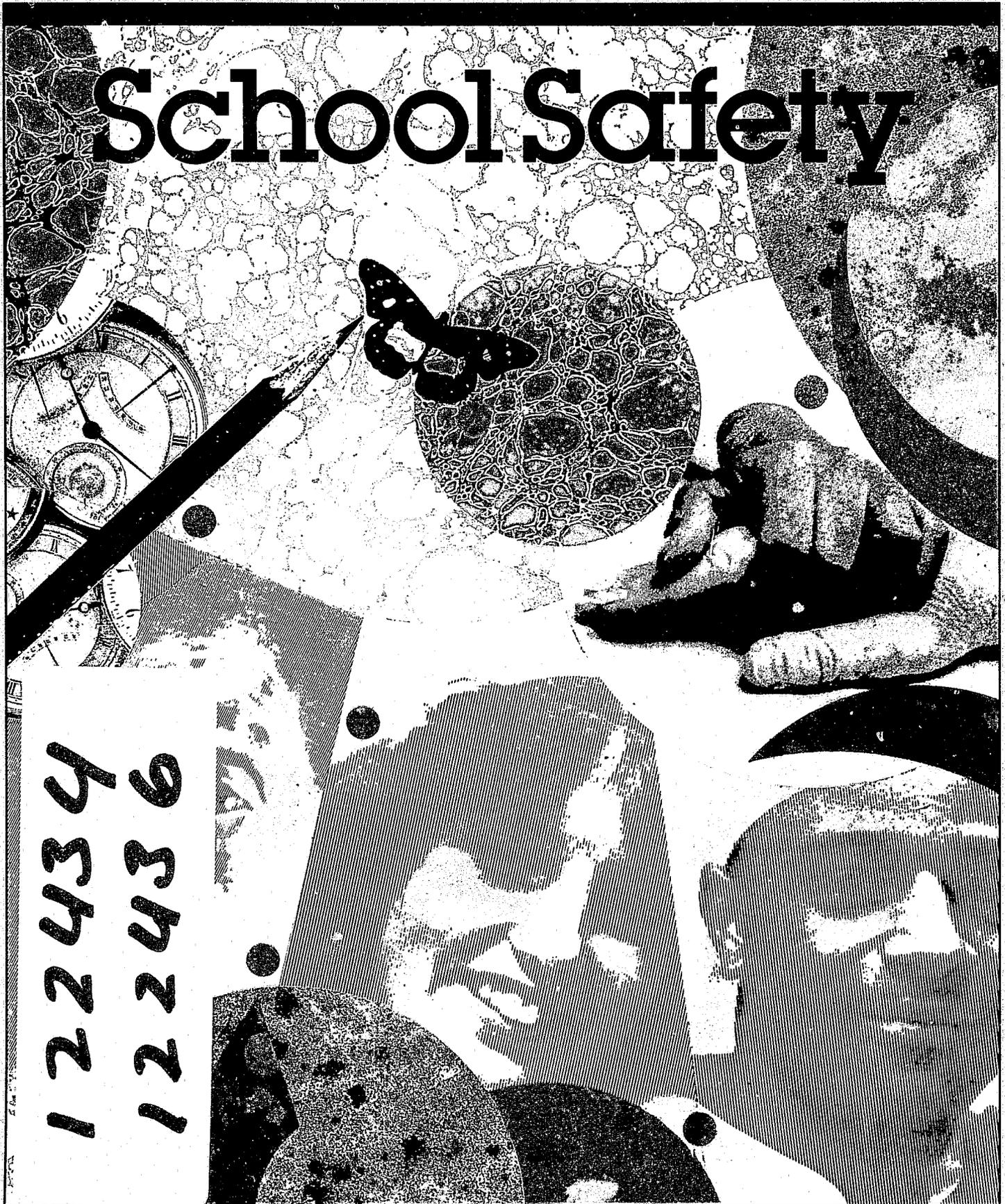


Youths and elder citizens both benefit by sharing their resources and experiences.

School Safety



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School Safety

School Safety is published by the National School Safety Center to communicate current trends and effective programs in school safety to educators, law enforcers, lawyers, judges, government officials, business leaders, journalists and the public. Publication dates are September (Fall issue), January (Winter issue) and May (Spring issue). Annual subscription: \$9.00.

