



Community based approaches to intergenerational social connection

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We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land throughout Australia, and their connection to land, sea and community. We pay respect to elders past and present and extend our commitment to learning and reconciliation to all First Nations people.



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Executive Summary

The InterGen Project was one of the first trials to develop a community-based approach to intergenerational social connection between older adults and teens in the Eastern Metropolitan Region (EMR) of Victoria.

The InterGen project developed the framework for intergenerational social connection focusing on three elements in the healthy social connection model: people, places, and activities (Farmer et al., 2021). The research explored how communities could facilitate healthy social connection between teens and older adults by managing these three elements.

The project team partnered with five councils in the eastern metropolitan region of Victoria to co-develop and facilitate five context-specific intergenerational social connection programs. We used participant observation, video interviews, and surveys to explore whether community-based approaches would contribute to successful, sustainable, and/or scalable intergenerational social connection programs.

This report outlines the following research findings:

- Community-led approaches were successful in the development and facilitation of intergenerational social connections between teens and older adults.
- The three elements of healthy social connection each produced specific opportunities and challenges to development and maintenance of intergenerational social connection.
- Leveraging community connectors was a successful way to build sustainable and scalable intergenerational connection but required significant investment in connectors over long periods of time.

Based on these findings, we made recommendations to ensure intergenerational social connection is a key part of planning healthy communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

Prioritise community-based approaches to intergenerational social connection as a key aspect of creating Victorian communities that are culturally safe, and experiencing less discrimination, especially around age.

Recommendation 2

Invest in resourcing community connectors and networks to manage context-specific elements that contribute to prioritising intergenerational social connection as part of thriving neighbourhoods.

Recommendation 3

Build capacity of local health and government to embed integrated, evidenced-based programs to remove social barriers to connection between marginalised age groups.

Recommendation 4

Support more research to be conducted into tracking how intergenerational social connection between older adults and teens might improve mental wellbeing and reduce loneliness over time.

Introduction

The InterGen project aimed to assess a community-based approach to building intergenerational connections. The project had three key aims:

AIMS

- 1 Develop and test a sustainable community-led model of intergenerational social connection;
- 2 Develop and test a sustainable community-led model of intergenerational social connection;
- 3 Assess the efficacy of community approaches and resource implications for implementing a systematic, sustainable and scalable model for social connection.

Methods for fostering intergenerational social connection have gained increasing attention within academia, government and health services as a way of improving community health. Intergenerational social connection has been shown to have multidimensional benefits for communities and the physical, developmental and mental well-being of younger and older people (Xu et al., 2016; Giraudeau & Bailly, 2019; Douse et al., 2020; Suragran et al., 2021).

Despite the breadth of research indicating the benefits of intergenerational connection, two gaps remain in the research.

There is little research focusing on the benefits of intergenerational social connection between older adults and teens

Much of the current intergenerational research focuses on very old and very young age groups (Rosebrook, 2002; Kirsh et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2012). Yet the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that some age groups in communities are much more disadvantaged by lack of community-based social connection (Marlay et al., 2020). Both older people aged 65+ and adolescents aged 12-17 have faced similar social isolation and need for social connection. The VicHealth Young Australian Loneliness Survey (Lim et al., 2019) indicated one in six adolescents (12-17) experienced loneliness, while other research showed older Australians experiencing loneliness reduced health-seeking behaviours during the pandemic due to social isolation (Strutt et al., 2022). Existing research indicates that intergenerational social connection breaks down social polarisation based on age discrimination and has been shown to benefit positive perceptions of other age groups (Cook et al., 2021; MacCallum et al., 2010).

There is very little research focusing on informal intergenerational social connection

Much of this research has also focused on methodologies for improving intergenerational connection through formal or programmatic interventions, which often require ongoing funding, resourcing and facilitation. Many local communities lack the funding and staff to provide commitment to ongoing resourcing of formal programming, and thus a lack of sustainability of intergenerational practice beyond pilot programs has been cited as a barrier to building community capacity of intergenerational social connection. There is little research tracking the impact of informal social connection, though there has been some productive research round taking intergenerational approaches to community planning (Kaplan et al., 2017).

The InterGen Project

The InterGen project emerged through long-standing relationships with council partners in the eastern metropolitan region of Victoria working on primary prevention of elder abuse. Previous research completed with some of these partners focussed on primary prevention of ageism as a key driver of elder abuse. Through the work of the Eastern Elder Abuse Network (EEAN) led by the Eastern Community Legal Centre (ECLC), we formed partnerships to build a community of practice for preventing ageism. Previous research completed with the EEAN indicated that age discrimination starts early, and that ageism is often internalised due to reinforcement of social norms around age over time. These forms of age discrimination showed up as both socialised and internalised forms of discrimination experienced by both older and younger people. This formed the basis for thinking about intergenerational social connection to remedy the experiences of age discrimination, loneliness and social isolation experienced by both older people and teens.



In the framing for this project, we facilitated several co-ideation sessions where council partners described many of the same issues –

- After a period of extended lockdowns in Melbourne, many people- both old and young- were having trouble reconnecting with their communities.
- Apart from this, many community spaces or locations needed revitalisation or reframing in how they catered to a changed community, and changing community needs.
- Many councils were also experiencing – sometimes for the first time – budgetary difficulty, diminishing resource allocation, staffing issues and other impacts that prevented them from developing or maintaining social connection programs. While councils have great networks and abilities to share and collaborate, they do not always have the resources to fund and maintain programs.
- Most councils do not have ways to measure the social impact of their social connection programs, so they often don't continue after initial pilots because they can't attract funding or resources to continue.

The InterGen project was one of the first trials of a community-based model to develop and foster intergenerational connection between older adults and teens in Victoria. The project focussed on developing more informal, everyday forms of intergenerational social connection in communities, by negotiating the three elements of the community-based healthy social connection model: people, places and activities (Farmer et al., 2021).

The InterGen Project was the first attempt at remedying some of these issues by taking an innovative intergenerational approach.

The InterGen project partnered with five councils in the Eastern metropolitan region of Victoria, Australia to co-develop and facilitate 12-week programs that aimed to create a context-specific and sustainable model of informal intergenerational

social connection between older adults and teens in each of the council areas.

The team used mixed qualitative methods to understand the development, challenges, and impacts of sustainable, informal intergenerational social connection. The five intergenerational programs were developed using co-ideation and co-design methods. We used qualitative surveys, observation and semi structured interview methods to analyse and evaluate the impacts and sustainability of the projects. The evaluation contributed to three findings:

FINDINGS

- 1 Community-led approaches were successful in development and facilitation of intergenerational social connections.
- 2 The three elements of healthy social connection each produced specific opportunities and challenges to development and maintenance of intergenerational social connection.
- 3 Leveraging community connectors was a successful way to build sustainable and scalable intergenerational connection but required significant investment in connectors over long periods of time.

Literature Review

Defining intergenerational social connection

Intergenerational practice has been defined as providing opportunities for “purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations” (Kaplan et al., 2002: p. xi). Intergenerational practice has expanded in the last decade, with different programming techniques providing opportunities to bring people of different age groups together for social, civic or educational experiences. In addition to demonstrating mutual benefits to participants of at least two non-familiar, non-adjacent generations, intergenerational programs embrace social cohesion relevant to all generations involved. Intergenerational programs have been shown to promote greater awareness and understanding among the younger and older generations, improvement of physical and mental wellbeing, and growth of self-esteem for both generations (Martins et al., 2019).

Most research on intergenerational social connection has been focused on the broadening evidence of its benefits for physical and mental wellbeing for both older and younger people. These benefits include improved academic outcomes and confidence in young people (Tierney et al., 1995), improved physical and mental health of older people (Cornwell et al., 2008), and improved social cohesion in communities (Kaplan, 2004).

More recent research has shown an increasing research interest in promoting intergenerational social connection as a way of fostering stronger and more resilient communities, through better engagement of citizens in local civics and social life. Related to this, strategies to improve intergenerational social connection have been shown to help break down age-discrimination-based social polarisation. Further, these practices have been shown to have a positive impact on health and wellbeing through fostering new relationships and positive perceptions of other age groups (Meshel and McGlynn, 2004).

Facilitating intergenerational connection between older adults and teens

Relatively few intergenerational programs in the literature focus on teenagers and older adults. Much of the research prioritises small children or tertiary students. Indeed, a scoping review of evidence-based practices in intergenerational programs found that university students made up 57 per cent of the studies involving young adult participants (Jarrott et al., 2021).

Much of the research positions intergenerational practice as more difficult with teens. As Santini et al., (2018: 2) suggest: ‘IGPs [intergenerational programs] targeting teenagers aged 13-15 are

rather rare, as it seems to be quite difficult to capture their interest'. Yet, adolescents, teens and older adults are seen as much more vulnerable to experiencing social isolation and loneliness, with compromised social connectedness common to both age groups (Knight et al., 2017). Similarly, younger people and older adults experience ageism and age-related stigma (WHO, 2021), with both groups at risk of lacking sufficient social agency or environmental mastery (Knight et al., 2017). As Parkinson & Turner (2019: 388) suggest: 'adolescents and older adults (ages 65 and older) face age-related misconceptions and seek a sense of independence while wanting to feel connected to others'.

Erikson's (1959) theory of psychosocial development argues that adolescent's main task of psychosocial growth is the development of identity, with growth of identity incorporating 'the establishment of life values, attitude development and the determination of what meaning the adolescent will attribute to his/her life' (Knight et al., 2017: 167). In contrast, older adults 'psychosocial development generally involves a struggle to maintain a sense of self, a consolidation of integrity and a desire to share learned wisdom (Erikson et al., 1986).

Other research indicates social networks tend to shrink in size as people age, with older adults having approximately 50 per cent of the social connections of people in their twenties and thirties (Lang, 2001). Despite this, older adults tend to report a higher satisfaction with their social connections than younger people (Birditt & Antonucci, 2007; Luong, Charles, & Fingerman, 2011). This appears connected to perceptions older people have of less time being available, and thus tending to pursue emotionally meaningful social connections as a social goal in and of itself (Lang, 2001). Although older adults tend to value and prioritise emotionally meaningful social connections (Lang, 2001; Cornwell et al., 2008), there is evidence to suggest that fostering weaker ties, e.g., connections considered less emotionally close, are also important for overall wellbeing (Huxhold et al., 2020). In a comprehensive review into the impact of intergenerational programs with children and older adults, researchers found the

strongest intergenerational interactions occurred in cases of informal activities that promoted conversation among participants and in structured activities (Gualano et al., 2018). This is further validated by a paper that explored the barriers and enablers to engagement between the older and younger participants in an intergenerational learning program. The study found that when the activities were less structured, the more spontaneous the interaction between the children and older persons (Kirsnan et al., 2022).

