

Stanford Center on Longevity  
**A LONGEVITY BRIEF**

INTERGENERATIONAL  
RELATIONSHIPS  
CAN TRANSFORM  
OUR FUTURE

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## TAKE-HOME POINTS

- Societal challenges and inadequate adult connections jeopardize young people’s ability to thrive; older adults, with their unique abilities and motivations, are increasingly positioned to help them profoundly.
- A burgeoning cohort of older adults are the “only natural resource that’s actually growing,” according to Stanford psychologist Laura Carstensen, and while often overlooked, their unprecedented numbers and health positions them as an invaluable resource for encouraging and mentoring younger generations.
- Meaningful relationships between old and young create a “secret sauce” that can benefit both generations.
- “Making the match” between old and young would allow both to thrive and grow.
- Age-diverse workplaces with “generational intelligence”<sup>1</sup> offer creative opportunities and unique, competitive advantages for companies and workers across all generations.

## INTRODUCTION

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“Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her.”

URIE BRONFENBRENNER

Urie Bronfenbrenner, a child psychologist and co-founder of the Head Start preschool program, passionately advanced the idea that children blossom not just in the embrace of parents but also from the commitment of other adults who encourage and mentor them.

Bronfenbrenner’s idea, straightforward yet profound, holds that a young person’s success in life is tied to meaningful relationships. And it invites

one obvious and important question: Where do we find adults with the commitment, time and skills to engage with youth in these relationships that are so important to their development?

The answer is hiding in plain sight, and it’s all around us. It is a vast human resource, flourishing in a world that is aging as never before, a resource waiting and ready to be tapped: millions of older adults. With a new generation of Americans reaching their 65th birthdays at the rate of more than 11,000 each day, and with 32 years added to life expectancy in the U.S. since 1900, the older adult population is a resource we can’t afford to ignore.

“Children who are now in grade school will grow up in societies filled with old people. Most children—not just a lucky few—will grow up in families in which four or five generations are alive at the same time.”<sup>2</sup>

LAURA CARSTENSEN  
PROFESSOR AND FOUNDING  
DIRECTOR, STANFORD CENTER  
ON LONGEVITY

# THE “NEW” OLDER GENERATION: AN OVERLOOKED RESOURCE

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Today's older people are healthier, both mentally and physically, than older generations before them. They are far removed from the dependency, disability and decline that are yesterday's stereotype of what it means to age. They are capable and experienced. In fact, if measured by life expectancy, many classified as old today should actually be classified as middle aged. Each successive cohort over the last century has entered later life with progressively better physical and cognitive health. Stanford psychologist Laura Carstensen's research has found that as we age, our brains actually improve in many ways, including

in complex problem solving and emotional skills.<sup>3</sup> Even more important, our aging population has distinctive qualities to meet the needs of youth. Older adults are exceptionally suited to meet these needs in part because they welcome meaningful, productive activity and engagement. They seek—and need—purpose in their lives, arguably more than at any other life stage.

Today's aging population, the largest senior cohort the world has known, offers a potent synergy for society, and for youth specifically. The very attributes that older people possess—

the often-overlooked gains that come with aging—are ideally attuned to key needs of today's younger generation.

Simply stated, older people's inherent qualities and their affinity for purpose and engagement position them to make critical contributions to the lives of youth who need help the most. At the same time, such engagement fulfills older people's desire for a sense of meaning and purpose, which in turn promotes well-being. Thus, it's a win-win for both the young and the old.

## YOUNGER GENERATION AT A CROSSROADS

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Socioeconomic and educational gaps have never been larger among young people in the United States, underscoring a critical imperative to reshape the trajectories of our most vulnerable young men and women.<sup>4</sup> A large proportion of youth lack the resources needed for success; their educational pathways and well-being are impeded by poverty, perpetuating an ever deeper gulf between those who succeed in life and those who struggle.

But the challenges extend beyond those faced by vulnerable youth. All young adults increasingly require social and emotional skills that are often overlooked in traditional educational curricula. These skills are essential to optimizing attitudes, behaviors and strategies for maneuvering in a social-

ly complex and increasingly high-tech world. Research suggests that critical thinking, creative problem-solving and empathic reasoning promote social connections and a sense of purpose.<sup>5</sup> These skills are also the key to success in school and work, and they enable people to contribute meaningfully to society.

Skills such as teamwork, confidence and organizational competence also are strongly linked to success in academic pursuits. Emphasizing social and emotional development has been shown to improve concrete performance in reading, writing and mathematics. Unfortunately, the deficit in these social and emotional skills is most acute among economically disadvantaged youth.<sup>6</sup>

# AN ANSWER: MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN OLD AND YOUNG

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Increasingly, research has aligned with Bronfenbrenner's premise that a key ingredient for success in life is the commitment of a non-parental adult to a youth's well-being.<sup>7-12</sup> Youth are more likely to thrive when their passions and ideas are championed, especially when their champions help them cultivate a sense of purpose. In turn, that purposeful attitude and action paves the way to a productive and meaningful adulthood,<sup>13</sup> and to strong social relationships that are so important to well-being across the life span.