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Correspondence for *School Safety* and the National School Safety Center should be addressed to: National School Safety Center, 16830 Ventura Boulevard, Suite 200, Encino, CA 91436, telephone 818/377-6200, FAX 818/377-6209.

Prepared under Grant No. 85-MU-CX-0003 from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Education or Pepperdine University.

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About the cover:

The coming decade will inherit a new wave of senior-youth partnerships that move beyond symbolic gestures to mutually beneficial programs and changes in attitudes. Illustrations by Karen Watson. Copyright © 1990.

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BY MARC FREEDMAN

Orchestrating relationships between at-risk youths and senior citizens is an effective means of imparting those essential skills for surviving in a tumultuous world.

Partners in growth: Elder mentors and at-risk youth

Many at-risk youth are growing up isolated from the range of caring and consistent adult relationships so important for navigating the treacherous course from adolescence to adulthood. An accumulation of longitudinal research suggests that adult relationships — provided not only by parents, but also by grandparents, neighbors and other interested adults — are a common factor among resilient children, who achieve success despite growing up in disadvantaged and stressful circumstances.¹ An important, and not often addressed, question for social intervention is whether the circumstances of more at-risk youth could be improved through efforts designed to provide greater access to these relationships.

In the search for new, cost-effective approaches to improving the life chances of at-risk youth, older adults are an intriguing potential source of developmental relationships for these young people. Elders are the fastest growing segment of the population, may be relatively inexpensive to employ, and are in need of opportunities for socially productive activity. Bringing these two seg-

ments of the population together could provide mutual benefits.

The study *Partners in Growth: Elder Mentors and At-Risk Youth* was intended to gain a fuller understanding of what really happens when elders and at-risk youth are brought together. In an effort to develop this understanding, five exemplary intergenerational programs in Michigan, Massachusetts and Maine were studied during 1987 and 1988.

The five initiatives involve adults in the federal Foster Grandparent program, retirees from several labor unions, and other older volunteers. These elders seek to aid teenage mothers, jail-bound young offenders, and students in danger of dropping out of school. The programs studied were the International Union of Electrical Workers' IUE/The Work Connection in Saugus, Massachusetts; Teen Moms in Portland, Maine; School Volunteers for Boston; Teenage Parent Alternative Program in Lincoln Park, Michigan; and Teaching-Learning Communities (T-LC) Mentors Program in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Funding for the study was provided by the Luke B. Hancock Foundation of Palo Alto, California, and the Skillman Foundation of Detroit, Michigan.

Intergenerational relationships

The study sought to answer a series of questions and concluded with a sturdy appreciation of the potential of inter-

generational relationships for youth at risk of a variety of life disruptions. The questions and the study's answers, briefly stated, follow:

Will intergenerational relationships form?

The study found that bonds between elders and youth will form in social programs structured for that purpose. Despite a sharply age-segregated society and some initial hesitation, the participants were in most cases able to forge powerful bonds. Of the 47 pairs interviewed, 37 constituted significant relationships that provided benefits to both partners.

What do the relationships look like?

Two types of significant relationships — primary and secondary — were observed. Primary relationships were characterized by attachments approximating kinship, great intimacy, and a willingness on the part of elders to take on the youth's full range of problems and emotions. In secondary relationships, elders served as helpful, "friendly neighbors," focusing on positive reinforcement but maintaining more emotional distance.

Do they result in benefits for the youth?

Benefits from exposure to the elders appear to exist for all youth in the programs. However, youth in significant relationships consistently cited an im-

Marc Freedman is affiliated with Public/Private Ventures. He is working on a book about mentoring programs for at-risk youth, funded by the Ford Foundation, which will be published by Sage Publications, Inc. in 1990.

provement in the quality of their day-to-day lives and described learning a variety of functional skills as a result of their alliance with the older person.

Young people in primary relationships reported a further tier of benefits. They described elders helping them weather potentially debilitating crises, bolstering their stability and sense of competence, acting as advocates on their behalf, and providing important access to the mainstream community.

All these relationships appear to help change a life trajectory from one headed for failure to a more adaptive path of survival.