Promoting informal intergenerational social connection

Several studies showed that successful intergenerational programs have some characteristics in common. There is some evidence that successful intergenerational connection does not have to be fostered through formalized programming of activities. In a review of the study design and characteristics of intergenerational programs, researchers found activities did not seem to be the determining factor for a program's success, but rather it was the contact between the generations themselves, regardless of the content of the sessions (Martins et al., 2019). Some scholars identify the importance of an adequate setting, accessible to all participants, and of open-ended activities that appeared more interesting, as indicators for success in intergenerational programs (Gualano et al., 2018). Others note an intergenerational program ought to be created and negotiated among all those who can be involved, respecting their interests, desires, motivations, and needs and that shared learning for all participants, provides a more intense and effective learning (Patrício et al., 2016). Others note a common goal and mutual levels of knowledge are thought to be essential for intergenerational attitude change (Alcock et al., 2011).

When younger and older people have more personal engagement time, they tend to create more opportunities to find and share common interests. This finding reinforces the importance of embedding activities that encourage closer ties and bonds between connections in intergenerational programs to improve the social

fabric that underpins these relationships and interactions (Kirsnan et al., 2022). Other studies have similarly shown that one-on-one interaction between two generations is ideal. In a study that investigated three different models for university students to connect with older adults including booking appointments, drop-in session or matching pairs, found both generations wanted the one-on-one interaction so they could get to know one another because they appreciated the natural relationship that forms (Leedahl et al., 2019).

Interventions that include both educational and intergenerational contact components demonstrated particularly strong effects, especially for combating negative attitudes toward aging, suggesting that such combined programs should be a high priority for rigorous testing and dissemination (Burnes et al., 2019). In a systematic review and meta-analysis of interventions to reduce ageism against older adults, Burnes et al. (2019) assessed three intervention types designed to reduce ageism, including education, intergenerational contact, and combined education and intergenerational contact. The combined and intergenerational contact-only intervention types demonstrated the strongest effects on the attitudes and knowledge outcomes, respectively.

In regard to intervention length and activities, there was high variability between studies. The length ranged from one single session to six weeks and some lasting 6 months (Canedo-García et al., 2017; Hausknecht et al., 2021; Martins et al., 2019).

Longer follow-up, with weekly/biweekly sessions, seems to be important for these intergenerational programs, giving participants time to get to know each other, to feel comfortable in a strange environment, to create bonds, and therefore be more effective (Martins et al., 2019). In terms of intervention contexts, researchers found in a systematic review of the effectiveness of intergenerational programs that schools are the most widely used among a wide range that encompasses nursing homes, day centers, social and health centers, and even private homes. In addition, many of the interventions were carried out in multiple contexts (Canedo-García et al., 2017).

One gap in the evidence is that studies continue to rely, primarily, on evaluations of just one generation of participants, with one study arguing that an intergenerational program is not effective if it only benefits one group, and researchers must move toward more comprehensive assessment (Jarrott, 2011).



Methodology

The InterGen project was developed to explore two key questions:

KEY QUESTIONS

- 1 how community-based approaches to intergenerational social connection might influence the wellbeing of teens and older people; and
- 2 how these approaches might develop more informal, everyday forms of intergenerational social connection in communities.

We used a community connection framework focused on three elements of fostering connection – people, places and activities – to create five informal social groups in the Eastern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne to explore these questions. This project prioritises place-based actions which directly involve participation from targeted populations to activate a unique community-based, co-designed model for social connection.

We drew on mixed qualitative methods to understand the development, challenges, and impacts of sustainable, informal intergenerational social connection. This section will outline these methods through the project phases of developing, facilitating, analysing and evaluating the InterGen project.

These evaluative methods contributed to a findings matrix to understand which elements influenced enduring social connection.

Phase One: Developing the InterGen project

The five intergenerational programs were developed using co-ideation and co-design methods with a project advisory group. The project advisory group included Active Ageing and Youth Advisory representatives from each of our project partners: Maroondah Council Manningham Council; Knox City Council; Whitehorse Council; and Monash City Council. The project also had input from two community practice partners: The Eastern Community Legal Centre and the Australian Institute for Intergenerational Practice.

Below is an example of some framing for the co-ideation and co-development activities we conducted with project partners to work through some of the more context-specific challenges and opportunities that emerged as we were choosing the people, locations and activities that would frame their individual projects.

ACTIVITY ONE: 15 minute scoping Council partners

- 1 What sort of projects are you thinking about doing?
- 2 What are you prioritising by framing the project in this way?
- 3 What are the challenges or gaps you are thinking about now?

Through the Advisory we identified and developed relationships to help lead intergenerational social connection, working across the interlinked elements of community connection: (1) People and Context, (2) Activities, and (3) Spaces and Places.

ACTIVITY TWO: Refining the projects: a group discussion

- 1 What are the key outcomes for each project? Policy? Practice? Programming? Evaluation?
- 2 What opportunities and challenges do we share in terms of each council project?
- 3 What needs to happen now to finalise the project idea?

This model is unique because it emphasises community-based co-ideation and development through each phase of the project. The model supports community to lead parts of the program but also to form networks between current and prospective stakeholders.

The Advisory participated in co-ideation and co-development workshops, which helped the research team to identify the specific social context of each project location and to leverage existing Active Ageing and Youth Advisory networks to recruit participants from communities.

The Advisory also assisted in the design of the projects by identifying the specific locations and activities that best suited intergenerational social connection in the local context.

We also worked on identifying community 'connectors' that would help work through the elements of the project and assist in ensuring the project was sustainable over time. All communities have people whose social participation revolves around being 'connectors'.

Connectors live or work in communities or organisations, value participation, and often cross the social boundaries that limit connection between groups (Wallace et al., 2019). Embedding community connectors in specific place-based social contexts will assist the sustainability of the model over time, and can be replicated across locations, ensuring scalability.

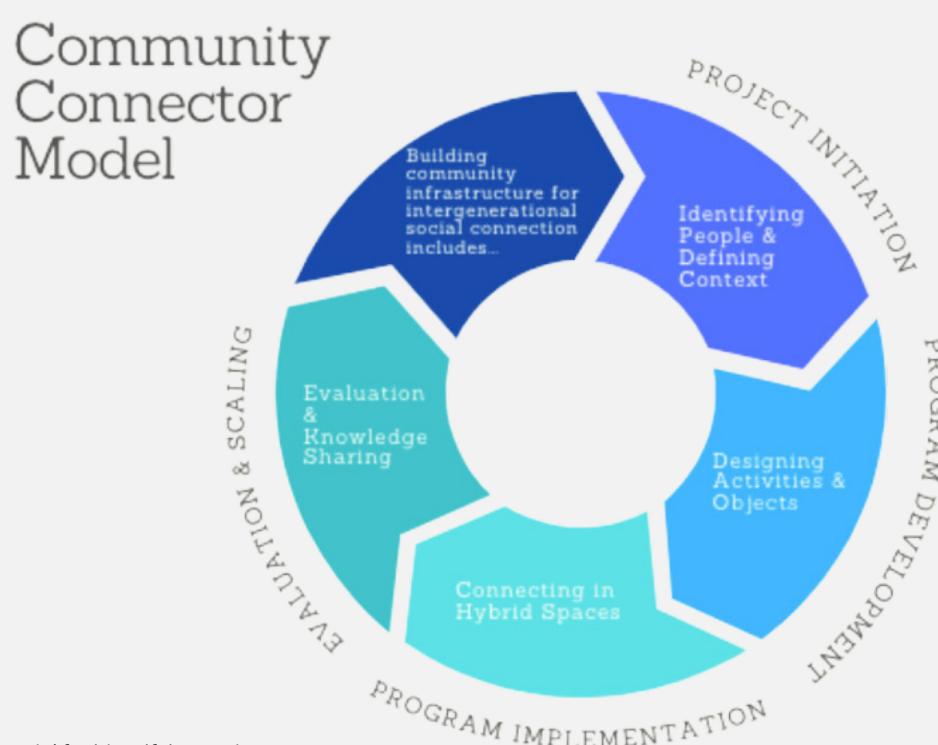


Figure 1: A model for identifying and developing community connectors

Facilitating the InterGen project

The research team facilitated five intergenerational social groups across locations in the partner council areas. Each group responded to the specific context of the council area across recruitment, locations and activities. Participants met for one hour per week for 12 weeks, participating in informal activities based on mutual interest and shared learning. The group meetings were observed by a research assistant, using ethnographic techniques to document the workshops, and also participated in some of the activities.

Each council area had a unique social activity:

COUNCIL AREA ACTIVITIES

Knox

Board game social group at Knox library with older recruited participants and teen participants aged 13-15 from Boronia K-12 Senior College.

Maroondah

Weekly coffee and chat at Croydon Community Wellbeing Hub with recruited older participants and teen participants aged 16-18 from EV's Youth Centre.

Manningham

Weekly story sharing and activities at Doncaster Library with older participants from Chinese Friendship group and teen participants aged 16-18 from Templestowe Secondary College.

Monash

Weekly coffee and chat at Euneva Youth Space with recruited older participants and recruited younger participants aged 14-18.

Whitehorse

Weekly mixed activity group with recruited older participants and younger participants aged 16-18 from Vermont Secondary College at Strathdon House and Orchard Precinct.

Evaluating the InterGen project

The project emphasised evaluation to ensure scalability of the project. Thus, project evaluation considered impact across social connection, wellbeing, and possibilities for scalability, recorded in an evaluation matrix.

Analysis was based on:

- Participant observation of group meetings;
- Attitudinal surveys of participants;
- Video interviews of participants;
- Interviews with project advisory representatives;
- Organisational evaluation and resource evaluation to consider costs and resources required for scalability of projects.

Participant Observation Methods

The research team used participant observation as a qualitative method to explore how and whether social connections were made between older and younger participants in each of the five group settings.

Participant observation is a commonly used qualitative data collection method that allows the researcher to participate in an event, social setting or group, to observe the interactions, attitudes, behaviours and practices of research participants in situ. We chose this method as we were conscious of how researcher presence might impact on the kinds of social connections made in the groups. Being able to participate in the group's activities ensured the setting did not feel like a research project to participants, and observations were less intrusive on the social connections being made.

These observations were one of the key methods of collecting data about the experiences of younger and older participants in social connection programs. They were an extremely important methodology for gaining access to otherwise hidden social interactions.

