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**DIRECT OBSERVATIONS OF CHILDREN AT RISK FOR  
ACADEMIC FAILURE: BENEFITS OF AN  
INTERGENERATIONAL VISITING PROGRAM**

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*Ten elementary school students in need of a positive self-image and/or a sense of appropriate social conduct took part in a monthly intergenerational visiting program at an assisted living facility. In comparison to systematic observations obtained in their classrooms, the children were observed to be significantly less anxious, more interested, and participating more during the intergenerational program. Outcomes of a focus group with five seniors revealed that they had*

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*enjoyed the program and wanted it to continue. School administrators may want to consider intergenerational visiting programs for students whose behaviors place them at risk for academic failure.*

In 1963, the Foster Grandparent Program laid the groundwork for intergenerational programming and since then, we have seen the emergence of a huge number of structured programs that provide opportunities for meaningful contact between children and elderly persons. Over the decades, the focus of intergenerational programming has expanded and now includes traditional visiting programs, shared site facilities and programs (Kuehne & Kaplan, 2001), and programs that serve as interventions for at-risk children (e.g., tutoring, mentoring). In the case of the children, benefits of participating in intergenerational programming include: positive changes in perceptions/attitudes about older people (Aday, Aday, Arnold, & Bendix, 1996; Aday, McDuffie, & Sims, 1993; Aday, Rice, & Evans, 1991; Bales, Eklund, & Siffin, 2000; Carstensen, Mason, & Caldwell, 1982; Cummings, Williams, & Ellis, 2002; Ivey, 2001; Kassab & Vance, 1999; Newman, Faux, & Larimer, 1997; Pinguart, Wenzel, & Sorensen, 2000; Taylor & Dryfoos, 1998–1999; Taylor et al., 1999), increased empathy toward seniors (Schwalbach & Kiernan, 2002), increased knowledge of aging and institutionalized elderly (Slotnick, Reichelt, & Gardner, 1985), an increase in prosocial behaviors, such as, sharing (Dellmann-Jenkins, Lambert, & Fruit, 1991; Lambert, Dellmann-Jenkins, & Fruit, 1990), increased self-esteem (Bocian & Newman, 1989; Lowenthal & Egan, 1991), improved attendance at school (Brabazon, 1999), improved attitudes toward school (Taylor & Dryfoos, 1998–1999; Taylor et al., 1999), better school behavior (Cummings, Williams, & Ellis, 2002), increase in self-management skills at school and interest in school work (Newman, Morris, & Streetman, 1999), academic growth (Bocian & Newman, 1989; Cooledge & Wurster, 1985), and improved peer relationships (Newman, Morris, & Streetman, 1999).

In the majority of the studies cited, program outcomes were evaluated using pre-program and/or post-program assessments. However, a number of intergenerational researchers have come to recognize that pre-program versus post-program outcome measurements are not always sensitive enough to capture what is really going on during intergenerational programming, as positive outcomes often occur only in the moment (Marx, 2003; Ward, 1999; West & Hutchinson, 1992). For instance, time-sensitive outcomes such as moments of happiness,

feelings of well-being, or increased comfort (or conversely, moments of sadness, discomfort, or increased anxiety) are missed when a researcher relies solely on post-program assessment. Some intergenerational researchers have therefore expanded their approach to data collection to include ethnographic methodology or systematic observations, although these are not without drawbacks. Systematic observations can capture program delivery (i.e., whether or not program variables are implemented), program receipt (i.e., whether or not participants take part in the programming), and program enactment (i.e., whether or not the desired change occurs as a result of program receipt) (Araan et al., 2003), but systematic observations may not readily capture the meaning of the experience. The ethnographic approach focuses on meaning with respect to what persons in the group think about certain things, how they view themselves, and how they interpret specific events, but ethnographic observers tend to rely on convenience samples or sometimes on just one participant, thereby limiting the generalizability of outcomes (Ward, 1999).

