

Kids and Elders: Forever Friends

Presenting a program that spans a generation gap and proves you're never too old – or too young – to learn

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Forever Friends functions as an integral part of a holistic model of classroom instruction. The regular instructional program is followed, with the teacher identifying activities in which children and elders might jointly participate.

For the past nine years, the Forever Friends program has linked one classroom of second graders at Hillside School in Brookfield, Wisconsin, with about 25 residents of St. John's Tower, an independent living retirement facility for elders in downtown Milwaukee.

Forever Friends began as an opportunity for the children to form friendships with healthy elders and in so doing, to dispel the myth that all old people are frail and in nursing homes.

Learning opportunities. Second graders and elders are given opportunities to work together as members of the whole group, cooperative groups and partnerships, as well as individually. Themes vary each year to meet the needs and interest of each new group of children. But regardless of the

A second grader gets a hug from two new friends at the program's very first meeting.



topic, both children and elders learn about the topic together and indirectly learn to know each other.

After initial preparation in the classroom, the children meet with their elder friends approximately once a month, with letters and phone calls exchanged in between. The elders participate in selected classroom activities, accompany the children on field trips, participate in musical programs and join in many creative writing projects.

“What Is Old?” To prepare the second graders for meeting their new friends, various activities are presented in the classroom. The first is a brainstorming session called “What Is Old?”

The children are asked to tell what words come to mind when asked the question, “What is old?” The words are listed as they are given, without comment, on a large piece of chart paper. The descriptors are usually all negative – sick, dying, slow, wrinkly, worn out, tired, in nursing homes, canes, grouchy, and so on.

After each child has had an opportunity to contribute, the list is read orally. The discussion is ended by mentioning casually, “Santa Claus is old and these words don't seem to describe him very well. It makes me wonder...”

The final segment of this activity is a read-aloud of Karen Ackerman's *Song and Dance Man* (Knopf, 1988). The main character in this award-winning story is an ac-



On stage everyone – elders join the children for the final three songs of a special musical program



Three friends practice their penmanship while visiting a one-room schoolhouse. Notice the pre-ballpoint pen and ink being used.

tive, former vaudevillian who entertains his grandchildren. At the conclusion of the story, the class is asked to describe grandpa. They typically use positive descriptors such as fun, great dancer and good cane-twirler.

Three intergenerational stories are read each week for three weeks, followed by brief discussions in which the main characters are described. The new list of descriptors generated by the children is frequently very different from the initial “What Is Old?” list.

Other books. *Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children* by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen is then read and discussed. Because the ages of the elders typically range from 65 to 90+ years, it’s important to prepare the children for the possibility of death. (Since Forever Friends was established almost a decade ago, three elders have died.)

My Great-Aunt Arizona by Gloria Houston is also presented to the class for enjoyment and discussion. This story personalizes the aging process by introducing the main character at her birth and following her life until she dies on her 93rd birthday.

After these literature experiences, the children are told that they will each have an elder friend. They share questions (How old are they? When will we meet them? What will they be like?) and begin preparations for their first meeting.

Same and Different. Another preparatory activity is a class discussion of Same and Different. The children list characteristics under each heading that compare themselves and elders. When they finish, they

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see that the similarities far outnumber the differences.

Next, the children form small groups and list questions they’d like to ask an elder. They then share their questions in a class discussion. Copies of all the questions are given to each child so that each can choose five to ask his or her elder friend. The answers are shared with the class when the second graders return from its first visit to St. John’s.

Although the units of study and themes vary from year to year, the following is typical of the activities the children and the elders enjoy together throughout the year:

September The first session is held at St. John’s for two reasons: first, the children are always eager for a field trip and are anxious to leave school for an adventure; second, the elders enjoy the comfort of familiar surroundings. Having the children come to them lessens whatever apprehension they may have had about meeting their new friends and gives the elders the opportunity to show the children their home.

Once the children arrive at St. John’s, they are taken to a large room where residents are seated, two each at tables for four. The children are allowed to fill in the empty seats at random and the person to their right is their friend for a year. The random pairing has been extremely successful. It gives the partners an opportunity to share the questions brought by the children. The opportunity to “discover” things about each new friend is enhanced as well.

October The second meeting takes place in the school. The elders are taken on a tour of the building by their young friends and share a Halloween art activity and a snack. The elders bring along a short story about

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Intergenerational Books for Children

Amazing Grace by Mary Hoffman; illustrated by Caroline Binch (Dial, 1991).

