



# EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS

**AN OVERVIEW OF INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMMING:  
EFFECTIVENESS, BEST PRACTICES, AND PRACTICAL  
CONSIDERATIONS**

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EMAIL: [info@appta.ca](mailto:info@appta.ca)

TELEPHONE: 1-506-444-8300

AGE-WELL National Innovation Hub, APPTA Inc.  
100 Sunset Drive  
Fredericton, NB  
Canada  
E3A1A3

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## BACKGROUND

Social isolation of older adults in Canada has long been a concern for many individuals as they progress through the life course and begin experiencing the natural changes associated with aging. The World Health Organization outlines 'social support' as one of ten recognized social determinants of health, noting the negative impacts that a lack of social support can have on both physical and psychological health<sup>1</sup>. Among the detrimental effects listed, they note that a lack of positive social support often results in lower self-esteem and self-worth – both of which have been linked to premature mortality, depression, and increased risk of disability resulting from chronic medical conditions<sup>2</sup>. Not only is being socially isolated a risk factor for negative physical and psychological health, but negative overall health is in itself a risk factor for increased social isolation<sup>3</sup>. This is particularly important within the population of older adults whose social networks can dwindle as they age due to the loss of friends and relatives, relocation to urban centers, and diminishing mobility.

As Canadians prepare for a future where the population of older adults continues to grow at an exponential rate, social isolation is rapidly becoming more of a concern. Statistics Canada estimates have reported that there are now more individuals aged sixty-five and over than individuals under the age of fourteen for the first time in recorded history<sup>4</sup>. These figures become even more staggering upon consideration of the challenges facing residential care in Canada today, most notably, bed, staff, and funding shortages. In this light, helping older adults remain connected to their social networks is about more than simply avoiding loneliness. Given the considerable mental and physical health issues associated with social isolation, keeping older adults connected means supporting them to age in place for longer<sup>5</sup>.

Digital technologies can be used to combat social isolation among an aging population<sup>6</sup>. Technology can help facilitate social connections by removing barriers that exist for a variety of reasons including, but not limited to, mobility limitations, geographic position in relation to social support networks, loss of friendships due to illness or death, and admission to residential facility or hospital. Through access to various digital technologies, older adults can stay connected to friends and relatives, meet new people, access a wealth of information and resources with the click of a button, and get assistance in managing their physical and mental health symptoms which may be impacting their ability to initiate and maintain connections with others<sup>7</sup>.

Although technology has significant potential in helping older adults stay connected to their social networks, many experience barriers related to digital literacy<sup>8</sup>. The digital divide is a phenomenon which explains the lack of digital literacy faced by many older adults<sup>9</sup>. Younger generations have had the privilege of growing up

alongside new technological advancements, and as a result these technologies have been engrained into their everyday lives<sup>10</sup>. Older generations, despite having been the creators of much of the early technologies that are widely used today, have historically had less personal access to it because of cost and unavailability during their younger years.

In an attempt to bridge the digital divide and increase older adults' digital literacy levels, many reverse-mentoring-style intergenerational technology training programs have been established. In these programs, younger individuals help older adults learn how to use technologies that can reduce their feelings of loneliness and isolation<sup>11</sup>. These programs have shown to be effective in not only bridging the digital divide, but also the generational gap that exists between younger and older generations<sup>12</sup>. Most notably, these programs are allowing seniors to reap social and psychological benefits, to develop new skills, and acquire new knowledge – reducing their technology-related anxieties and increasing their desire to use and learn more about other technologies after their initial training programs have finished<sup>13</sup>.

## **EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMMING**

An evaluative study regarding the effectiveness of intergenerational programming has revealed overwhelmingly positive results, both for the older and younger generations<sup>14</sup>. Intergenerational programming is almost always established to enhance the well-being of older adults, and being primarily recreational in nature, there is little to no risk involved in their implementation. However, through a systematic revision of programming it has been established that some intergenerational programs are significantly more effective in imparting the intended skill and/ or knowledge to the participants, and at facilitating meaningful intergenerational connections, than others. Through this systematic review of fifty empirical studies that evaluated the effectiveness of intergenerational programs conducted by Canedo-García, García-Sánchez, and Pacheco-Sanz in 2017, ten empirically-based intervention (EBI) indicators were identified and are described in Appendix A.