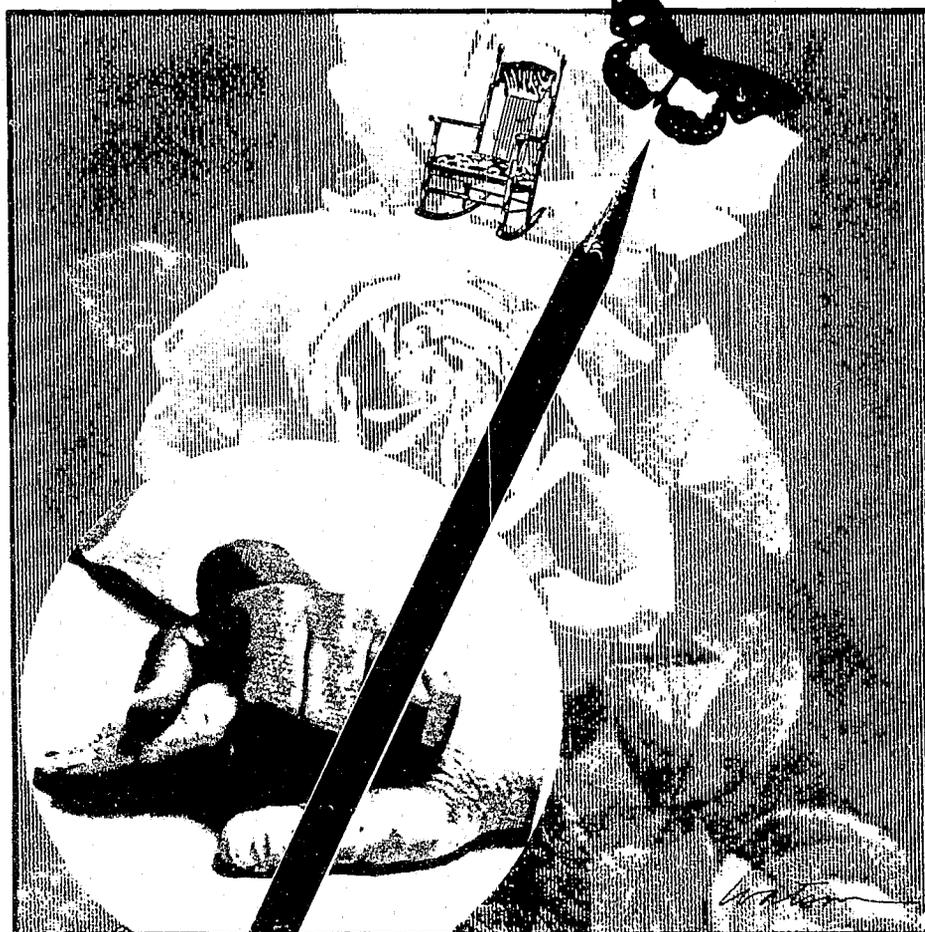
Are there benefits for elders?

The elders interviewed described meeting their own needs through providing the kind of attention, caring and commitment the youth craved. Beyond simply getting out of the house and earning money, their relationships with youth offered the elders a chance to pass on skills developed over a lifetime, get a fresh start in a relationship with a younger person, and play the appealing and somewhat idealized role of mentor. The role also provided the elders with a challenge: helping youth change their lives. The elders found their assignment sometimes frustrating, at other moments exhilarating, and always engaging.

Why do intergenerational bonds form?

A strong emotional basis exists — not only among the surveyed participants, but also fairly widespread among elders and at-risk youth — for the formation of bonds. Rather than being dependent on “chemistry,” these alliances seem to occur when youth are receptive — lonely, at a time of crisis, ready for change and desirous of adult contact — and elders are enthusiastic but also lonely and intent on finding meaningful roles in their senior years.

The elders interviewed felt a special empathy that appears to derive from the marginal status shared by elders and youth in our society. They also appeared attracted to fulfilling the “Elder



Function,” the propensity of the old to share the accumulated knowledge and experience they have collected. Mentoring ability appears to be more easily expressed in the senior years of age.

Perhaps one of the study’s most striking findings is that the most effective elders were individuals who had not lived what would commonly be considered “successful” lives. Many had endured strained family relationships, struggled at low-paying jobs, and battled personal problems such as alcohol abuse. Partly as a result of surviving — and surmounting — such difficulties, these elders seemed to understand the youth, were able to communicate with them from their own experience, and established strong, constructive bonds.

Can program factors stimulate intergenerational bonding?