To date, a few ethnographic studies and a few studies of systematic observations of intergenerational programming have been published. The results of data obtained via ethnographic study (Kuehne, 1989) as well as data captured through direct observations (Chamberlain, Fetterman, & Maher, 1994) show that interactions between elderly persons and children who participate in intergenerational visiting programs are primarily positive (e.g., giving affection, helping, encouraging) rather than negative. Similarly, direct observations of participants in an intergenerational school-based mentoring program revealed that the children and seniors interacted with one another in a positive and constructive manner (Newman, Morris, & Streetman, 1999). In a different population of seniors, direct observations revealed that elderly persons with dementia exhibited positive behaviors when interacting with the children that they did not display when the children were not present in both a senior daycare setting (Newman & Ward, 1992–1993) and in a nursing home (Ward, Los Kamp, & Newman, 1996). Recently, Jarrott and Bruno (2003) observed behavior and affect of seniors with dementia during intergenerational versus unigenerational programming and found that affect was more positive during the periods of intergenerational programming. Similarly, results of another observational study revealed that seniors with dementia were significantly more engaged and more expressive (manifesting a greater number of indicators of affect such as smiling, laughing, head nodding) during structured activities with children than during times when children were not present (unigenerational structured activities or no-activity periods) (Xaverius & Mathews, 2003).

In the present study, we utilized systematic observations during an intergenerational visiting program at an assisted living facility in order to gain a better understanding of affect and behavior in elementary school students in need of a positive self-image and/or a sense of appropriate social conduct. These children generally had more negative experiences at school than did their peers. It was hoped that participating in an intergenerational visiting program would provide these children with positive interactions (as had been demonstrated by Chamberlain, Fetterman, & Maher, 1994; Kuehne, 1989; Newman, Morris, & Streetman, 1999; Newman & Ward, 1992–1993; Ward, Los Kamp, & Newman, 1996), giving these children an opportunity to feel good about themselves and to reinforce appropriate social interactions. Observational data were obtained not only during our intergenerational programming but also when the children were in their classrooms at school. It was hypothesized that children would display more positive behaviors (e.g., interest and participation) and less negative affect (e.g., anger, anxiety) when interacting with the seniors than when in their classrooms. Additionally, in order to understand the feelings and thoughts of the participants, open-ended post-program questionnaire items were asked to the children and a focus group was conducted with the seniors.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

The study participants were ten children from a suburban public elementary school who were selected for this program by the school counselor. The children were chosen on the basis of concerns about one or more of the following: inappropriate behavior, poor social skills, difficulty with making and keeping friends, and poor self-concept. All children were at risk for academic failure due to the negative impact of these factors on their academic performance. The children were students in grades three through five, and their ages ranged from 8 to 11 years (mean = 9 years). Seven children were boys and 3 were girls. As to ethnicity, eight children were Caucasian, one was Hispanic, and one was Asian. Informed consent for participation was obtained for each child from a parent or legal guardian.

### **Assessment**

Direct observations of moods and behaviors were recorded separately for each child during the visiting program as well as in the children's

classrooms at school using Lawton's Modified Behavior Stream (LMBS; Lawton et al., 1996), which we adapted for the present study. Our assessment included the following moods and behaviors: (1) Anger—recorded when the child exhibited explicit signs of anger, for example, clenched teeth, grimace, shouting, pushing, hitting, throwing things, or physical or verbal aggression; (2) Sadness—recorded when the child looked upset, had tears, or used verbal expressions of sadness; (3) Anxiety—recorded when the child appeared tense, with furrowed brow, or with facial expressions of fear or worry; (4) Interest—recorded when the child was focused on someone or something (i.e., eyes followed an object, facial, motoric, or verbal feedback), or maintained eye contact; (5) Discomfort—recorded when the child pulled away from touch or stiffened when touched; (6) Fidgeting—recorded when the child had trouble staying seated, bounced around a lot (in a chair or standing), or with motoric restlessness; and, (7) Participation—recorded when the child was involved with the task specific to the location (assisted living facility or classroom). Observations were performed as three-minute periods, with each item being assessed along the following scale: 1 = None, 2 = Less than 16 seconds, 3 = Less than half of the time, 4 = More than half of the time, 5 = All or most of the time. The data were recorded onto a data sheet that also included a checklist for coding situational data (e.g., number of other persons in the room, a description of the specific activity). Two observers independently rated five children on this assessment, and inter-rater reliabilities (with a 1-point discrepancy) for the different moods/behaviors averaged .91, with a range from .80 to 1.00.