This provided evidence which demonstrated that the more EBI controls considered in an intergenerational program, the more effective it is. This review also yielded results about the program design and intervention delivery models, noting that the most effective programs are those wherein design, and implementation strategies are based on critical gerontological theoretical perspectives, as they challenge ageist stereotypes that society tends to hold in regard to older individuals<sup>15</sup>. Theories based in gerontology provide context for important milestones in older adulthood and can assist program coordinators and staff to better understand the behavioural and cognitive processes of the older adults they work with. Interestingly, intergenerational programs

that control for at least four of the identified ten EBIs are consistently more effective, regardless of what (if any) theoretical models are applied during program design and implementation<sup>16</sup>.

## **BENEFITS OF INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMMING: OLDER ADULT LEARNERS**

The most notable benefit of intergenerational programming, particularly those that focus on technology training, is that they facilitate social connection and participation between and within generations<sup>17,18,19</sup>. Intergenerational programming aimed at improving digital literacy is generally delivered according to one of two models: in-home instruction, or in-class instruction. Programs that deliver instruction in-home often focus on teaching older learners how to connect virtually with their friends and relatives despite barriers such as mobility limitations, geographical location, and harsh weather patterns that may limit travel. While in-class delivery models offer these same virtual connection skills, they also provide learners with a reason to venture out of their homes. These reverse-mentoring programs often result in ongoing intergenerational friendships that long outlast the program itself, which further increases the intergenerational understanding and appreciation of all involved

<sup>20</sup>.

These programs also offer numerous psychological benefits to older adult learners. As briefly noted above, one of the most important psychological benefits is the increased social connection, participation, and subsequent reduction in feelings of loneliness and isolation. Not only do participants learn how to effectively engage with virtual connection devices and applications, they learn these skills through in-person interaction with others. Both delivery models outlined above involve direct communication with younger adult instructors, and in-class models have an added benefit of bringing together groups of older learners together in a scenario where they engage socially, and find support among their peers. Other psychological benefits include but are not limited to: reduced feelings of depression and technology-related anxieties<sup>21</sup>, increased feelings of confidence in interacting with technology and increased interest in future learning about other digital technologies; heightened sense of pride<sup>22</sup>; increased feelings of happiness, self-esteem, and self-worth<sup>23,24,25,26</sup>.

Not only do reverse-mentoring style intergenerational programs offer benefits to social and psychological functioning as a byproduct of engaging with, and in, a learning environment, they also provide opportunities for skill development and general knowledge acquisition. Overall, older adults who participate in this style of programming emerge with a better understanding of digital technology as a whole<sup>27</sup>. The increase in

exposure over the course of the program results in more adept use of technology, particularly as it pertains to searching for, and finding information and resources.

## **BENEFITS OF INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMMING: YOUTH INSTRUCTORS**

Young adults also receive social benefits by participating in reverse-mentoring intergenerational programs. Increased social connection and participation in younger adults often present as an enhanced sense of civic responsibility<sup>28</sup>. Like their older adult students, younger adult instructors also reap the benefits of intergenerational friendships that have been known to persist after programs have ended<sup>29</sup>. By way of sharing knowledge and experiences, younger adults can benefit from the wisdom and experience of older adults. Often this results in younger instructors gaining new perspective<sup>30</sup> about themselves, their older students, and the world in which they operate. In addition, this style of programming has been shown to help younger adults in the construction and integration of their identities<sup>31</sup> as they attempt to make sense of their place in the world. Young adults involved in reverse-mentoring programs also tend to exhibit an increase in their confidence and pride after having successfully helped others acquire a new skill<sup>32</sup>.