The participant observation method allowed the team to immerse ourselves into the sometime complex social interactions that occur within intergenerational groups and observe how these interactions develop over time, as well as particular opportunities or challenges to fostering and sustaining these interactions over time.

We emphasised strong participatory aspects within our observation; researchers were immersed in the activities with participants, such as playing games with one group, or moving around and talking with different participants while engaging in activities. Notes were taken after participation in group activities and recorded the activities the behaviours, group and individual conduct and any observed forms of social connections between participants. Researchers also recorded participants' insights into their thoughts about experiences they were having in the group.

Researchers attended and participated in every session and provided at least one page of observations after each.

The research team discussed observations weekly and began to co-develop themes in the observational data. These themes were further validated at the end of the sessions, when the lead CI completed the immersion phase of data collection, by reading and making notes on each of the observations. Agreement was sought about themes for analysis and then a thematic analysis was conducted, using hand coding of the notes to organise and interpret the data collected into the themes. We also chose some of the experiences as examples or case studies that were appropriate exemplars of the themes.

We further triangulated this data with the survey and video data analysis to bolster the reliability of the findings.

Video interview Methods

We used the analysis of multiple video interviews with participants to triangulate the data we collected from the participant observation methodology. Video narrative and digital story are becoming increasingly popular methodologies to collect data, and to gather evaluation of impact in social programs. This is because digital narrative forms like video interview and storytelling can reflect group or community methodological practices. This has been demonstrated in a number of community-led projects, and is increasingly favoured in indigenous led research and social programming to better reflect community knowledges (See Cunsolo Willox, 2013).

Digital narrative can provide participant testimony that helps promote lived experience as an important way to develop community capacity. In this project digital narrative was used to trace development of attitudes towards intergenerational social connection over time, and to provide community testimony about the perceived impacts of intergenerational connection on individual participants.

We used a 'vox pop' style method of collecting video data, favouring short video interviews with participants over the beginning, middle and end of the programs. We asked the same or similar questions with each interview to trace the development of attitudes and experiences with intergenerational social connection over time. We completed this process with each of the intergenerational programs, collecting a number of short video interviews.

The lead CI completed the immersion phase of data collection, by watching and making notes on each of the observations. Agreement was sought within the research group about themes for analysis and then a thematic analysis was conducted, using hand coding of the notes to organise and interpret the data collected into the themes. We then edited the interviews into cohesive video stories that individually identified the themes emerging from each of the programs, leading to a collection of five videos that reflected the individual program themes.

Attitudinal Survey Methods

We completed attitudinal surveys to establish a baseline understanding of participant attitudes towards different age groups. This was also an important aspect of validating the attitudes, behaviours and thoughts of participants observed during the program.

Our initial methodological approach included use of the scale at the beginning and end of the program. This was not implemented for two reasons; firstly; we quickly realised that the informal nature of the individual projects meant it was impossible to ensure that all participants were present for both survey collections due to varied and occasionally staggered participation, and secondly; we could not establish from the literature that the 12-week programs were long enough to determine psychological change. The research team instead used the FSA to establish a baseline understanding of attitudes toward different age groups, and then establish change based on observed behaviours and qualitative analysis of attitudes toward other ages based on participation in the program. This would better establish whether and how the program may have fostered positive connection between older and younger participants.

Participants, in their first week of the program, were asked to complete a hardcopy form that contained two measures related to ageist perceptions and experiences of age-based discrimination. Sixty-one participants started the survey, however, one participant completed less than 50% of the survey and this response was excluded from the analysis. Sixty responses were therefore analysed. Thirteen respondents were aged over 65, and forty-seven respondents were aged 18 or younger. Hardcopy responses were manually entered into SPSS (V.29) for analysis.

Two measurements for the survey/questionnaire were adapted from previous work and deployed to establish a baseline of ageist perspectives and self-reported experiences of ageism. The first scale was an adapted version of the Framboni (1990) scale of ageism.

A 5-point Likert scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' was used for responses. The second measurement was a collection of 9 statements adapted from The Ageism Survey (Palmore, 2001) that described different experiences of age-based discrimination.

Answers to the second scale included 'never', 'once', or 'more than once' and an optional space to provide further information on the experience. After completion of the surveys and questionnaires, descriptive analysis was conducted via SPSS (v.29).

To ensure accuracy given the small sample size, missing responses were excluded from percentage calculations. The data was split into older and younger participants' responses. The Framboni (1990) scale of ageism was analysed at an item level to compare the answers of the older and younger participants and see if any patterns emerged. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the percentage of respondents within each group who agreed with the item (answered 'agree' or 'strongly agree') or disagreed with the item (answered 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree'). Where a respondent put an answer in between the response options, the less extreme option was entered.

Self-reported experiences of ageism were also analysed using descriptive statistics to report the percentage of respondents from each group who had never experienced the statement, experienced the statement once, or had experienced the statement more than once.

Research Findings

The InterGen project produced five intergenerational social groups across locations in the partner council areas, with participant observation, video interview and surveys contributing to our understanding of whether and how community led approaches were successful in fostering intergenerational social connection. Analysis of the data has produced three main research findings.

FINDING ONE

Community-led approaches were successful in development and facilitation of intergenerational social connection between teens and older adults.

Analysis of the observation data and interviews indicated that participants overwhelmingly felt they had formed positive social connections with one or more people in a different age group. We found that community-based approaches to intergenerational connection had a positive impact on social lives of both teens and older people. We collected observational, video interview and survey data to evaluate participants' perceptions of the impact of intergenerational social connection on them.

Establishing baseline attitudes toward age difference:

One measure of success in development of facilitating connection is attitudinal change between age groups. We used the Framboni (1990) Scale of Ageism (FSA) to establish a baseline for participants' attitudes toward different age groups.

The concept of the FSA is taken from the definition of ageism by Butler (1969), and aims to measure the affective component of attitudes, with a 4-point, 29 item scale.

We collected enough survey responses to establish a baseline understanding of attitudes towards different age groups. We used the FSA as a base model to create positive and negative statements about age groups, coupled with a scale of agreement. We also used a scale to determine if participants believed they had experienced discrimination based on age. The results of the survey indicated attitudes that were supported by some of the behaviours we observed in the initial individual project observations and interviews.

The chart below indicates agreement and disagreement only, excluding neutral responses.

The results indicate ageist attitudes; however, these are largely made up of internalised ageism; that is, the ageist attitudes older people hold toward other older people, including themselves. For example, some survey questions asked about younger people's attitudes toward older people. The responses showed that older survey respondents overwhelmingly perceived that younger people would respond negatively toward social participation with older people. Younger people's responses, however, suggested they would largely welcome social participation with older people. Young people's responses did indicate some ageist attitudes, largely around older people's abilities and purpose post-work age.

These responses are highlighted in the table on the following page:

	Younger		Older	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Old people can be creative and innovative.	94%	2%	92%	8%
Older people deserve the same rights as other members of society	87%	2%	100%	0%
Older people should feel welcome at the social gatherings of young people	85%	0%	62%	8%
Older people contribute to communities even when they retire from paid work	68%	9%	100%	0%
Older people are generally more socially isolated than younger people	60%	9%	62%	39%
Many older people live in the past	57%	13%	62%	23%
It's much easier for younger people to make friends	60%	19%	46%	31%
Many younger people are happiest when they are with people their own age.	47%	19%	85%	15%
Most younger people are more interested in their phones than face social activities	38%	30%	46%	39%
I would prefer not to go to an activity at a seniors club	41%	41%	31%	62%
Older people should have social activities that are separate from young people's activities.	36%	36%	46%	39%
Many older people are not that interested in making new friends, they prefer the circle of friends they have had for years.	30%	26%	62%	31%
Older people can be intimidating	34%	43%	46%	39%
Younger people feel too embarrassed to socialise with older people	30%	49%	46%	46%
I sometimes avoid eye contact with younger people when I see them.	30%	37%	15%	69%
Younger people would not welcome older people into their activities.	23%	66%	39%	39%
Younger people don't feel as lonely as older people	22%	39%	8%	85%
Young people should find friends their own age.	15%	43%	31%	39%

Table (continued)

Younger people would not want to spend much time with an older person.	13%	55%	39%	54%
Complex conversation cannot be expected from most young people	17%	44%	8%	92%
I don't like it when older people try to make conversation with me.	6%	89%	8%	75%
I would feel embarrassed to admit that I had a platonic friendship with a person much older than me.	9%	77%	0%	69%
Young people don't really need to use community services and facilities.	4%	55%	0%	85%
There should be special sports facilities so older people can compete at their own level.	81%	2%	85%	0%

Figure 2: Survey results on ageist attitudes.

These perceptions of younger people's disregard for older people were reflected in the discriminatory behaviours we observed older people direct toward teens, as discussed later in this report. Much of the ageist behaviours or attitudes we observed were directed toward younger people by older participants, though appeared rooted in internalised ageism. The survey does reflect overall, young people's enthusiasm for social interaction and participation with older age groups, which was also indicated in our qualitative project observations and interviews.

Where we asked about experiences of ageist behavior, it appeared that younger people reported more instances of discrimination toward them due to age. Young people perceived that they had often (i.e. more than once) been treated with less dignity, were patronised or had assumptions made about their intelligence or engagement due to their young age. The comparison was stark, with 50 per cent of young respondents suggesting that they had been treated with less dignity and respect, whereas 85 per cent older respondents suggested they had never been treated this way. Both age groups

perceived that they had been ignored or denied service due to age more than once, though we noted in responses, some young people assumed this meant service of alcohol, so this response has some indication of discrepancies.

	Younger			Older		
	Never	Once	More	Never	Once	More
I was treated with less dignity or respect because of my age.	34%	17%	49%	85%	15%	0%
Someone made a joke that poked fun at my age	51%	23%	26%	69%	8%	23%
I was ignored or not taken seriously because of my age.	26%	26%	48%	92%	0%	8%
I was patronised or "talked down to" because of my age.	32%	32%	36%	82%	0%	18%
Someone assumed I was 'weak' because of my age	49%	19%	32%	83%	0%	17%
I was rejected as unattractive or incompatible because of my age	70%	11%	19%	92%	8%	0%
Someone assumed I could not understand because of my age	21%	30%	49%	67%	8%	25%
Someone told me I was not able to participate in an activity or event because of my age	30%	13%	57%	85%	15%	0%
I was denied service or ignored by service providers because of my age.	54%	22%	24%	77%	8%	15%

Figure 3: Survey results on experiences of age discrimination.