## **Procedure**

Several weeks before the first visit, an orientation was held for the children at the assisted living facility during which the activity director led a discussion about what it is like to be around old, frail persons. Following the orientation, the children were individually asked if they thought that the seniors would like them. Responses to this question ("yes," "no," or "don't know") were provided by 9 of the 10 children, as one child was absent from school that day. Upon returning to school after the first visit, we asked each child: "Do you think the seniors liked you?" and responses were recorded as "yes," "no," or "don't know."

The children visited the seniors once a month for a total of four visits. Each visit lasted approximately one hour. The intergenerational visits took place in the either the activity room or the kitchen/

crafts room of the assisted living facility. The number of seniors who took part in the visits varied from six to ten across the four visits. According to the staff at the assisted living facility, changes in the seniors' health as well as other scheduled activities interfered with the seniors' ability to attend all of the intergenerational visits. There was a wide range of cognitive ability in this group of seniors, and most had physical limitations.

Structured activities, which were appropriate for both the seniors and children, were provided for all visits. At the first visit, the children and seniors worked together on pencil-and-paper tasks (e.g., word search), and played a game where they tapped a balloon back and forth to one another. Toward the end of the visit, cookies and juice were served while one of the seniors talked about his experiences on a submarine during World War II. During the second visit, the children and seniors played Bingo and had a chance to talk over cookies and juice. During the third visit, the participants had a sing-along, followed by several of the children playing piano for the group. The participants then played a trivia game (the teams were intergenerational), and juice and cookies were served. At the final visit, the children and seniors made wreaths and baskets, and the senior who had previously spoken about being on a submarine brought a picture of it and talked again about his experiences. Following juice and cookies, the activity director provided closure for the program.

Observations were conducted at the assisted living facility during the intergenerational visits and also when the children were in their classrooms at school. During the classroom observations, which were initiated approximately one month after beginning the intergenerational observations, we found the children to be involved in the following activities: a reading lesson, a grammar lesson, reviewing a math quiz, show and tell, and writing answers to questions in their journals. Classroom observations were recorded on two different days for five children and once for each of the other five children. Observations during the visiting program were obtained on three separate occasions for nine children and on two occasions for one child. When appropriate, means were derived for the visiting program data and for the classroom data for each child for each of the seven moods/behavior items from the LMBS.

To get feedback about the program, we held a focus group with the seniors. For the children, we asked them to respond to the following three open-ended questions/statements: "Going to visit the seniors makes me feel . . .," "The best thing about visiting the seniors is . . .," and "If you could, what would you change about our visits to the seniors?"

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data were entered separately onto a computer by two different persons, and then checked and corrected for data entry errors. Descriptive statistics were used with responses to open-ended questions and demographic data. Differences between the affective/behavioral measures recorded during the intergenerational visiting program and those recorded in the classroom were examined using paired *t*-tests. All analyses were performed via SPSS 11.0.

## RESULTS

Prior to the first visit, six children thought that the seniors would like them (66.7%), two did not think so, and one did not know. The three children who did not answer in the affirmative were all boys, and one told us that he planned "to act better than usual" when he went to visit with the seniors. Following the first visit, 100% of the children felt that the seniors had liked them.