Finally, engaging with older adults in a mentorship or instructional capacity allows younger adults to develop and hone useful skills for their future careers. These skills include but are not limited to: effective leadership skills through taking on an instructional role; listening and communication skills; patience; perspective-taking through sharing knowledge and experiences with individuals who have lived longer and experienced more; empathy skills<sup>33</sup>; and group facilitation skills<sup>34</sup>. Ultimately this style of programming has been demonstrated to benefit the learners and the instructors as they both learn how to navigate unfamiliar territory together<sup>35</sup>.

## **CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Upon reviewing the evidence surrounding intergenerational programming, several considerations for practical implementation have been identified:

1. *In-Person Training for Instructors*: Many older adult learners noted that it is helpful if their younger adult instructor(s) have access to a training session in which differing needs of older learners can be explained. The research also indicates that these kinds of training sessions would be beneficial to young adult mentors for several additional reasons, as follows<sup>36,37</sup>:
  - Instructors gain a clear understanding of roles, responsibilities, and expectations in a safe environment where they can ask questions, work on their teaching skills, and learn about addressing termination with the learners.

- Program coordinators can supply teaching modules and resources geared specifically toward teaching digital technologies to adults.
  - Provides instructors with information about different learning styles of older adults as well as barriers to learning such as memory, hearing, visual, mobility and dexterity challenges.
  - Instructors are able to become familiar with one another, and exchange contact information for extra peer support they may need during the program.
2. *Pre-Program Information Session for Learners:* An info session prior to beginning a technology training program allows learners to have an understanding of the expectations, goals, and program structure. This relieves some of the anxieties that often come with starting something new and unfamiliar. An info session also gives coordinators an opportunity to address termination with learners, preparing them for the time-limited nature of the class<sup>38</sup>.
  3. *Addressing Termination:* Younger adult instructors learn about how to best prepare their older learners to avoid emotional distress that can be associated with the end of a relationship when the program ends. Learners often express a desire to maintain some form of contact with their instructors, and instructors should be equipped to have these conversations – whether or not they wish to maintain a relationship<sup>39</sup>.
  4. *One-on-One Program Delivery:* Fewer learners to each instructor allows the curriculum to be tailored to the individual wants and needs of learners, particularly when they are bringing their own devices to class<sup>40</sup>. Very small group learning has been shown to elicit similar results, and has an added benefit of peer support for learners who may be embarrassed about their digital literacy levels. The smaller the group, the more meaningful the interaction between learner and instructor becomes, leading to greater intergenerational understanding and friendship<sup>41</sup>.
  5. *Involvement of Older Adults in Program Planning and Curriculum Development:* Involving learners in the planning phase of programming ensures that the content will be meaningful to them. It also removes some unknown variables that may cause learners stress, such as feelings of unpreparedness, or anxieties about the unknown. It allows learners to have a sense of ownership of the program, increasing engagement and participation levels. It is important to note that involving the older learners in this phase also stimulates their minds and gives them a space and purpose for sharing ideas and connecting with peers<sup>42</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

Social isolation is recognized by the World Health Organization as a threat to older adults' ability to age in place, to physical and psychological functioning, and to the Canadian healthcare system. Digital technologies and applications have been identified as an effective method of alleviating feelings of isolation and loneliness. Although several older adults have access to technology, many of them struggle with digital literacy challenges. One way to address the varying levels of digital literacy among Canada's older population is through the implementation of intergenerational technology training programs.

Intergenerational programming has been shown to be effective not just for the older participants of these programs, but also for the younger instructors. Both older and younger adults have noted significantly fewer age-related stereotypes, an increased ability to take the perspective of another age group, and an increase in the number of intergenerational friendships – something becoming more uncommon due to high rates of outmigration among younger generations. Increased feelings of overall mental wellbeing, pride, and confidence have also been noted in both younger instructors and their older learners. Lastly, an increase in technological knowledge and skill have been seen in both younger and older individuals involved in intergenerational programming. Overall, intergenerational training programs present a low risk intervention method for alleviating social isolation. They offer many benefits to both age-cohorts, have been shown to heighten mood, and above all they provide the foundation for bridging the digital divide and allowing isolated individuals to get and stay connected independent of their physical limitations.