Overall, these responses are perhaps indicative that young people are perceiving some disconnection from social and civic life due to age. At the beginning of the project we assumed that older people would report more experiences of ageism directed toward them, and that young people would display more ageism. The surveys suggest a much more nuanced picture of ageism in local communities in the eastern metropolitan region. Older people are suggesting that they are not experiencing as much ageism in the community, but are certainly displaying attitudes related to internalised ageism, that perhaps speak to more stereotypical understanding of how

younger people may perceive older people. Yet, we overwhelmingly observed positive perceptions of social interactions with older people and making social connections in both the survey and qualitative analysis.

Observational data:

The observational data collected indicated that there were several participants who were positively impacted by the experience of regularly meeting with another age group. The observations from earlier weeks in each of the project groups indicate a typical pattern nervousness amongst the participants. Below is an example of the typical observation of the early weeks of the projects:

"It was the first week where the younger participants met the older participants. There were obvious nerves, so it was focused on breaking the ice and having all of them get to know one another."

■ Maroondah, week 1

Other observations during initial weeks noted some discomfort around the informal, social purpose of the activity:

"We ended up playing with discussion starter cards and the younger participants did contribute though they are still overall very quiet and deferential. Most of the participants still defer to the facilitator to lead the conversation, and there are a number of conflicting opinions about what we 'should' be doing as an activity."

■ Monash, week 2

The observations tended to change over a period of two-six weeks, where the observational data begins to show groups getting to know each other:

"Third workshop felt a little more relaxed as the participants knew each other a bit better, and with the addition of a new younger participant who was a bit more confident and facilitated easier conversation amongst the participants when they broke off into their own groups."

■ Monash, week 3

Observers noted that eventually the social interactions became louder, more immediate and more confident as participants became more familiar with the informal structure, and with each other:

"Participants were quickly engaged in conversation and seemed visibly comfortable, and often familiar. The mood was friendly and upbeat. [The observer] was new this week and most people introduced themselves to me voluntarily during the workshop."

■ Maroondah, week 6

Many observers noted that the level of comfort and familiarity in the overall group, also coincided with interaction moving into smaller groups of activity or conversation:

"Session felt a lot more lively this week as people started to break up into smaller groups and use different areas in the space."

■ Manningham, week 4

Finally, observers note that increased familiarity and confidence is seen in the overall group, but interactions become much more individual, and smaller groups become drawn into regular conversation. For example:

One of the older participants who was newest to the group and had vision issues, at the beginning of the session went straight to the table of the more confident girls as he had sat with this group the previous weeks and enjoyed playing games with them. This group of girls are very good at holding conversation with the older participants, particularly those who are a bit more quiet or shy. At the end of the session this older participant when asked if he enjoyed the session said with a twinkle in his eyes, "oh those girls are great, they wind me up, but they're wonderful"

■ Knox, week 5

Or repeated activity:

"K- and S- continued to bond over their puzzle, having in-depth conversations and were slightly removed from the rest of the group."

■ Monash, week 8

Observers also noted the beginning of individual friendships start to form with repeated conversation and interaction:

"E- immediately chose P- as their partner. The pair seem to have formed a strong bond with inside jokes about food, finding common interests and both talking and laughing a lot."

■ Maroondah, week 8

Even if individual friendship were not forthcoming, there was evidence that the more successful groups shared comradery and friendship that had positive impact on their wellbeing. One memorable moment of group friendship toward the end of the 12-week program was recorded by an observer when the group agreed that some background music would add to the atmosphere:

"N- spontaneously suggested they could take requests on their smartphone. P- immediately said, 'Stand by me' which N- found and played. This led to N- telling the group they could play instruments – guitar, harmonica, piano – and sing and write songs and that they are going to have time in a recording studio this week for the first time. N- then asked if we would like to hear them sing their song. P- and C- agreed that would be terrific, and encouraged N, so they sang it unaccompanied to us. It was apparent N- felt a close trust bond with P- and workshop peers. N- later told the entire group that they had never felt as accepted as they are by the group and never had older people in their life like those they had met through this program. It was moving, and the older people in the room were clearly emotionally affected by this heartfelt admission by N."

■ Maroondah, week 12

The observations showed a fairly consistent pattern of interaction over the 12-week period, indicating that teens and older adults were able to find social connection through informal community-led activities. Observations indicated that almost all the participants had at least one positive social interaction with the group and/or an individual of a different age group.

Interview data:

Interview data from the two-three vox pop style interviews conducted over the course of each project showed that almost all participants indicated that they enjoyed meeting and engaging with activities with other age groups and found some benefit in intergenerational connection.

Much of the content of the initial interviews showed both younger and older participants were hopeful of “making a connection” or “meeting new people” or “making a friend”, though some indicated that there were social barriers based on “different backgrounds”. Many of the older participants in particular, appeared initially concerned that perceived generational differences might impact on social connection. For example:

“They [young people] have different ideas and different priorities. Young people, they like to go out to cafes and parties, and things like that. But older people like to stay home, or go to the library so let's less chance to understand each other.”

■ Participant Y, Older, Monash

However, the initial interviews showed that many younger interviewees were particularly cognisant of the need for intergenerational connection based on the social barriers they experienced around age. One younger participant eloquently articulated this stigma:

“There's a lot of stigma around the age groups. There's this idea that the younger are ignorant or reckless. Then there's the opposite stigma where there are people that are older who are 'withering away'. Coming here, and having the ability to connect, it shows that there can still be similarities, that age holds no difference when it comes to a person.”

■ Participant C, Younger, Knox

Another younger interviewee noted that social barriers between age groups could be seen in communities that kept age groups apart:

“We don't really have a space where we can meet. We don't have many opportunities where they cross [paths].”

■ Participant A, Younger, Knox



The later interviews showed that many participants had made a social connection, with both younger and older participants describing a weekly meeting as “fun” and “special”. Both older and younger participants suggested that the important aspects of the project were “getting to know someone on another level”, “talking to each other”, “having a laugh”; and, “realising there aren’t that many differences [between age groups]”. Many of the younger people suggested that the “deeper conversations” that emerged during an otherwise informal activity were very important to them; older people suggested that the interactions with young people were an enjoyable, and increasingly rare, reminder of the “enthusiasm of youth”.

“I find its nice to be able to mix on the same level as the younger generation...You can get encouragement from them because they still have that sparkle of life...a little bit more of their enthusiasm, it’s just nice.”

■ Participant T, older, Knox

Similarly to the observational data, the interviews conducted later indicated that as participants grew more comfortable with each other, smaller or individual friendships were reported. One older male participant (PT, older Knox) suggested that they had made an unlikely friendship with a group of teen girls that had brought value to this social life:

“It surprised me how quickly the young girls and myself gelled. I thought it was quite extraordinary.”

PT was initially hesitant to join the social group, having recently lost their partner and admitting to still feeling significant grief every day. He was convinced to give the group meetings a go for a few weeks and then decide whether he wanted to continue. PT attended the first session and sat with a group of younger female participants, who were also a group of friends. Each week the group of teen girls would look for PT to play board games and dominoes with them, while PT would talk about their love of motorbikes, and what it was like to grow up during WWII in Britain. A strong bond grew between the group and an additional older male participant. When PT arrived at one session slightly upset that their niece had cancelled a birthday meeting, he was moved to tears when he realised the girls had brought him a birthday gift and card.

Their small group continue to meet at the girls’ school to play board games together. PT said to an observer:

“I know it’s unusual for an old guy to be hanging out with teenage girls, but I respect them so much. They are so dynamic and clever, it’s a joy to be around them.”

Equally one of the teen girls who had befriended the older participant said that as well as enjoying the fun of interacting every week, she had also benefitted from the shared feeling of being valued and important to each other:

“When they start to appreciate you, and appreciate you being here, it makes you feel like you’re important.”

■ Participant H, younger, Knox

Another example of how strong the social connections were, is PJ’s experience within the Whitehorse project. PJ (Older, Whitehorse) arrived halfway through the program, and initially found it difficult to interact with groups who had already become comfortable with one another and had gravitated toward a consistent weekly activity. PJ has a disability and experiences some short-term memory loss, so getting to the meetings and moving around the activities was very difficult. After a few weeks of feeling ‘left out’, PJ eventually joined a group of younger teen boys and an older male participant working on a puzzle. While she initially suggested she didn’t like puzzles, she became invested in the conversation the participants were having during the activity.

She began to join the same activity every week and enjoying the conversation while watching the activity – and occasionally having a go of the puzzle. PJ reflected to the interviewer:

“I feel really quite sad that this was the final session. I was really enjoying the jigsaw puzzle and was getting to know the people attending. I think that this was a very, very valuable idea and worked well. I hope that this research helps to make these types of programs become more regular events”.

PJ's experience showed that even informal meetings in larger groups over short periods have a positive impact on the social connections formed. The activity itself was not important in this instance, but rather the opportunity for informal meeting repeated every week.

The interviews showed that younger and older participants had slightly different perceptions of how intergenerational social connection may benefit them; older people were keen to learn about younger people, while younger people were keen to participate in a new social interaction.

Subsequent interviews explored some of the connections that the different age groups were making, indicating deeper friendships were occurring on a smaller scale. Each age group did, however, suggest the value of some of the informal interactions and conversations to their overall social wellbeing.

Survey data

The survey data was collected at the end of each of the projects and allowed short form answers reflecting on the experience of the weekly group meetings. The questions asked participants to reflect on original motivations for joining and then reflecting on opportunities for connection during participation.

Many of the older participants suggested similar motivation for joining the intergenerational group, namely learning: "to learn about how young people live and think", "to learn about younger generations", "to have some communication with young people". Many of the older participants mentioned the popular ABC program 'Old people's home for teenagers' as motivation for joining an intergenerational group. Most of the younger participants were much more interested in the social aspect of the group, with responses like: "To try something new", "To meet new people", "To engage and build relationships with new people", and, "To socialise and have fun".

The survey asked for examples of when a social connection had formed with themselves or others. The responses between younger and older

participants were remarkably similar, focusing on the importance of shared communication. Older participants suggested: "Smiles and laughs connected us. Chats and giving thanks.", "Just being with young people, learning a little about them and their lives." and "I was thrilled when a young participant actually chose me to partner with in an activity." The younger participants suggested similar forms of connection were valued: "Just chatting and hanging out: I am going to miss all the chats", "When we were excited to see each other" and "I got to do a meaningful task while making a new friend".