Results of the paired *t*-tests of the seven affect/behavior items are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, the children were significantly more interested and participated more during the intergenerational program than in the classroom (interest: intergenerational program mean = 4.84, classroom mean = 3.35,  $t_{(9)} = 3.45$ ,  $p = .007$ ; participation: intergenerational program mean = 4.80, classroom mean = 3.45,  $t_{(9)} = 3.07$ ,  $p = .013$ ). Moreover, the children were observed to be significantly more anxious at school than when visiting with the seniors (intergenerational program mean = 1.20, classroom mean = 2.55,

**TABLE 1** Means (Based on Ten Children) and Associated Probability Levels\* for each of the Seven Affect/Behavior Items as Systematically Observed during Intergenerational Programming and in the Classroom

	Intergenerational program observations (mean)	Classroom observations (mean)	Probability (2-tailed)
Interest	4.84	3.35	.007
Participation	4.80	3.45	.013
Anxiety	1.20	2.55	.032
Sadness	1.17	1.80	ns
Anger	1.00	1.15	ns
Discomfort	1.10	1.05	ns
Fidgeting	2.25	2.95	ns

\*using paired *t*-tests; ns = not significant.

$t_{(9)} = 2.54, p = .032$ ). While the test statistics of the other four items did not reach statistical significance, there was a trend toward more sadness, more anger, and more fidgeting in the classroom than during visiting with the seniors (see Table 1).

With the exception of one child who will be described below, the children gave positive answers to the three open-ended questions asked at the end of the program. For the first open-ended statement, "Going to the visits makes me feel . . .," four children completed the statement with the word, "happy." Other responses to this statement were "great," "cool," and "good." As to the second open-ended statement, "The best thing about the visits is . . .," three children said "playing games/doing something fun," while another three said "playing with the seniors." Other responses included "meeting the seniors" and "helping the seniors." The children had a variety of thoughts with regard to the final item "If you could, what would you change about our visits?." Four children wanted to "have a longer time period with the seniors and/or to visit more often than monthly." Two children made suggestions about the activities—one offered watching movies as a possible activity, while the other came up with the following, "We could play Bingo again. We could have those table quizzes again. We could do a play. We could play the piano again. We could watch a short movie. We could watch a long movie, but a little bit of it." Other responses included having "fewer children in the program" and "making the boys behave themselves because they ruined the visits." As to the last comment, we do not feel that the boys' behavior ruined the visits, and actually were surprised when we learned that this had bothered a child. Although we collected data for only three-minute intervals for each child, we informally observed all the children throughout every visit, such that we were aware of any disruptive behaviors. Some of the boys did display inappropriate behavior at times by grabbing at cookies rather than passing the plate around the table or by playing with the Bingo chips rather than using these as card markers, but these behaviors did not occur often and appeared to be overlooked by the seniors and the other children.

One child gave these negative responses to the open-ended items: "Going to visit the seniors makes me feel . . . like I want to go back to school"; "The best thing about the visits is . . . eating" and, his reply to "If you could, what would you change about our visits?" was "to not have any old people." On the basis of these responses, one might conclude that this child did not benefit while at the visiting program. However, examination of the classroom observational data for this child revealed that he was anxious more than half of the time (while no anxiety was observed at the visiting program) and fidgeted at his

desk and was out of his seat most of the time (as compared with less than half of the time during the visiting program). While at the visiting program, he participated the whole time (in contrast to participating less than half of the time at school) and was interested most of the time (while he showed interest at school less than half of the time). Clearly, there was a discrepancy between his verbal responses to the open-ended items and his observed affect and behaviors during the intergenerational program. One explanation is that his verbal responses may have been an expression of something else, such as displaced negative feelings, attention-seeking behavior, or denial of enjoyment. Another explanation is that he simply did not enjoy the visiting program.