## Appendix A

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>1. Recording Sessions</b>	Audio or video recording of the training sessions.
<b>2. Training of instructors</b>	Training session(s) for the younger adult mentors prior to beginning their work in the program, that would discuss the nature of working with older adults, and their possible challenge areas, as well as information about being an effective instructor.
<b>3. Instruction of participants</b>	Information session(s) for the older adult learners to introduce expectations of the program, and to answer any questions that learners may have.
<b>4. Definition of variables</b>	Explanation of which outcome variables are going to be measured at pre and post-testing to evaluate effectiveness of the program.
<b>5. Intervention protocol</b>	A map or template of the implementation strategy, including background information, methodology, theoretical application (if any), etc.
<b>6. Intervention modality contrast</b>	Explanation of the activities required to implement the program.
<b>7. Generalization</b>	Explanation of how and why the program can be applied to a similar population and elicit similar results.
<b>8. Pre-post measures</b>	A test which is administered prior to the start of the program and again after the program has completed, designed to show which skills and knowledge have been acquired by attending the program.
<b>9. Follow ups</b>	Contacting participants some time (length of time is determined by program administrators) after the program has ended to address any concerns, answer questions, and evaluate whether skills and knowledge acquired during the program are still relevant and/ or being used by the participants.
<b>10. Total indicators</b>	Similar to key performance indicators, total indicators are used to determine whether or not program objectives have been met; evaluated through the pre-post measures.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe. Social Determinants of Health: The Social Facts. 1998. Retrieved from: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/108082/e59555.pdf;jsessionid=EB57851303B2ED67E8F2B8AE1BCAA8F9?sequence=1>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Khosravi, P., Rezvani, A., and Wiewiora, A. (2016). The Impact of Technology on Older Adults' Social Isolation. *Computers in Human Behaviour* 63, 594-603. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.092

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada: The Daily. (2017) Age and sex, and type of dwelling data: Key results from the 2016 Census. Retrieved from: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/170503/dq170503a-eng.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Neville, S., Russell, J., Adams, J., and Jackson, D. (2016) Living in Your Own Home and Being Socially Connected at 95 Years and Beyond: A Qualitative Study. *Contemporary Nurse* 52, no. 2-3: 258-68. doi:10.1080/10376178.2016.1205457.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>8</sup> National Seniors Council. Report on Social Isolation of Seniors, 2013-2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/national-seniors-council/programs/publications-reports/2014/social-isolation-seniors/page05.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/digital%20divide>

<sup>10</sup> Drury, L., Bobrowicz, A., Cameron, L., and Abrams, D. (2016) The Positive and Negative Impact of an Intergenerational Digital Technology Education Programme on Younger People's Perceptions of Older Adults. *Human Aspects of IT for the Aged Population: Aging, Design and User Experience*, 419-428. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Leedah, S. N., Brasher, M. S., Estus, E., Breck, B. M., Dennis, C. B., and Clark, S. C. (2019). Implementing an Interdisciplinary Intergenerational Program Using the Cyber Seniors® Reverse Mentoring Model Within Higher Education. *Gerontology & Geriatrics Education* 40 (1): 71-89. doi:10.1080/02701960.2018.1428574

<sup>12</sup> Underwood, H. L. and Dorfman, L. T. (2006). A View from the Other Side: Elder's Reactions to Intergenerational Service-Learning. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 4(2): 43-60.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Bringle, R. G., and Hatcher, J. A. (1996). Implementing Service Learning in Higher Education. *The Journal of Higher Education* 67(2):221-239. doi: 10.2307/2943981.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 12.