

Best Practices in Intergenerational Arts Education

Program Design from Lifetime Arts



A scene from "Peace 4 the Ages," an intergenerational chorale program in Minnesota, MN; Credit: Michael Matthew Ferrell

Intergenerational arts programs provide exciting, engaging opportunities for younger and older people to generate artwork together. Lifetime Arts has developed the following set of best practices for creative aging specialists and general arts education practitioners to use when designing intergenerational arts education programming.

I. Before you begin

- Consider your programmatic goals. What will an intergenerational arts education program offer your learners vs. one designed for an individual age group?
- As always, programs should be responsive to the constituents you aim to serve. Make sure the older adult learners you serve **want** to participate in intergenerational programming before you design one. (Some older adults prefer building relationships with those in their own age group.)

- Take care to avoid assuming that all older adults have grandchildren, and that grandparents' want to participate in programs with their grandchildren.
- Intergenerational programs are built on strong community partnerships. Connect with local senior centers, nursing homes, schools, libraries, churches, synagogues, community youth groups, and arts organizations to learn who is interested in collaborating.

Successful intergenerational arts ed program design will:

1. Generate community

- The more sequential sessions you can offer in a given program series, the deeper the skill-building, creative expression, and social connection your participants will experience. Try to design a program that is around a minimum of 4 sessions of 60-90 minutes each.
- Make social engagement the top priority when designing your program:
 - Create a safe and equitable “shared space” where participants can build new relationships and foster these social connections across generations.
 - Design your social engagement activities around an active exchange between both age groups, as opposed to having one side lecture another. Doing so will better promote community building and increase retention.
 - Be aware of generational differences. They may have vastly different communication styles and preferences, value systems, and levels of adoption of cultural norms. Highlight the fact that exploring our differences breeds opportunities for growth and connection.

2. Promote shared learning and creating

- Design your program so that no matter their skill level, every participant feels welcome to take part.

- There should be equal skill-building/artmaking participation across age groups. One group should not do more of the artmaking, while the other group observes, or merely serves as “inspiration.”
- Make sure all groups share in creative decision making throughout the process, and that the culminating work reflects that co-creation.
- Intergenerational programming is not “one size fits all”. The artform and skill-building curriculum should be engaging for all participants but understand that the outcomes of their learning may vary.

3. Provide equal access

- Design programs to be barrier-free for all age groups:
 - **Scheduling:** Consider the time and location for your program. Ask people what works best for them when conducting pre-program research.
 - **Program location:** If you are not able to find a location that is central nor easily accessible for everyone in the community, consider arranging transportation to bring the groups together.
 - **Remote program delivery:** If you are delivering an online or phone-based program, make sure that you get everyone familiar with the meeting platform ahead of time, and have assistance on hand to help address tech issues during each session.
 - **Accessibility:** Ensure that everyone can hear and see clearly, that there are no trip hazards, and there is plenty of seating for everyone.
 - **Communications and instructions:** Distribute informational materials and instructions in large print for older adults.

Practical things to consider:

- Can you realistically get both groups together for the full program time?

- What kind of buy-in do you need from teachers or senior organization staff to make sure attendance is equally robust across generational groups?

4. Combat ageism in both directions

- Within the program design, surface, explore, and address the stereotypes one group might hold about the other.
- Use the creating and sharing of artistic work to dismantle ageist stereotypes. Find opportunities for both groups to see each other beyond their ages — as fellow creators, learners, and artists.



Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Tucson, AZ; Credit: Eli Burke