Almost all of the participants said that they would continue attending the program, though there was some divergence in perceptions about the value of community-led intergenerational programs. There were a number of participants, both older and younger, who suggested that the value of the program was to meet and learn from different age groups, which reflected what was said in the interviews. However, where older people had suggested in initial interviews that learning from young people was their main motivation, by the end of the program, many responses reflected an understanding that the value of intergenerational connection was in the reciprocal benefit of different age groups sharing social connection. For example, responses such as: "we have created a social system where people are disconnected from the community. Building links to different groups of people gives us connection", "This [project] is absolutely vital in forging mutual respect and understanding", and "It's about support and appreciation of each other." gives a sense of older participants' recognition of the reciprocal benefits on intergenerational social connection. These responses reflect older people's understanding of the importance of reciprocity in intergenerational connection, which is something often missing in intergenerational research that focusses attention on the wellbeing benefits or positive impacts for one age group.

Younger participants' responses indicate a change from the beginning to the end of the program. Their responses at the end of the program indicate that they had found the informal nature of the projects an important part of forming deeper, and highly valued connections. For example:

"During one of the sessions, I got to talking with one of the participants and it turned into a friendship. We found common interests and we worked on them each session and it was great, and I really value the connection."

The engagement with the activities diverges from the research literature suggesting teens' lack of engagement in intergenerational programming (Santini et al., 2018: 2). Indeed, in the observations, interviews and the survey data, the evaluation indicated young people were aware of the social barriers between age groups and how it impacts on age discrimination:

"Some of us don't have living grandparents or even interactions with middle aged adults who aren't authority figures. We need to have that experience so we understand each other better."

We also found that the young participants all engaged with the opportunities for social connection and friendship with other age groups, though forms of participation varied. These opportunities for informal social connection were seen as adding to young people's social lives, as seen through survey responses like: "Somebody understood me yet looked after me... always checked in with me"; "I've never had a connection like this before so I really value it"; and "I learnt a lot about other people's experiences in a very enjoyable way. I got to meet new people who I wouldn't have met before."

Overall the evaluation across the observations, interviews and surveys indicated that community-led approaches were successful in development and facilitation of intergenerational social connections between teens and older adults. We noted difference in age groups in the motivations for joining intergenerational programs and their expected benefits. However, the evaluation of where participants made connections reflects the literature that the strongest intergenerational interactions occurred in cases of informal activities that promoted conversation among participants (Gualano et al., 2018). We saw some deviation from the literature around perceptions of the value of

intergenerational social connection and the depth of engagement in intergenerational social connection by teens. Our evaluation found that most older people had recognised the value of reciprocity within intergenerational connection and how this might contribute to healthier communities, rather than simply acknowledging individual benefits. Further we found younger participants deeply appreciated the connections they had made during the projects and indicated ways that they felt social benefits of making a friend within a different age group.

FINDING TWO

The three elements of healthy social connection each produced specific opportunities and challenges to development and maintenance of intergenerational social connection.

Analysis of the observation data and interviews indicated that the people, activities, and location chosen, each have varied impacts on the sustainability of intergenerational connection over time. We have separated our findings according to the impacts of people, activities and location on the success of intergenerational programming.

People

Recruiting both older and younger people to an intergenerational program requires different kinds of engagement.

While we found young people engaged in intergenerational projects with enthusiasm, it was indeed difficult to recruit teen participants. We quickly realised that young people, especially teens, are highly socially 'scheduled', so there needed to be some flexibility in timing of the program and a strong purpose to engage them. Often partnering with a school or leveraging an existing program was a much easier way to recruit teens who were otherwise extremely busy with other school or sport-based activities, or otherwise

not accustomed to spending time after school with older people. Similarly, we found the older people who might be engaged with a social connection program were usually already highly connected in their communities. It was often difficult to reach those participants who were not already connected and may benefit more from intergenerational social connection. Liaising with community service providers often help to find 'hard to reach' people, through services such as 'meal on wheels' or council advisories.

Unfortunately we did observe ageist behaviours during the recruitment of people to the projects. We found that the discriminatory behaviours or attitudes we observed during the project were most commonly directed from older people toward teens. The project team initially experienced difficulties recruiting older people for the programs based on older people's attitudes toward teens. Many of the older people who declined to participate suggested that they were much more interested in interactions with babies or small children, than teens. Some of the attitudes observed reflected internalised ageism – some older people expressed concern that young people

would find them boring or that they would have nothing in common. Others expressed stereotypical representations of teenagers as moody, self-absorbed and intimidating. Even during the project, we observed older people looked visibly intimidated by large groups of older teens talking or laughing together. As suggested previously, many of the older participants we recruited were interested in the possibility of intergenerational programming with teens because they had viewed the popular ABC program 'Old People's home for teenagers', which suggests some of the impact of more positive representations of young people in the media.

In comparison, almost all younger participants were excited about connecting with an older person in an intergenerational program. Most had good attitudes towards older people, having formed strong connection with a grandparent figure at least once before the program began. Below is an example of the kinds of positive feelings that young people said they had about socialising with older people, collected during our co-ideation sessions with participants:

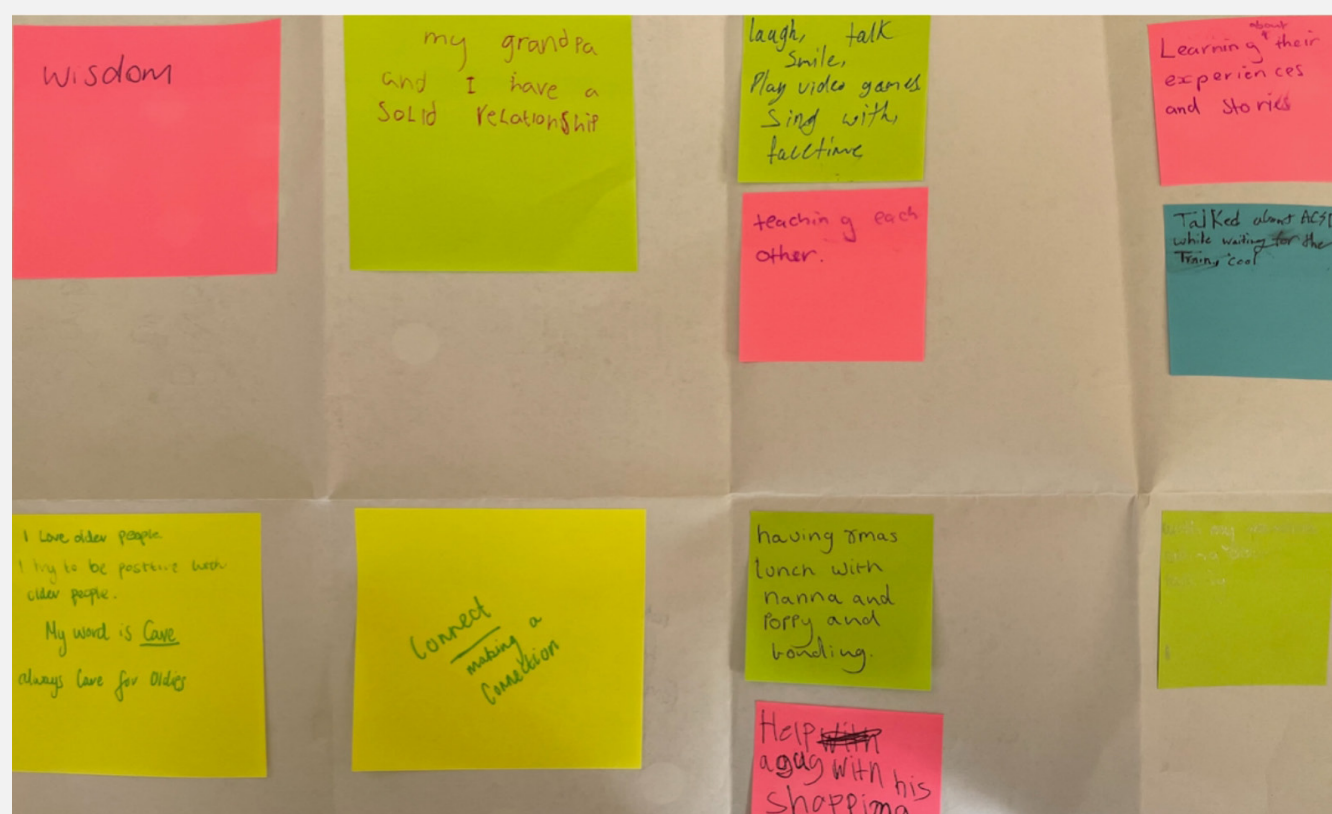


Figure 4: Examples of positive emotions young people associated with socialising with older people

Younger people noted positive experiences that they had had with grandparents, experiences of helping older people which made them feel acknowledged by others. Learning from older people was perceived as a positive experience. One interesting comment was “My word is ‘cave’ I always cave for elders”. This suggests that they both try to help older people, and perhaps that their own social barriers come down during those interactions. We found that most teens felt positive about interacting with older people.

Reciprocity was key to successful intergenerational connection between teens and older adults.

We noted in the observations that a sense of equity and reciprocity was key to successful connection, and had impacts on the sustainability of programs over time. The existing research literature suggests that sharing interests was an important aspect of facilitating ‘close ties’ within intergenerational social groups (Kirsnan et al., 2022). We found that the most successful projects had activities that could bring together diverse groups through a common purpose; to play games, tell stories, to learn something, or to chat and share coffee. Though these activities differ, their articulation as an aim of the program gives the participants a common or shared purpose, which is reflected in intergenerational practice research.

However we found that more than shared interest was needed to sustain intergenerational connection. We found that reciprocity of both the interactions and the benefits of intergenerational social connection were key to their sustainability over time. We observed that participants needed to feel there was equal participation in activities between participants. This meant ensuring that each age group had an opportunity to contribute knowledge or expertise, and that there was no defined leader of any interaction. For example, board game activities were swapped so that each age group had an opportunity to teach the other a new game.

Those participants who came to the group with the expectation of being a mentor were disappointed by the ‘lack of purpose’ of the programs. Observers

noted that facilitator intervention was required when individual participants wanted to take a mentoring approach to the group meetings. This is because younger people who perceived that they needed to defer to the older people in the group tended to disengage from making lasting social connections. The observer noted:

“Though it has been a few weeks, older people still seem to dominate conversation, mostly because the younger group are much smaller, quieter and often defer to them during conversation. We suspect this is because one older man in particular is trying to lead the discussion into mentoring the young people.”

In comparison, where social interactions developed into lasting friendships we noted that both older and younger participants were open to being equal contributors and felt equal sense of value of the overall experience.

Intergenerational connection should be inclusive of social connection as a varied experience across the age span and across multiple abilities.