Emma by Wendy Kesselman, illustrated by Barbara Cooney. (Dell, 1993).

Grandad Bill’s Song by Jane Yolen, illustrated by Melissa Bay Mathis (Putnam, 1994).

Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children by Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen (Bantam, 1983).

Miss Rumphius by Barbara Cooney (Viking, 1982).

Miss Tizzy by Libba Moore Gray, illustrated by Jada Rowland (Simon & Schuster, 1993).

Mrs. Katz and Tush by Patricia Polacco (Dell, 1994).

My Great-Aunt Arizona by Gloria Houston, illustrated by Susan Condie Lamb (HarperCollins, 1992).

The Other Way to Listen by Byrd Baylor, illustrated by Peter Parnall (Simon & Schuster, 1978).

Something from Nothing by Phoebe Gilman (Scholastic, 1993).

Song and Dance Man by Karen Ackerman, illustrated by Stephen Gammell (Knopf, 1988).

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The liveliness of the elders soon dispelled the children's notion of what it's like to be old.

Intergenerational Books for Children

(Continued from page 53)

Storm in the Night by Mary Stolz, illustrated by Pat Cummings (HarperCollins, 1990).

A Visit with Great-Grandma by Sharon Hart Addy, illustrated by Lydia Halverson (A. Whitman, 1989).

When Jeremiah Found Mrs. Ming by Sharon Jennings, illustrated by Mireille Levert (Firefly Books, 1992).

With Love From Gran by Dick Gackenbach (Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

Annotated Bibliography

For an annotated version of these intergenerational books, plus a professional bibliography, send a SASE (55¢) to Teaching K-8, "Intergenerational," 40 Richards Ave., Norwalk, CT 06854.

their favorite Halloween to share with the second graders.

November A field trip to a one-room school is planned for November. Both groups enjoy penmanship lessons, writing on slates and trying to avoid the dunce cap.

December The youngsters present a musical holiday program for parents and friends in December. Their elder friends attend and are invited to join the children on stage for the final three songs, which are traditional carols. Refreshments are served and the children and their families have an opportunity to socialize with the elders.

January The two groups start the new year by attending a play together. After they have seen the play, they are given the opportunity to discuss the characters and share their views of the drama. Each participant is asked to write a new ending to the play and share it with his or her friend.

February The elders attend an African safari at school in February. The children share original African folktales and play African games with their elder friends. Slides are shown and a gorilla (the teacher in a very hairy costume) serves a treat of hot fudge sundaes. The children have previously learned about exports from the African continent which include vanilla, cocoa beans and cashews.

March In March, the two groups tour a hospital. The visit is a culminating activity for a science unit. Both groups are shown a variety of medical procedures. The children are given stress tests, the elders have their blood pressure taken and both groups are taught the techniques of CPR.

April A writing activity is planned for April. Each group is asked to write about a favorite hat. The children are involved in a literature unit incorporating books about hats. When all of the stories have been written, illustrated and compiled in a class book, the elders come to Hillside School for a

fashion show. Each second grader reads a story while wearing his or her special hat. Parents are invited to attend and refreshments are provided.

May The children study several artists and are encouraged to imitate the artists' styles in original paintings. Families and elder friends are invited to a "gallery opening." Children share information about each artist and lead their guests on a gallery tour. Time is provided for everyone to complete a drawing in the style of their favorite artist.

June Another musical program is presented in June. The elders again join the children in singing the final few songs. Families and friends gather afterwards to view the children's work on display in the classroom and to share refreshments.

July The culminating activity is a picnic at St. John's Tower in July. Children and their families join the elders for an old-fashioned picnic, relay races, bubble-blowing contests and a sing-a-long.

By the conclusion of the school year, the children have written stories about their friends. Instead of their former words, such as old, sick and wrinkled, elders have consistently been described in a positive way:

"Mr. and Mrs. R are the best!...They are both very gentle and whenever I say goodbye, he kisses me on the hand!"

"Mr. R has the coolest cane I've ever seen. It looks like a tree branch. In just seventy years, I can have one just like it."

Kids from different countries stayed with her for one year. They probably liked it! Anyone would like living with her."

Some child-elder pairs have remained in contact since 1985, exchanging calls, cards, notes or letters at birthdays, holidays and throughout the year. Both groups have grown more understanding and appreciative of the other. Some may truly remain Forever Friends. ↓