

LITA's Bridging Generations Program Results

Bridging Generations links elementary school classes with residents of Marin long term care facilities for monthly visits during the school year. Each class spends about an hour for each visit and the two groups work on projects, games, and just having fun with each other. As much as possible, two students are linked with each participating resident for the entire year.

A. Program Impact on Students

Between 2014 and 2017 a total of 135 students in 11 classes representing grades 2 through 5 completed fall and spring questionnaires to assess what they learned about older persons as a result of the Bridging Generations program. This longitudinal data provides a wealth of information about changes as a result of the program because the fall questionnaires are given to the students before their first visits to interact with the residents, and the spring questionnaires are given after their last visits. Each student fills out his or her own questionnaire.

Increase in Positive Views of Older Persons

One of the strongest findings is a dramatic change in how the children view older persons as evidenced both by descriptive words and sentences and in statements by the students describing what they learned.

Descriptive Words

Both before they started visiting and after their last visit, students were asked to list 2 words that describe an older person.

Seven most common positive words: nice, kind, wise, fun, happy, cool, sweet

Seven most common negative words: wrinkly, slow, grumpy, tired, weak, fragile, forgetful

A sharp increase in describing older persons with positive words takes place over the year.

Start of School Year: 57% of the words were positive

End of School Year: 77% of the words were positive, a 35% increase from fall to spring.

There was also a 69% increase in the number of students who used two positive words to describe older persons and a 58% decrease in those using no positive words.

Differences between Boys and Girls

Boys: increased from 52% to 72% positive from fall to spring, a 38% increase

Girls: increased from 63% to 83% positive from fall to spring, a 32% increase

So boys increased their use of positive words a bit more than the girls, but girls were more positive overall.

Differences among Grades

All grades increased their use of positive words over the school year, but the percentage of positive words overall also increased from second grade through fifth.

Grade 2: 30% to 75% from fall to spring

Grade 3: 57% to 76% from fall to spring

Grade 4: 65% to 79% from fall to spring

Grade 5: 67% to 83% from fall to spring

Descriptive Sentences

The students were asked at both times to complete the following sentence:

I think old people are _____ because _____

Examples of positive sentences include:

“Wise because they’ve learned a lot”

“Nice because they are thoughtful and give hugs”

“Sweet because they ask you how your day was”

Examples of negative sentences include:

“Grumpy because they get over worked”

“Boring because all they do is sit around”

“Rude because they show their anger

Compared to the single words the proportion of positive sentences was higher in the fall (73%) but in similar fashion increased to 90% by spring, for a 23% increase. There was no difference between boys and girls.

What Students Say They Have Learned

At the end of the year, students were asked what they had learned about themselves and their feelings about older people.

A frequent comment from the children is that they like the senior residents because “They smile at us,” “They don’t scream at us,” “They all smile as we come in,” “They are not mean to you and when you get there they have smiles on their faces,” “They listen to what you have to say,” and “It made me very happy to see all the smiles on everybody’s faces around the room.” Children know that they are not always welcome and so appreciate the greetings and interest they received on Bridging Generations visits.

Another interesting comment is what they learn about themselves by helping someone else:

“I learned I can be helpful because I help them do things”

“I feel very happy because I’m making them happy”

“I realized that I make them happy because they don’t always get visitors”

Some students wrote in detail:

“When I am with them, it makes a new me. They taught me that anyone can be happy at whatever age you’re at. I feel like you can trust them, and they are really nice. I also feel that they are who they are. It’s nice to see someone who is being themselves around you.”

“At first I was very shy because I was meeting a new person. After that I was so excited to go and see them because they are fun people to be around. I also love that they are as excited to see us as we are to see them.”

“I learned that I can be very patient with seniors and that I really enjoy being around a senior and getting to know them. I also was very happy to think that I was doing a very great community service deed while enjoying it too.”

“I think my feelings for seniors have increased a lot. One feeling I have towards them is care and respect. One example of this is the second time I came in to meet them I could feel the change in my feelings. I think everyone should respect seniors like I do.”

The transformation in the children’s views of older persons is best encapsulated in one student who in the fall had described older persons as “boring” and “grouchy” and had noted that he didn’t really like some old people. By spring he had definitely changed his views:

“I learned that I love to see older people because they bring me lots of joy. The people from the home help me see the potential that I have with older people and that they can do many things.”

When Does Someone Become Old?

Both spring and fall, students were asked “At what age does someone become old?” A wide range of answers resulted, from 30 to 103. The mean age given in the fall was 66, but by spring the mean age had increased to 70. There were no differences between boys and girls.