The InterGen project showed that intergenerational social connection need not look the same to all people. There was one element of accessibility amongst younger participants that significantly influenced how we framed intergenerational social connection. While we did not observe that gender, age or cultural background had significant impact on intergenerational connection, neurodiverse participants were far more likely to experience the program activities in ways that defy typical understanding of social connection.

Each program was initially designed to ensure that those with sensory issues had choices for participation. Every location had a ‘quiet space’ where those who did not wish to interact could still watch events, but were away from noise and activity. We added fidget toys and a comfortable blanket to that space. We also created a poster where those who did not wish to speak could indicate to a facilitator that they were not feeling well, or did not feel like social interaction on that day.

We observed some interactions between older participants and younger neurodiverse participants may have caused distress. During one program we observed some issues around unwanted eye contact or touching, issues with lack of understanding of social cues or interactions and issues with noise levels. We tried to address these issues in subsequent programs by:

- Creating pre-program 'information sessions' with older and younger people, meeting each age group separately to talk about the project.
- We spoke about what to expect in each of the programs, how many people would attend and expectations of interaction so that neurodiverse participants would feel prepared for social interaction.
- We spoke specifically to older participants about how neurodiversity might be expressed in certain behaviours and needs and should not be considered 'rude'.
- We spoke specifically to younger people about what disability might 'look' like for an older person and how to make accommodations for abilities in activities.
- We reiterated that nobody was expected to participate in activities, and that any and all social interactions were accepted, as long as they were not harmful, hurtful or culturally unsafe to others (with examples given)

This prior management of programs was deemed helpful to participants who said that they were nervous about meeting a different age group for the first time. In particular, we observed that older people were much more open and accepting of different forms of social interaction when given a basic understanding of neurodiversity.

This observation caused us to rethink what a 'successful' intergenerational social connection looked like – some neurodiverse participants said

they benefited from interaction with older people, despite having spent much more time watching activities than participating. Further, intergenerational connection occurred for neurodiverse participants on a much smaller scale; one on one activities led by the neurodiverse participant were considered much more sustainable and beneficial than the group friendships formed between age groups elsewhere.

Below is an example of strong social participation from one participant, who often found the activities quite overwhelming, and took frequent breaks with a trusted friend. However, they also valued the program of social interaction, and took the trouble to hand write an almost ten pages document detailing chess instructions for older participants who had said previously that they were finding it difficult to learn the rules of the game:

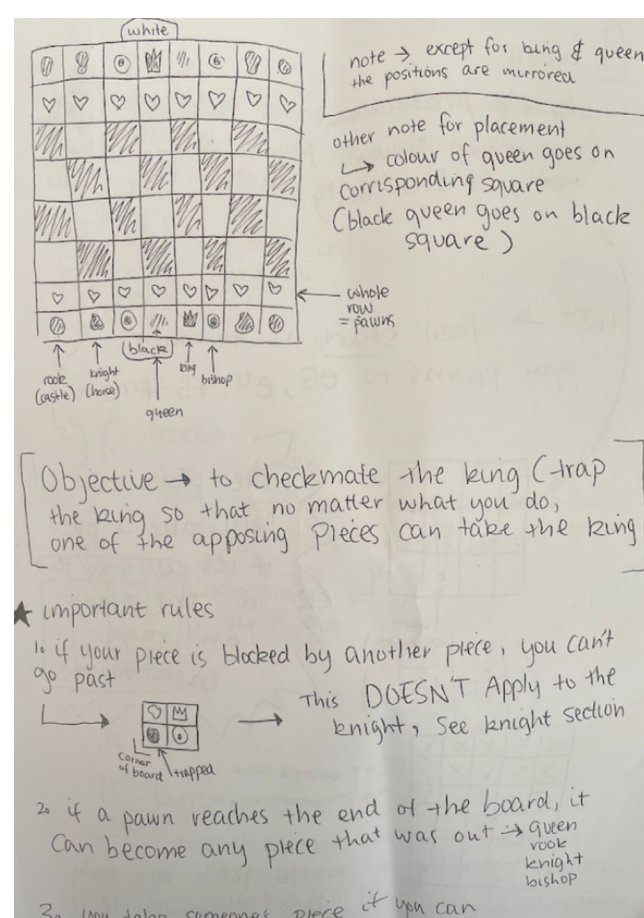


Figure 5: Document made by younger participant detailing instructions for playing chess.

The Whitehorse project

Should intergenerational social connection look like social connection?

The Whitehorse project provided some interesting examples of how neurodiverse participants redefined what successful intergenerational social connection might 'look' like. The Whitehorse project had many neurodiverse participants; two younger participants were diagnosed with ADD and another three with autism. This project also had one older participant who had recently received an autism diagnosis in their mid-80s. This was a highly vulnerable and emotional time for the older person, who admitted that she maintained very few friendships and was largely ostracized by her family for being 'difficult' due to her lack of understanding of neurotypical social norms. The participant wanted to try to form a social connection with a young person for the first time, while trying to understand her own needs as a newly diagnosed autistic person. As facilitators, we tried to ensure they knew what the structure of the program was, and what to expect each week. We also made sure they knew they had access to quiet space when they felt overwhelmed by the noise or other interactions. We did experience some initial issues when the participant became overwhelmed and angry when a conversation with a young person in a group setting was 'interrupted' by another older participant joining in. We debriefed with all the participants afterward to ensure everyone felt safe and supported. The next week, we paired the participant with a student who shared an interest in photography and they spent the time walking around the venue taking photos. The participant was overjoyed to make a social connection with a young person and share an interest. The two participants spent two weeks enjoying their shared interest, and in the third week we received the sad news that the older participant had been in a serious accident and would be hospitalised for the remainder of the program.

We observed that small, repeated moments of shared interest were extremely important to our neurodiverse participants. A younger and older participant shared an interest in cooking and while they did not talk much, they created a strong connection over the repeated activity of talking about, deciding on and engaging with a cooking activity every week. Another younger participant did not have any actual conversations with older participants, however each week they sat at a table with others completing a solo activity like a jigsaw. The participant's parents and teacher reflected that the program had immense benefit to their social participation despite the lack of shared conversation or activity – and indeed we observed that the participant was initially nonverbal, but by the end of the program was greeting the facilitators, asking for chocolate and moving from a solo activity to another part of the venue to view other activities.





Activities

The InterGen project illustrated that what works as an intergenerational social activity is often more than just simply meeting in a public space. Our social structures often create barriers for younger and older people to socialize together, and both older and younger people face stereotyping and discriminatory attitudes that marginalize them within communities. These barriers often translate into difficulties creating engaging spaces and activities that both age groups feel safe and comfortable to interact with socially.

While there are many community activities that cater for older and younger people individually, the InterGen project was interested in the activities that would foster intergenerational social connection. We used co-ideation principles to work with communities to design activities that reflected individual community contexts, alongside a socialisation process from joining and getting comfortable in the group, to investment in the activities, and finally to feeling belonging and established connection between age groups (Farmer et al., 2020). We worked with both community stakeholders and with participants to develop and then refine the program's social activities over time. Planning and flexibility were keys to success; enough time to discuss and co-ideate potential activity ideas that responded to community context, and enough flexibility to refine over time and in response to the unique participant group needs.

Our subsequent approach to developing intergenerational activities was:

- Understand and identify the purpose and the context for activities
- Introduce an activity/ies to participants
- Modify according to feedback
- Deliver flexibly

Observing this process of identifying, facilitating and evaluating activities over the course of the five projects led to some specific findings:

Activities need to be mutually beneficial to contribute to intergenerational social connection

It became obvious as we experimented with different program contexts that activities that interested or benefited only one age group tended not to be sustainable over time. For example, initial suggestions of young people teaching older people digital skills, or older people mentoring young people about careers did not become sustainable social activities. For example, the Manningham project was initially premised on young people's creation of digital stories about the older participants. This activity failed almost immediately because of the language barrier between the younger Australian students and the older Chinese participants and because there was not a clear benefit or purpose for each age group.

Further, activities that worked best reflected the reciprocity that was so important to intergenerational connection overall. Experiences of unequal power relations in social activities often fostered more discriminatory attitudes or disengagement with the other age group. For example, we observed an activity that an older participant was keen to share with the younger participants; their impressive model boat collection. This had mixed results according to observation data:

"The young men stayed inside the shed and listened to [J] explain the model boats. I overheard him explaining to the group: "It's like anything in life, if you want to do something you learn how to do it... step by step". [J] seems to enjoy the mentoring aspect of these workshops and there are a few young male students who are studying trades that are attentive to [J] when he speaks, and these students and [J] have a connection."

However, the younger women in the group almost immediately disengaged from the activity, and left the shed. Some of the neurodiverse students were visibly uncomfortable around the mentoring aspects of this activity. We noted that [J] was subsequently keen to bring the students to the local model boat club, but we would have to split up the group to do so, as this was not an activity that everyone in the cohort benefitted from.

Managing expectations of an 'outcome' to social connection activity is key to success.

We found that some participants – mainly older – dropped out of the programs. When we asked why they were not going to continue with the program, they articulated a desire to engage in activity that was more purposeful. The InterGen project's focus on social connection was perceived to lack purpose, especially to participants who were looking to be mentors or for community leadership opportunities. For example, one participant dropped out, saying: "I don't find the aim really clear...I am volunteering as a mentor at [redacted] and that matches part of my skill set and interests, and makes me feel useful" (PL, older, Whitehorse).

These experiences illustrated that being very clear that the purpose of the activity is to make friends and engage in a pleasurable social activity can help diffuse disappointment where participants were emphasizing an outcome or product emerging from the program.

We also found that internalised ageism was a factor in drop outs. For example, one older participant said they felt overwhelmed by social situations after spending extended periods alone during COVID lockdowns in Victoria. This, coupled with their perception that they were 'too old' to learn to play new board games with young people, contributed to them dropping out of the Knox program.

Similarly, several of the older Chinese participants in the Manningham project dropped out by the middle of the program. This was due to their embarrassment about the language barrier and fear that their age and lack of English language would be annoying to the younger participants. This perception was not reflected in the experience of the younger participants – they created video reflections that indicated clear interest and often joy at being able to learn more about a highly visible group in their community.