The elders’ success with the young people also appeared to be attributable to their unique role and to some deft decisions by the five programs studied. The elders’ position in an optimal role — as neither parents nor professionals — left them relatively free from role constraints and untainted by the mark of authority. At their most effective, the programs reinforced these natural advantages by casting the elders in non-professional roles, giving them freedom to do their work, providing ongoing support, and structuring contact with the young people so that it was personal, sustained and consistent. Merely adding occasional adult contact to a conventional youth program will not

produce the ties and benefits portrayed in the case studies that form the heart of this report.

Elders helping at-risk youth

While much work remains to be done in this field, the findings of *Partners in Growth* are richly suggestive of the possibilities inherent in the notion of intergenerational relationships for at-risk youth.

First, intergenerational relationships offer a new role for older people. From the perspective of elder productivity, the discovery that a variety of elders can help at-risk youth is of great importance. Older people today often have few choices. Many middle-class seniors escape to separatist playgrounds such as Sun City, the retirement community Frances Fitzgerald describes in her book, *Cities on a Hill*. Too many others

national service than any other age group," they wrote.³

Second, the activities of the five programs studied point to some alternative directions for social intervention. They show that it is possible to use unrelated, non-professional adults to intervene in the natural world of youth, a sphere usually considered the exclusive domain of friends and family. These programs aspire to do more than provide counseling, social support, role models or professional services; they attempt to seed genuine relationships, ones that in a significant proportion of cases take on the appearance of an extended family.

By using older adults from the community to fulfill these roles, they contribute to building what is essentially a self-help strategy. It is not surprising that these relationships often take on a life of their own beyond the walls and

one's feet and developing psychological and social maturity may be just as crucial to achieving long-term self-sufficiency as a firm grasp of the three R's.

These programs, by orchestrating relationships between at-risk youth and seniors, may offer young people a chance to acquire tools to develop future relationships with other adults. Some evidence from other research suggests that close developmental relationships with adults may be a common characteristic of resilient youth — youth from stressful backgrounds who succeed seemingly against all odds. Perhaps these intergenerational programs offer participants access to resources and opportunities to develop the qualities of resilience that enable some of their peers to navigate successfully out of adverse conditions.

The programs studied offer many lessons for encouraging the development of intergenerational relationships, not the least of which is that it can be done. It is an operationally feasible goal. The models described in this study do not appear unduly complicated, are relatively inexpensive to institute, and may be applicable in a wide variety of settings and systems. Intergenerational programming is a notion with a potent set of natural advantages, and one that may make for appealing policy as well. Further programmatic and research exploration appear fully justified. □

This article is excerpted from a larger study of the same name, published by Public/Private Ventures, a non-profit program development and research organization. Copies of the full study are available by writing to the Director of Communications, Public/Private Ventures, 399 Market Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106, or by calling 215/592-9099.

Endnotes

1. Emmy E. Werner, *Vulnerable But Invincible: A Longitudinal Study of Resilient Children and Youth* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982.)
2. Frances Fitzgerald, *Cities on a Hill* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987.)
3. Richard Danzig and Peter Szanton, *National Service: What Would It Mean?* (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1986.)

It is not surprising that these relationships often take on a life of their own beyond the walls and prescribed activities of the program.

of smaller means are condemned to isolation, idleness and low-level work.²

Remaining in their communities and working with these young people is clearly a preferred option for a particular segment of the older population. The fact that some of the elders who need the additional income from this type of challenging work also may be well-suited for working with disadvantaged young people is especially fortunate.

In fact, the five programs studied are at once programs for youth and programs for seniors, with both benefitting in equal measure. On the policy level, the experience of these programs supports the wisdom of expanding national service opportunities for seniors. Danzig and Szanton draw similar conclusions in their book *National Service: What Would It Mean?* "Persons at or beyond the retirement age may have more to give and more reason to benefit from

prescribed activities of the program. The elders give the young people their phone numbers, take them out to dinner, get them jobs with their relatives, and open up social networks to the adolescents that were formerly closed to them.

A third intriguing possibility suggested by the intergenerational relationships studied is that of a distinct paradigm for youth development, an approach which goes beyond the inculcation of academic and employment skills, the proliferation of computer-assisted instruction, and the emphasis on developing competencies so characteristic of many of our efforts to prepare at-risk young people for the world. Intensive personal relationships with adults are, for the most part, absent from social programs for youth. The experience of the young people interviewed suggests that these intergenerational bonds may impart essential skills for surviving in a tumultuous world, where landing on