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Program Profile

Intergenerational Toy Library: One, Two, Three ... Let's Play Again?

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Background

This paper describes the pilot-action, Intergenerational Toy Library: 1, 2, 3 ... Let's play again?, in terms of activities and participants and reports the benefits for participants and suggestions to improve the intergenerational activities. This action aims to bring children and older persons together by playing and building games. Games are used as tools to enhance intergenerational (IG) encounters, based on the known benefits in stimulating the cognitive, emotional, and physical development of children and slowing loss of the cognitive, sensory, and motor functions of older persons.

The literature shows that IG practices involving young children are still a neglected area in research, practice, and policy. The European project, TOY (Together Old and Young, www.toyproject.net), aimed to promote IG learning and relationships in community spaces by bringing together young children (less than 9 years) and older people (over 55 years) in activities. TOY supported the design and implementation of IG pilot actions (13 actions in five countries: Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Poland, and Italy) with the intention to capacitate practitioners and institutions in the development of IG initiatives.

On December 2013, the Portuguese TOY partner (University of Aveiro) launched a challenge to support community institutions in the design and implementation of IG initiatives involving older persons and young children. The TOY team received four proposals and selected two based on the following criteria: clarity, creativity, relevance, impact, and sustainability. "*Intergenerational Toy library: 1,2,3 ... Let's play again*" was one of the selected proposals. This initiative was promoted by CCPSPA (Centro Comunitário São Pedro de Aradas, Aveiro), which is a private nonprofit institution with facilities for young children (day care and kindergarten) and older persons (care home, day care, and home care) at different locations (within a short distance of around 100 m). CCPSPA has been, for some years, organizing IG activities involving children and older persons to

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promote an IG atmosphere involving these different facilities. Practitioners have been receiving positive feedback leading to the continued organization and improvement of IG activities.

Goals

TOY Library aimed to bring together children and older persons in playing and building games to promote their happiness and well-being, intergenerational learning, and communication and mutual understanding.

Activities and participants

This initiative was planned by three IG facilitators (i.e., practitioners involved in the design and implementation of IG activities) and was carried out during 4 months (2 months for design and planning and 2 months for implementation and assessment).

Eight events happened on a weekly basis and were structured in sessions with three types of activities simultaneously. Each session lasted between 1 and 2 hours and the activities took place in different rooms in the care home. The activities were attended by a mixed group of children and older persons (ratio of five older persons to eight children) and two IG facilitators:

- (1) Room A—general activities: playing board games mostly with cognitive character, such as dominos and puzzles (see [Figure 1](#));
- (2) Room B—‘atelier’: using hands to create/build a variety of games with different themes and purposes (such as learning colors or animals) to be used for the activities in Room A during the following week (see [Figure 2](#)).



Figure 1. Playing board games.



Figure 2. Building a variety of games.



Figure 3. Outdoor physical activity.

- (3) Room C—physical activity: exercising and improving motor skills (see [Figure 3](#)).

In each session, the children rotated through the three rooms/activities to diversify their learning and interactions while the older participants' stayed in the same room and were always involved in the same activity. This structure was decided on by practitioners at the first session when the older persons rotating between activities felt too tired afterwards.

In total, 88 children (3–6 years old), 15 older persons (74–96 years old) and 6 IG facilitators (2 kindergarten teachers, 1 gerontologist, 1 social educator and 2 auxiliary staff) were involved. The older persons were recruited from the institution, based on their interest and previous participation in IG activities. Children were invited by the kindergarten teachers with parents' consent. Other staff was invited (and accepted) to join and support the activities.

Benefits

IG facilitators and two TOY researchers collaborated to monitor and evaluate the pilot action. Data were collected from all involved (children and their parents, older persons, IG facilitators) and submitted for content analysis. Evaluation, as established by TOY consortium (The TOY Project Consortium, 2013, 2014), aimed to uncover requested skills of IG facilitators and strategies and resources for successful IG activities. The evaluation was based on testimonials from 10 children and five older persons; questionnaires with 10 parents; participant attendance sheets; photography and video records of activities; children's drawings; and two sessions of group discussion with three IG facilitators and two researchers (at the beginning to support preparation and at the end to reflect on benefits and obstacles). Overall, the IG Toy Library showed that games and toys are empowering tools to enhance interaction between young children and older persons. Participants reported the following benefits for children and older persons:

- (1) Happiness and well-being. Older persons stated that the time spent with the children in a meaningful activity is joyful and makes them feel good; children were shown to be happy while playing with the older persons (for instance, parents reported that their children enthusiastically reported at home what they were teaching and learning from older persons).
 “We love and care for the children because they are the “tomorrow’s adults” and it is enriching for them to be in contact with the old people to receive good advices.” (A, participant, 90 years old, male)
- (2) Intergenerational learning. Children taught the older persons how to play with a tablet; older persons taught the children how to play board games.
 “My son feels good when he can help the older persons and I believe it brings benefits to his development.” (F, parent, 38 years old, female)
- (3) Communication and mutual understanding. While engaging in activities together, children and older persons seemed to enjoy finding ways to understand each other using verbal and nonverbal communication.
 “The intergenerational activities instigate all those involved to experience an atmosphere of giving and receiving with generosity, promoting feelings of gratitude.” (S, practitioner, 38 years old, female)

Lessons learned

Based on obstacles faced by the IG facilitators and/or observed by the researchers, together they reflected on and provided suggestions to improve this project and other IG practices:

- (1) Group structure and time spent together. More frequent time together in small groups (e.g., once a week 2-hour sessions and activities structured with a ratio of four children to one older person) can increase socializing and nourishment of meaningful relationships.
- (2) Consider children and older persons' physical capabilities. It was a challenge to design physical activities that would be attractive to and/or achievable for both generations. So, it is important to find creative forms for equivalent participation.
- (3) IG approach integration in the institutional plan of activities. Difficulties in planning and implementation show that practitioners are often limited by their institution's standard practices, which still do not correspond to IG practices, limiting practitioners to do more.
- (4) Role of the IG facilitator. In general, practitioners did not seem to be aware of their crucial role in mediating the interactions and nourishing the relationships between children and older persons. They state that by bringing both together, the relationship automatically evolves. However, to find a balance between their responsibilities in this role (e.g., facilitate, interfere, "step out"), important and specific skills are needed for better performance from the IG facilitator.

Unique features

Games, toys, and playing emerged as powerful tools for IG learning, linking generations through fun activities carried out in a positive and natural atmosphere of happiness and meaningfulness. Clear rules and instructions can get the players deeply focused on hours of playing together. Also, children and/or older persons can take very easily the lead in showing (verbally and nonverbally) how to play, for instance, a tablet or a domino. Young children and older persons report benefits mostly related to happiness, well-being, and learning. The goal of establishing an IG Toy Library seems to be a good strategy to ensure continuity. Having these materials available provided a means and the resources for children and older persons to play and have fun together whenever they felt like it.

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