CASE STUDY

The Manningham project

How cultural difference impacts intergenerational connection

Shared social and cultural experiences can be an important way to bring diverse intergenerational groups together. For the Manningham council, an intergenerational connection program would be shaped by their diverse community, and particularly the large Chinese community, living in the LGA. Partnering with a Chinese social group and a local high school, the project brought non-English speaking Chinese older participants together with a larger group of predominantly male high school students completing their Vocational Major. As the students were completing a community leadership aspect of their study, creating an opportunity to hear about the older people's stories about moving from China to Australia gave them a purpose. Originally the goal of the program was to focus on digital storytelling. Given the need for ongoing translation, we pivoted toward more informal chatting together around gatherings such as BBQs, morning and afternoon teas. This provided more opportunities for connection, with less focus on need for formal language translation, and more use of individual tools like Google Translate.

This project was one of our less successful projects in terms of opportunities for sustainable connection, mainly because many of the older participants slowly disengaged from the workshops. Upon further investigation it appeared that the students enjoyed and benefited from engagement with the older participants, but the older participants felt embarrassed and stifled by their lack of English language skill. At times we observed that some of the older participants may have felt excluded or even slightly intimidated by groups of mostly young men speaking English together. This showed how stereotypes about older and younger people might impact on intergenerational interaction – many of the younger people expressed keenness to learn more about a different culture, but many of the older people felt embarrassed by their age and language skill in front of a large, noisy group of young men. We also noted the importance of reciprocity in intergenerational social connection – uneven power relations or social dynamics impacted on the sustainability of connections, and thus the program overall.





Locations

Accessibility of spaces has a major impact on creating safe and inclusive forms of intergenerational connection

Successful connections between age groups will necessarily look different across abilities and background. Thus, intergenerational connection should be accessible and inclusive. Most of the research team had a background working on research with older participants, and were well versed in the accessibility requirements for older people. Accessibility was a major concern of the project's location choices – elements of the location such as access to accessible bathrooms, appropriate seating and lighting were considered in choosing where to host programs. However, based on our observations other issues of accessibility became apparent over time, for example:

- Experience of echo in closed spaces meant those with hearing aids were excluded from conversation,
- Long driveways, hills, or gravel walkways and lack of lighting, meant those in walkers or wheelchairs took far longer to arrive and settle comfortably,
- Later scheduling of programs meant using public transport was much more difficult for those with vision impairment,
- Food and drink needed to be appropriate for those experiencing long term illness, or issues like diabetes,
- Lack of temperature control or outdoor activities were a concern for those with chronic illness.

Accessibility issues are of course an issue across all age groups, however these issues were experienced predominantly by older participants, and impacted on their ability to participate.

Expanded risk assessment and planning will ensure the inclusion of other community services and organisations

One of the clear themes emerging from interviews with project partners was the need for risk assessment due to the diversity of the younger cohorts. The research team provided a child safe policy, risk assessment of locations and emergency information prior to each group meeting initiation. However, interviews with project partners suggested that 'risk assessment' be broadened to a more iterative approach, and to include ongoing assessment of psychological safety. For example, a teacher from one of the schools the project partnered with said:

"Some of the students that we took were neurodiverse and I find that I'm wondering if we put them in somewhat of a vulnerable position because most older people probably don't even reflect on that. I'm not sure how much we've gained in some of those interactions and whether the older people had any more of an insight that made a difference. I reflect on our neurodiverse kids whether, in that situation, are we doing them a disservice?"

As a result of that interview, we subsequently implemented rolling risk assessment in subsequent programs, which we believe led to much better outcomes for neurodiverse participants (see discussion above).

We also implemented separate pre-group meetings for older people, especially those who may not have had not had many social experiences with teens. One older group member was asked to not continue participation with the group due to comments made that breached the Child Safety Policy. We also had facilitators intervene in another group meeting where an older person had inadvertently discussed drug and alcohol use, which was also a breach (albeit accidental) of the Swinburne Child Safety policy. These two incidents confirmed that more pre-group briefing was needed with older participants to ensure culturally diverse,

neurodiverse or teens currently experiencing poor mental health were participating in psychologically safe environments. Pre-group briefings worked well both to create social boundaries in keeping with the child safe policy and were introduced across the remainder of the projects.

We also created pre-group briefings for younger participants which helped them to understand some of the health conditions that might limit traditional forms of active social participation for older people and to ensure that there was some equity and reciprocity in social participation, so that younger participants didn't feel that they had to defer to the older people in the room. These were highly successful at creating some initial trust with facilitators and to give younger participants some autonomy over subsequent group activities.

Below is an example of ideas younger participants forwarded as social activities they would enjoy learning, leading or participating in with the older participants.

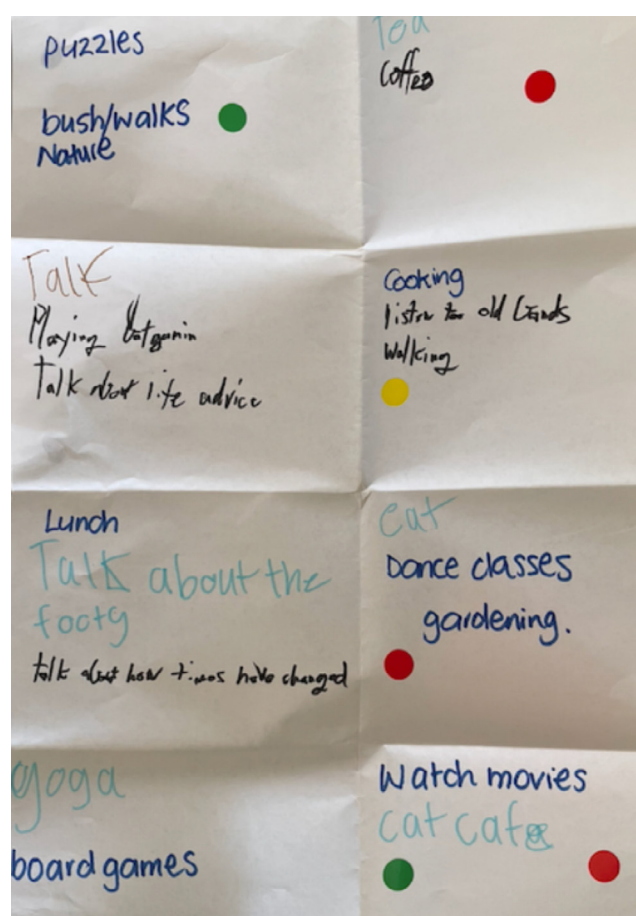


Figure 6: Younger participants' brainstorming of enjoyable activities to lead or learn about.

There was also discussion about how younger participants would like to share, and what makes a safe social environment, which we created together as 'trees' growing social interactions over time:

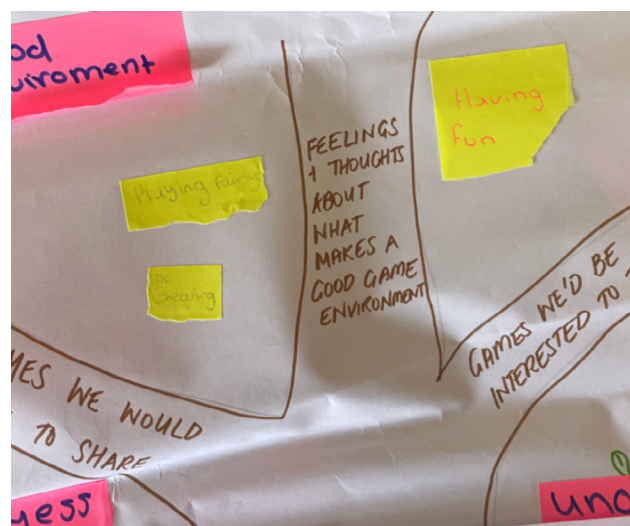


Figure 7: A social interaction 'tree'.

These are some examples of how the project broadened the initial 'risk assessment' to ensure more positive intergenerational social connections occurred.

Community ownership of spaces can strengthen single cohort cohesion, but can also exclude others in an intergenerational context

Making a location truly intergenerational is more than simply designing accessible spaces and forms. Creating intergenerational spaces must also consider and address the tensions that might arise due to intergenerational adoption of spaces. This is because many community spaces are designed with a single cohort in mind, such as 'seniors' clubs' or the 'youth hall'. Traditionally, single cohort ownership of a space was seen as contributing to community cohesion. But this approach is not always successful when overlaying intergenerational social connection into single purpose spaces.

 CASE STUDY

The Maroondah project

Making spaces intergenerational

In the Maroondah LGA, the Maroondah council had been moving toward multiple use community spaces for some time, culminating in the Croydon Community Wellbeing Hub which, when fully launched, will serve as a central gathering place for different community groups across the lifespan. The InterGen project was responding to this context of introducing a new age cohort into what would eventually be an intergenerational space of community services.

While many of the seniors' community groups had already moved into the Wellbeing hub, the InterGen project would be the first time teens from the local youth services centre would be introduced to the space. At first, older people who had been using the space for some time, responded negatively to seeing young people in a space that they claimed some community ownership of. Despite working on the project in an open, bookable space, many of the older users of this space felt they had been 'kicked out' of their space. This required intervention to communicate to existing groups to manage expectations of shared community spaces. But as the young people engaged with older participants in the InterGen project, they were gradually welcomed. Some said it was nice to see young people in the space, and eventually young people were seen as a key part of the space. Some of the older participants asked if they could continue to meet after the project was completed, showing that management of expectations was needed, as well as time to get used to a change.





B&W PHOTO DISPLAY

WELCOME TO THE B&W PHOTO DISPLAY

A selection of photographs from the B&W Photo Display, showing a variety of subjects and styles.

Approximately 1000 images.

WELCOME TO THE B&W PHOTO DISPLAY

A selection of photographs from the B&W Photo Display, showing a variety of subjects and styles.

Approximately 1000 images.



FINDING THREE

Leveraging community connectors was a successful way to build sustainable and scalable intergenerational connection, but this required significant investment in people over long periods of time

The InterGen project was initiated with the aim of finding and facilitating the work of 'community connectors' to ensure the sustainability of the projects over time. The original aim was to find and develop community connectors from within participant groups, who would then lead or maintain subsequent meetings. Initial attempts at doing this work failed for a number of reasons:

- Participant motivation and need for intergenerational social connection varied. Even if a participant was a 'natural' connector', most of the participants' motivation for joining was to make a friend or have a weekly conversation, rather than to lead, or maintain a group.
- Social connection and participation varied.
- Most of the deep, sustainable connections that happened between age groups were on a small, or even an individual scale, and many of the sustained connections continued outside of the group meeting environment. This meant that community connectors would not be needed to maintain these connections, or that group meetings themselves evolved over time and as connections formed.
- Participants often wanted to join a group based on their interest in a shared purpose, like playing board games, but did not want to lead groups themselves.
- Most of the participants – young and old – had highly scheduled and busy lives and were not necessarily keen on the idea of the increased 'labour' of facilitating a group meeting.
- Finding community connectors was much more difficult based on the short term informal programs that were created for the InterGen

project, though there are definite possibilities for group facilitation of intergenerational social connection by council partners over longer periods of time.