Older people are well positioned to step into the role of champion and mentor, either by complementing family relationships or by providing important support where family structures are weak. They offer an emotional stability that improves with age, and the wisdom that grows as experience deepens. They have strategic communication skills and are motivated to contribute to the lives of future generations.

## OLDER ADULTS CAN BENEFIT, TOO

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"The key is pairing great potential with great experience."<sup>14</sup>

SUSAN CURNAN

BRANDEIS PROFESSOR AND  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CENTER  
FOR YOUTH AND COMMUNITIES

Older adults can help young people develop their talents and knowledge, and can advise on relationships and daily life conflicts.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, their years of living give them an almost intangible ability to communicate and model social and emotional skills, and to help young people develop those key traits. The perspective that comes with age and their focus on what matters helps older adults nurture the development of social skills and sense of purpose among young people with whom they form meaningful relationships.

But the benefits are not one-directional. Research shows that pairing younger and older people has positive consequences for each. In promoting the well-being of the next generation, older adults experience fulfillment and purpose in their own lives, and there is data to show that working (either paid or unpaid) may benefit cognitive functioning and physical health.<sup>16</sup> This mutual benefit is perhaps the most compelling reason for opportunities that connect young and old.

Successful models of intergenerational programming are relevant to both paid and unpaid environments. Currently, there are fewer examples of paid work opportunities designed to leverage the resources of elders to achieve the needs of our nation's youth, but there are many reasons why intergenerational engagement can be brought into the workplace. Primarily, multigenerational staffing

has the potential to create more productive and engaged work environments.

There are now three primary generations in today's workplace: millennials, gen-Xers, and baby boomers. While the popular press may prefer to tell stories of conflict and competition between generations, there is much research that shows an intergenerational workforce has more positive outcomes and attributes than negative. A Hartford study shows 90 percent of millennials say boomers bring substantial experience and knowledge to the workplace, and 93 percent of boomers believe millennials bring new skills and ideas to the team.<sup>17</sup>

Multigenerational workspaces that value the relationships among generations and foster intergenerational learning and teamwork gain several benefits, including greater profitability and wider market share, better de-

cision-making, increased innovation and creativity, and enhanced recruitment and retention of employees.<sup>18</sup> To retain older workers, employers need to rethink their workforce strategies and design alternative career paths for older workers, such as offering more flexible schedules, responsibilities and pay. Challenges (such as needing to report to a younger manager) are worth taking on, and reframing them as positive opportunities for generativity (the opportunity to mentor younger employees) can turn challenges into opportunities for multigenerational work teams. Creating an age-inclusive work environment is every bit as important as creating a gender- or ethnic-inclusive environment, and requires thoughtful and intentional leadership to make it happen.



## CONCLUSION

“In the coming decades, there will be many more older people in the United States, at precisely the moment it is imperative that we do everything possible to nurture and develop the next generation. Why not match talent with need, tap experience for youth, connect supply with demand? Why not activate this solution hidden in plain sight?”<sup>19</sup>

MARC FREEDMAN  
FOUNDER AND CEO,  
ENCORE.ORG

There is scant public discussion about how our increasing longevity, fueled for decades by advances in science and public health, can offer greater opportunities for individuals and society. Although many existing programs promote intergenerational activity, others can be encouraged to orient their activities toward young-old pairings, such as Encore.org’s latest initiative, the Generation to Generation campaign ([www.generationtogenation.org](http://www.generationtogenation.org)). Still others might pioneer ways that older adults can help young people by building community resources or advising non-profit organizations. Reaping the benefits of intergenerational, purposeful relationships requires institutional and cultural change, a reorientation that

recognizes the capabilities of this vast human resource, aging adults, and the value that intergenerational matches can instill in the lives of both young and old.

Recognizing this unique fit and its mutually beneficial synchronicity holds untapped promise for the good of current and future generations and society at large. But to get there, there is work that needs to be done. It will take a change in thinking, policy and cultural attitudes to fulfill the potential of older adults, and it will take creativity and intentionality to match this potential with the critical needs of our youth.





# ACTION STEPS

1. Challenge outdated stereotypes and myths that older workers are less productive and unable to learn, and encourage the dissemination of factual information about how multi-generational workplaces are more engaged and more productive.
2. Consider fostering meaningful inter-generational relationships beyond the family unit.
3. Support bi-directional intergenerational programs that foster intergenerational solidarity through structures that facilitate mutual benefit for both young and old, instead of framing one generation as either the problem or the cure.
4. Leverage the unique age-related assets that older adults possess, like wisdom from life experience, emotional intelligence, generativity (the need to nurture and guide younger people and contribute to the next generation) and the drive to give back.
5. Widen the reach of intergenerational bonding programs within and beyond the volunteering sphere to programs, organizations and companies. For companies that offer paid time off to volunteer, encourage intergenerational mentoring opportunities.
6. Create a generationally inclusive workplace, where opportunities for cross-generational collaboration and learning are expected and encouraged.

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The mission of the Stanford Center on Longevity is to redesign long life. The Center studies the nature and development of the human life span, looking for innovative ways to use science and technology to solve the problems of people over 50 in order to improve the well-being of people of all ages.

