

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercise.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary

1. old people's home
2. residents
3. snoring
4. concept
5. crèche
6. extended family
7. retired
8. intergenerational

Definition

- a. people who live in a specific place
- b. idea
- c. a home for older people where they are supported (given food and help when they need it)
- d. involving more than one generation – children, parents, grandparents make three generations
- e. a place where children can be left safely while parents work, go shopping, etc.
- f. having stopped working (usually because of age)
- g. a loud noise made by some people when they sleep
- h. a family unit which includes aunts, uncles and grandparents as well as parents and children

Building bridges

Being old is when you know all the answers, but nobody asks you the questions. (Anonymous)

Six months before she died, my grandmother moved into an old people's home and I visited her there when I was in Britain. She was sitting in the living room with about 15 other residents, mostly women, half of them asleep. The room was clean and warm, with flowers and pictures, and the care assistants were kind and cheerful. *The Weakest Link* was on the television ('to keep their brains active,' one of the assistants said), and the only other sound was snoring and embarrassing digestive noises. People only moved when they needed to be helped to the bathroom. It was depressing. Gran talked a lot about how much she missed seeing her grandchildren (my nieces, aged 7 and 5), but I knew from my sister that they hated going to visit her there and, to be perfectly honest, I couldn't wait to get away myself.

So I was interested to read a newspaper article about a new concept in old people's homes in France. The idea is simple, but revolutionary: combining a residential home for the elderly with a crèche/nursery school in the same building. The children and the residents eat lunch together and share activities such as music, painting, gardening and caring for the pets which the residents are encouraged to keep. In the afternoons, the residents enjoy reading or telling

stories to the children and, if a child is feeling sad or tired, there is always a kind lap to sit on and a cuddle. There are trips out and birthday parties too.

The advantages are enormous for everyone concerned. The children are happy because they get a lot more individual attention and respond well because someone has time for them. They also learn that old people are not different or frightening in any way. And of course, they see illness and death and learn to accept them. The residents are happy because they feel useful and needed. They are more active and more interested in life when the children are around and they take more interest in their appearance too. And the staff are happy because they see an improvement in the physical and psychological health of the residents and have an army of assistants to help with the children.

Nowadays there is less and less contact between the old and the young. There are many reasons for this, including the breakdown of the extended family, working parents with no time to care for ageing relations, families that have moved away and smaller flats with no room for grandparents. But the result is the same: increasing numbers of children without grandparents and old people who have no contact with children. And more old people who are lonely and feel useless, along with more and more families with young children who desperately need more support. It's a major problem in many societies.

That's why intergenerational programmes, designed to bring the old and the young together, are growing in popularity all over the world, supported by UNESCO and other local and international organisations. There are examples of successful initiatives all over the world. Using young people to teach IT skills to older people is one obvious example. Using old people as volunteer assistants in schools is another, perhaps reading with children who need extra attention. There are schemes which involve older people visiting families who are having problems, maybe looking after the children for a while to give the tired mother a break. Or 'adopt a grandparent' schemes in which children write letters or visit a lonely old person in their area. There are even holiday companies that specialise in holidays for children and grandparents together. One successful scheme in London pairs young volunteers with old people who are losing their sight. The young people help with practical things such as writing letters, reading bank statements and helping with shopping, and the older people can pass on their knowledge and experience to their young visitors. For example, a retired judge may be paired with a teenager who wants to study law. Lasting friendships often develop.

But it isn't only the individuals concerned who gain from intergenerational activities. The advantages to society are enormous too. If older people can understand and accept the youth of today, and vice versa, there will be less conflict in a community. In a world where the number of old people is increasing, we need as much understanding and tolerance as possible. Modern Western society has isolated people into age groups and now we need to rediscover what 'community' really means. And we can use the strengths of one generation to help another. Then perhaps getting old won't be such a depressing prospect after all.

Tasks

Task 1

Circle the best answer.

1. What was wrong with the home that the writer's grandmother was in?
 - a. The old people weren't looked after properly.
 - b. Children weren't allowed to visit.
 - c. The residents had no stimulation.
2. What was the new concept that the writer read about in the newspaper?
 - a. Old people being allowed to keep pets
 - b. A nursery school inside an old people's home
 - c. Children visiting old people for lunch and birthdays
3. Who benefits from this new type of old people's home?
 - a. The staff
 - b. The staff and the old people
 - c. The staff, the old people and the children
4. What does the writer think is a major problem in society today?
 - a. The breakdown of the extended family.
 - b. There isn't much contact between the old and the young.
 - c. Old people are lonely.
5. Why are intergenerational activities important nowadays?
 - a. There will be more old people in the future.
 - b. Western communities are isolated.
 - c. Old people don't like young people.

Discussion

Where do the elderly live in your country? How much contact do they have with other generations?

Answers

Preparation task

1. c
2. a
3. g
4. b
5. e
6. h
7. f
8. d

Task 1

1. c
2. b
3. c
4. b
5. a