Following the conclusion of the intergenerational visiting program, we held a focus group for the participating seniors in order to get their feedback about the program. Five seniors (2 male, 3 female) attended the focus group. Of these five seniors, two were married (to each other) and the others were widowed. All five seniors said that they had enjoyed the program very much. When asked if they had been bothered at all by any inappropriate behaviors by the children (e.g., acting out, grabbing cookies, not saying please and thank you), they said that they had not been bothered or had not noticed. All seniors expressed interest in continuing the visiting program during the following school year.

## **DISCUSSION**

The occurrence of positive behavior (participation, interest) was high and that of negative affect or behavior was low in our group of ten children during our intergenerational visiting program. This finding is consistent with previous observational studies of intergenerational programming, which have reported predominantly positive rather than negative interactions between children and seniors (Chamberlain, Fetterman, & Maher, 1994; Kuehne, 1989; Newman, Morris, & Streetman, 1999; Newman & Ward, 1992–1993; Ward, Los Kamp, & Newman, 1996). When we compared intergenerational programming observations with classroom observations, we found significantly more interest and participation and less anxiety (and a trend toward less anger, sadness, and fidgeting) in these children when they visited with seniors than when they were in their classrooms at school. These findings are remarkable given that the program met only four times (and at a frequency of only once a month), the same seniors did not attend every visit, and that the role of the seniors was that of program participant, not mentor.

Positive outcomes also were found when we examined responses obtained through other types of data collection. For instance, we learned during a focus group with the seniors that they had very much enjoyed when the children came to visit, were not bothered by any inappropriate behaviors by the children, and wanted to continue the visiting program during the following school year. As to the children, examination of their responses to our post-program questions revealed that nine of the ten children had enjoyed the visiting program, supplying favorable adjectives when asked to describe the program. Moreover, four children expressed a desire to spend more time with the seniors. In addition, responses to a pre-program item revealed that three children had not felt confident that the seniors would like them. Yet, responses obtained following the first visit revealed that these three children (as well as the other participating children) felt that the seniors had indeed liked them, suggesting that the experience of the intergenerational visit had contributed to a positive self-image for them.

By obtaining data through a focus group, pre- and post-program questionnaire items, and systematic observations of the children, we have been able to learn about not only the participants' thoughts about the visiting program but also to capture behavior and affect that occurred in the moment. A distinct advantage of including more than one type of assessment was seen in the case of the child who responded negatively to the three post-program items. On the basis of those responses, it would be easy to conclude that an intergenerational visiting program is not a good fit for him. However, examination of the observational data for this child revealed that he was less anxious, more interested, and participated more during the visiting program than when in the classroom at school, demonstrating that taking part in an intergenerational visiting program may benefit this child. In fact, this child was included in an intergenerational visiting program during the following school year, and this time, gave favorable responses at an exit interview. We supplied him with a list of activities that had occurred during the visiting program and asked him to indicate which he had liked and which he had not liked. He had liked: playing games with just a few people at a small table, interviewing a senior, just talking with the seniors, and the snacks. He did not like playing games with the whole group of children and seniors (approximately 35 people). When asked what he would do to improve the visiting program, he responded, "Get more people to participate so that more people would be able to enjoy it."

The results of the present study suggest a variety of ideas for future research. For instance, researchers could take a closer look at specific

concerns that place students at risk for academic failure (e.g., children with poor self-concept due to learning differences; children with emotional problems stemming from problems at home) and monitor these throughout the duration of the visiting program. In addition, observational data could be recorded for the seniors as well as the children, and the interactions between the two generations could be examined. And finally, it would be interesting to look at outcomes of an intergenerational visiting program that meets more often than once a month (possibly meeting after school so that children do not miss instructional time during the school day), as more frequent interactions would allow more opportunities for children and seniors to develop relationships.

In conclusion, intergenerational programming, even with limited exposure, does benefit children in need of a positive self-image or a sense of appropriate social conduct. School administrators who do not have the resources to provide mentors for students whose behaviors place them at risk for academic failure may want to consider placing these children in intergenerational visiting programs, thereby providing them with positive experiences and opportunities to feel useful.

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