These observations led to the following findings:

Community connectors tended not to come from within the participant groups but from within service or governmental organisations

We did find community connectors – but they were not found in participant groups as originally expected. Instead much of the commitment to refinement and sustainability of intergenerational social connection came from our council partners and associated stakeholders. Where intergenerational social groups continued (Knox, Maroondah and Whitehorse), it was due to commitment from original project partners in council and through their enduring partnerships with stakeholders to refine projects.

Only one committed community connector was needed to begin facilitating sustained intergenerational but development of connectors required much more investment of time than originally planned. For example, identifying the unique community context, stakeholders and potential participants took at least three months of continuous meeting and refinement with stakeholders. Subsequent development of community connectors on council and elsewhere required sustained effort and meeting to ensure long term commitment to intergenerational approaches to social connection programming.

Investment in community connectors was far more important to the sustainability of intergenerational connection than budgetary investment

Our community toolkit indicated that resourcing of intergenerational programming was not resource intensive. Using networked collaborations with schools, libraries, youth and senior's groups and other community services can ensure that group meetings are facilitated and resourced without extensive budgetary requirements. However cultivating these networks, and ensuring commitment to sustainability of the approach

required much more of an investment in time than originally envisioned. This requires investment in people who can do the work of creating and maintaining the networks that commit themselves to intergenerational approaches. Knox council for example, employs a dedicated intergenerational officer, who is now able to maintain the InterGen project, and create more networks of stakeholders interested in intergenerational connection across the lifespan.

Interviews with project partners showed that this investment of time in 'connector' roles certainly pays off in terms of resource efficiencies – the projects facilitated during this project indicated improved intergenerational use of space, integration of otherwise separately funded social programming and had benefits for both older and younger community members. For example, the intergenerational officer from Knox suggested the intergenerational approaches build and sustain community connection:

"As a council we have so many facilities and connections within the community and I think it's a really important aspect of intergenerational programs... I think it really highlights some great relationships that we can work on. That we can build stronger

connections with our schools, with the library. I just feel like we can do so much with our community areas, where a lot of cohorts go often, and perhaps there were some missed opportunities there that we can really work on creating something fantastic."

The intergenerational officer has suggested that the benefit of the InterGen project was that these were now more of an impetus for other community organisations and services to take on a connector role, through establishing networks that can facilitate sustained intergenerational approaches:

"It shows that they are really willing to continue with this and make it more of a reciprocal program this year, because they have been able to see how well it works, and perhaps how easy it can be, with the right planning and securing the participants who want to be involved and that it can be that ongoing relationship."

The Knox program has been successful in fostering a network of connectors for sustained intergenerational connection. The Knox InterGen project has almost completed its second iteration at time of reporting.



Recommendations

The evaluation of the InterGen project demonstrated that: Community-led approaches were successful in development and facilitation of intergenerational social connection. Analysis of the interview and observational data collected showed that both age groups participating in intergenerational group meetings reported positive benefits to making social connections with each other. Some of the key successes of this project included:

- Implementation of five informal intergenerational social connection programs that used context specific responses to three elements of social connection;
- Positive wellbeing outcomes for older men experiencing loneliness or social disconnection;
- Creating opportunities for diverse forms of social participation that met the needs of neurodiverse participants;
- Leveraging community connectors across council and other community contexts to build sustainable and scalable intergenerational connection.
- The challenges in this project were mainly encountered in developing and maintaining sustainable intergenerational social connection, in particular:

- Leveraging community connectors required significant investment in people over long periods of time, and;
- Community-led approaches produced context-specific hurdles around people, locations and activities chosen to facilitate intergenerational social connection.

These learnings have led to following recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION ONE

Further investment in community-based approaches to intergenerational social connection, as a key aspect of creating Victorian communities that are culturally safe, and experiencing less discrimination, especially around age

The InterGen project indicated that successful intergenerational social connection programming contributed to a) positive social wellbeing outcomes for both age groups, b) more and integrated use of traditionally single use or single cohort spaces and c) inclusion of diverse forms of social participation in community programming.

Key to these outcomes was our findings that:

- Reciprocity was key to successful intergenerational connection between teens and older adults.
- Managing expectations of an 'outcome' to social connection activity is key to success.

Co-ideation was an important way to bring community stakeholders together to create intergenerational programming that responded to each partner's unique community context. However, co-design initiatives were not found useful in supporting inclusive program design. Rather, we observed more inclusive behaviours and less discriminatory attitudes presented during the programs after we broadened our risk assessment planning to include co-ideation around cultural and psychological safety with both age groups.

Activities such as games, arts and other participatory modalities were important to the successful development of intergenerational groups, but only insofar as they created opportunities for shared purpose and reciprocity within groups.

RECOMMENDATION TWO

Invest in resourcing community connectors and networks to manage context-specific elements that contribute to prioritising intergenerational social connection as part of thriving neighbourhoods

The InterGen project found community-led approaches produced context-specific hurdles around people, locations and activities chosen to facilitate intergenerational social connection. This was especially important given our findings that for intergenerational connection to be successful:

- Activities need to be purposeful, reciprocal and mutually beneficial to contribute to intergenerational social connection.

- Recruiting both older and younger people to an intergenerational program requires many different forms of engagement.
- Use of space needs to include aspects of accessibility, inclusion and risk assessment to avoid excluding others.

We found that those programs that were sustainable over time often had community connectors supporting the extension of the programs. Creating these networks of community connectors also contributes to better opportunities to work through the context-specific elements around people, places and activities that support diverse, inclusive and accessible forms of intergenerational social connection.

RECOMMENDATION THREE

Build capacity of local health and government to embed integrated, evidenced-based programs to remove social barriers to connection between marginalised age groups.

We identified the need for 'community connectors' to contribute to the sustainability of community approaches to intergenerational programming. However, we saw that community connectors were not often identified within participant groups, as we originally suspected. Instead community connectors were largely found working within community, local government and other service roles.

These connectors were often already working within existing local networks, and were building connections that assisted their work in local communities. Watching these connectors work to leverage their existing connections showed us that community approaches to intergenerational connection requires investment in resourcing the people who make building connection part of their everyday labour. Building the capacity of community connectors within local government

and services helps to network aspects of sustainable intergenerational connection, which contributes to their sustainability over time.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR

Support more research to be conducted into tracking how intergenerational social connection between older adults and teens might improve mental wellbeing and reduce loneliness over time

Observation and interview data collected during this project indicated that the project facilitated increased social connection and helped to enhance the capacity of the public to understand and address social connection. This data also showed reports of improved wellbeing amongst both age groups participating in the InterGen project, and more importantly expression and acceptance of many diverse forms of social participation amongst age groups.

Interviews with participants showed strong evidence of improved awareness, understanding and/or acceptance of other age groups in communities. This was important as we showed that there is a lack of research around how intergenerational social connection between older people and teens might impact both individual and community wellbeing over time.

This project provided evidence around positive teen engagement with intergenerational social connection programming. This contradicts existing research about the difficulty of engaging teens to interact socially with older people, which suggests more research is needed in this area.



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Author bios



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Dr Bossio's research focuses on older people's digital inclusion and community social connection. She has recently completed extensive intergenerational social connection work with Australian Unity Aged Care and Eastern Community Legal Centre using digital narrative methodologies. She was also recently commissioned to complete research for the Commissioner for Senior Victorians' State Government review of older Victorians' digital connectedness. Dr Bossio has worked for over five years on research collaborations with local government in the Eastern Metropolitan Region of Victoria and sitting on the Eastern Elder Abuse Network, The Knox Active Ageing Advisory, the Revitalising Boronia Advisory and sits on the board of Arpad Aged Care.



Jane Farmer

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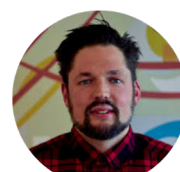
Jane Farmer is Professor of Health & Social Innovation at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne. She specialises in place-based social connection and how to activate it through activities, infrastructure and digital technologies. Jane also has considerable experience of supporting cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary STEM + HASS working for social innovation and technology. For much of her career, she researched in rural communities internationally, particularly around rural health services, technology and community engagement. Throughout her career, Jane has worked in collaborations and partnerships with citizens, communities, councils, businesses and community service organisations, as well as with academic researchers from a wide range of disciplines. Jane has a longstanding interest in innovative research methodologies.



Milovan Savic

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Dr Savic is an experienced qualitative researcher who focusses on the ways digital and social media shape interpersonal communication, social relationships, and community programs.. Recently, he was a Social Research Analyst for the City of Boroondara where he led research projects involving youth, elderly, recent migrants and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. An advocate for empowering youth voices in policy design and development, Savic has facilitated a range of research projects regarding youth and technology.



Max Schleser

Associate Professor in Film and Television, Swinburne University

Dr Schleser is an award-winning filmmaker with expertise in Immersive Media and interactive filmmaking. He will contribute expertise in community engagement, creative transformation and digital storytelling. Schleser has worked extensively with youth, older people and marginalised communities in Australia and New Zealand to produce community engaged creative outcomes



Jayme Verhagen

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Jayme is a PhD Candidate at Swinburne University, working on the ARC project 'Activating Social Connection to Reduce Isolation in Australia.' Passionate about social connection, she has been involved in various research projects, including those focused on social connection in residential aged care and intergenerational connection.

Jayme's PhD research focuses on creating and validating a strengths-based measurement tool that can capture social connection across different settings. She is enthusiastic about bringing together practice, community voices, policy, and research to ensure her work leads to real-world, impactful outcomes.



Jasmine Knox

Associate Professor in Film and Television, Swinburne University

Jasmine Knox is a PhD candidate and Research Associate at Swinburne University of Technology's, Social Innovation Research Institute (SIRI). Her PhD explores ways to effectively support social connection for older people in residential aged care, through understanding policies and practices that proactively support social and emotional wellbeing in care facilities in Finland.

At SIRI she has been involved in multiple projects related to social connection. These include several projects with Australian Red Cross to develop social connection outputs, including development of the 'Social Connection 101' an introductory handbook to social connection, and is currently involved in a study to test and evaluate a Social Connection Assessment and Enablement Toolkit for residential aged care co-designed with Uniting NSW.ACT and The Salvation Army Aged Care.