B. Comments from Parents

For the last three years, parents have been asked to complete an on-line survey at the end of the school year asking about their children’s experience in the program, any problems that they saw, and suggestions for improving the program.

When asked if their child enjoyed visiting and working on projects with the residents, 92% agreed that they did. 95% also said that they were satisfied with their child’s Bridging Generations experience.

Some of the parents also elaborated on their answers. Here are four examples:

“It was a very positive experience for our daughter and she talked about it many times. I think it is a very nice way to bridge the generations. It sounds like all enjoyed the journey this year.”

“I think this is a fabulous program. It’s great for the students and even more important for the seniors. I’ve been on all the trips to help and it’s so nice to see them interact. The kids love it and the seniors seem really happy as well.”

“One of the most important experiences for empathic growth, realistic appreciation of all people and the preciousness of aging, wisdom, experience, and life.”

“My daughter absolutely loved the resident she was linked with. She talked of her often and it was lovely. I was lucky enough to also meet her and witness the program as a driver one day and it was truly lovely. Thank you so much for providing such an enriching experience for my girl.”

C. Teachers’ Evaluations of the Program

At the end of the school year in 2018, teachers were asked for their opinions of how things had gone that year and whether they wished to continue in the program the next year. Eight of the nine teachers in the program responded with detailed comments.

All of them valued the program and wished to continue being involved in the next year. Sample comments include:

Second grade teacher: “I have many eighth graders who fondly and excitedly talk to me about our second grade visits to the nursing home and their memories of the residents that they got to know.”

Third grade teacher: “Our visits to the home are highlights of our 3rd grade year. The sense of joy and energy is palpable and my students leave feeling proud and helpful. This is a win-win – great for students, great for seniors. Every school should have at least one class participate.”

Third grade teacher: “It is such a special opportunity for my students and they value the time with the residents. For some, this is one of only a few opportunities they’ve had with older adults.

Fourth grade teacher: “After each visit we worked on conversations skills, empathy, perseverance and understanding. My students gained confidence and responsibility from their visits.”

Fifth grade teacher: “It has been a great way to give kids a sense of service through relationship.”

Fifth grade teacher: “My parents were very impressed and touched by this program. They loved having their kids take part.

D. Activity Directors Describe the Program’s Impact on Residents

Activity directors at facilities where Bridging Generations takes place were asked in 2018 what impacts they saw on the residents from having the children visit over the year. All were enthusiastic about the program. Sample comments include:

“The program does an about face on our residents’ mood levels - most definitely. We see smiles light up their faces! Grumblings turn to grins. They begin to think outside of themselves - away from physical and emotional pain. It is beautiful to see. The children are full of life and so compassionate.”

“The residents will often only get visitors on the weekends. If at all. The children’s energy boosts their energy and spirits. In fact, some of our residents who like to stay to themselves will often surprise us and choose to join this activity!”

“Always positive comments from our residents. They mainly remark how sweet, polite, fun, and cute the kids are. Our residents sit down to lunch after the kids leave and individual folks are holding on to something from the activity, like a card, etc. - a souvenir of the time spent together.”

“Our residents always spend the rest of the day talking about how much they enjoyed the visit.”

E. Residents Express Their Own Views

Each year several residents from each facility taking part in Bridging Generations are asked their opinions of the program and what suggestions they have for improving it. Here are some of their comments.

“It was a wonderful opportunity to work with and interact with young students. For children who live far away from their grandparents, it was a good opportunity to work with and get to know older people!”

“There is so much love from the children. What a joy it is for me!”

“Knowing the same two students each visit - seeing them grow physically and mentally - their looking forward to summer and 4th grade next school year.”

“To have the children be able to talk and listen to the seniors, face to face. It brings smiles to my face!”

“Sharing our lives - the “olden days” - with the kids was fun as well as hearing their corresponding answers. Seeing the year-end video the kids made was pretty amazing - the wonderful creativity - such a lot of work, but you could tell how proud they were of their product as it was shown on the screen.”

The main suggestion from residents deals with the difficulty some of them have hearing what the children are saying. A class of children is invariably noisy plus many of the residents have trouble hearing in any situation. Room size presents problems because if too small the background noise is very high but if too large it becomes difficult to hear if a child, resident, or teacher is speaking to the whole group. LITA provides microphones when speaking to everyone and is considering using hearing assistive devices like pocket talkers for residents with serious hearing problems. This past year one student was particularly resourceful in writing what he was saying on a white board provided by a resident who was nearly deaf.