



Building Bonds That Last: Why Intergenerational Play Matters

by Lori A. Hoffner, Supporting CommUnity, Inc.

At parks and recreation agencies, we know that our spaces do more than provide fun and fitness—they help people connect in meaningful ways. One of the most powerful types of connection we can encourage is *intergenerational play*. When people of different ages come together through play, recreation, and shared experiences, something truly special happens: they form *developmental relationships* that help everyone thrive—especially our youth.

Developmental Relationships® as Search Institute indicates, are the kind that help young people go beyond just “getting by.” These relationships help them figure out who they are, build confidence to shape their future, and inspire them to make a positive difference in their world. And they don’t have to come from parents or teachers alone. In fact, parks and recreation spaces are some of the best places for these relationships to blossom.

Think of a grandparent and grandchild sharing time at a community garden, or a teenager teaching a senior how to use a fitness trail. These moments build trust, empathy, and understanding between generations. By designing inclusive spaces—parks, rec centers, walking paths—and hosting programs that encourage participation from all age groups, we create natural opportunities for these valuable connections to form.

Even more powerful? Programs that intentionally bring age-diverse groups together—through mentoring, volunteer events, or shared service projects—help deepen that connection and broaden perspectives on both sides. These aren’t just feel-good moments; they have a lasting impact.

Studies show that young people involved in programs like conservation leadership—where adult mentors are present—grow through multiple phases of learning and development. With the right guidance, they “sprout” new ideas, “bloom” in confidence, and eventually “propagate” those lessons by leading others. That’s the power of relationships in action.

And while family is important, connections with non-family adults—like coaches, park staff, or program leaders—can be just as life-changing. Yet many youth say they don’t have

enough of those opportunities outside school.

Parks and recreation professionals are perfectly positioned to help fill that gap.

Out-of-school hours are full of possibility. Whether it’s after school, weekends, or summer months, these are the times when kids and teens can explore their world, try new things, and make lasting connections. Our parks, trails, lakes, and open spaces are already magnets for young people—65% say they spend time in outdoor spaces. Let’s continue to make those moments count by encouraging intergenerational activities that promote not just play, but connection.

Researchers Megan Julian and Junlei Li compare developmental relationships to fluoride in toothpaste—it’s the *active ingredient* that really makes a difference. While new programs and incentives are great, it’s the caring adult relationships that truly help young people grow.

At the heart of it all, intergenerational play builds more than skills—it builds community. When we foster these relationships, we’re helping young people thrive, supporting older adults in staying active and connected, and creating stronger, more inclusive neighborhoods.

So let’s keep designing programs, events, and spaces that bring people of all ages together. Because when generations play together, everyone wins. ■

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Lori A. Hoffner, Organizational Development Speaker & Trainer helps people and organizations create open, positive, and inclusive environments through her speaking, training, and consulting. Since 1997, Lori has had the pleasure of working with audiences across the country to help them learn, grow, and develop positive practices for their organizations. If you want to learn how Lori can support your team, please contact us.

