DAILYGOOD
News that Inspires

What Happens When Old and Young Connect
by Marc Freedman

This essay is adapted from How to Live Forever: The Enduring Power of Connecting the Generations (PublicAffairs, 2018, 224 pages).

This year, for the first time ever, the U.S. has more people over 60 than under 18. That milestone has brought with it little celebration. Indeed, there are abundant concerns that America will soon be awash in a gray wave, spelling increased health care costs for an aging population, greater housing and transportation needs, and fewer young workers contributing to Social Security. Some fear a generational conflict over shrinking resources, a looming tension between kids and "canes."

Without discounting these very real challenges, I'm quite a bit more optimistic. I've spent decades wondering what the increasing years beyond 50 mean for crafting more fulfilling lives, and how a more-old-than-young society can thrive. In that time, I've sought to find new ways to match the untapped resource of older adults with the unmet needs of our nation's youth. I've seen intergenerational connection help children learn to read, graduate from high school, and go on to accomplish their dreams.

But I've only recently come to realize some of the biggest benefits of bringing old and young together. As I recount in my new book, How to Live Forever: The Enduring Power of Connecting the Generations, when younger and older connect, the intergenerational relationships built are a route to success in early life and a key to happiness and well-being in our later years.

The benefits of intergenerational connections

Forty years ago, the eminent Cornell University professor and child psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner famously concluded, "Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her." The benefits of a caring adult mentor on children's well-being have been reinforced in study after study, as well as reports from youth themselves—including research I was engaged with early in my career.

In the 1980s, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America served 70,000 children in the U.S., but 30,000 more were languishing on the waiting list for an average of 18 months. Our research team was able to take 1,000 kids on the waiting list and randomly assign mentors to half. The other half were promised mentors at the end of 18 months, the period they would have waited anyway. But first, during that year and a half, we compared the young people who had mentors with the young people who didn't have them.

The contrast was staggering. There was a 46 percent difference in drug use, a 50 percent difference in school truancy, and a 33 percent difference in violent behavior. The

conclusion was inescapable: Relationships with adults matter in young people's lives.

But what do older adults gain from relationships with young people? One powerful answer comes from the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which began tracking more than 700 men in 1938 and continues to this day. Of the study's findings, one towers above all others: Relationships are the critical ingredient in well-being, particularly as we age.

Harvard psychiatrist George Vaillant led that study for more than three decades. In his book Aging Well, Vaillant illuminates the importance not only of bonds with partners and peers but of ties spanning the generations. "In all three Study cohorts," he wrote, "masters of Generativity tripled the chances that the decade of the '70s would be for these men and women a time of joy and not of despair." Generativity means investing in, caring for, and developing the next generation; older adults who did so were three times as likely to be happy as those who did not.

Research from Washington University in St. Louis and Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine shows that intergenerational volunteering is good for older people's mental and physical health. A separate study by Hopkins professor Michelle Carlson found that, after six months of tutoring students with Experience Corps, older adults had "improved brain and cognitive function." According to Dean Linda Fried of Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health, working with the students "dusted off the cobwebs in their brains."

Today, an accumulating body of research on purpose, generativity, relationships, and face-to-face contact suggests that engagement with others that flows down the generational chain may well make you healthier, happier, and possibly longer-lived.

Becoming masters of what matters

If these connections are so profoundly important for all involved, why aren't armies of older people actively engaged in the lives of young people?

The answer lies in a wide array of societal changes—some progressive, others less so—that have taken place over the past century: The recognition of childhood as a distinct life stage, a viewpoint reinforced by innovations like universal schooling and institutions like orphanages, high schools, and even the Boy Scouts; the transformation of later life from being seen as a natural part of the life cycle to a medical condition, an incurable malady to be diagnosed, treated, and managed; the rebranding of retirement as an attempt to recapture one's youth; the rise of age-segregated, seniors-only sunshine cities that have come to embody that new norm for the golden years. These cultural ideals and institutional arrangements have served to stymie ties between the generations and seed many of the challenges we face today.

In a single century, we have gone from one of the most age-integrated nations on earth to its opposite. So how can we turn things around? How can we find new ways to do old things, to rediscover the joys of intergenerational connection?

Dozens of social innovators are working to answer that question. In the arena of intergenerational housing alone, theTreehouse Foundation in Easthampton, Massachusetts, brings foster and adoptive families and older adults together in a supportive, intergenerational community of about 100 people. Judson Manor, a retirement community in Cleveland, invites graduate music students to be artists-in-residence who provide performances in exchange for free rent, creating the opportunity for intergenerational friendships. And Nesterly matches older homeowners in Boston with

room to spare with college students willing to help out with chores in exchange for reduced rent. All of these initiatives bridge the age gap and benefit both generations—and there are many more.

But you don't have to wait for an innovative solution to come to your town to get involved. Here are a few ways to prepare for a generative future filled with purpose and love.

First, accept your mortality. As The Onion headline proclaims, "World Death Rate Holding Steady at 100 Percent." We need to accept that life is a journey with a beginning, a middle, and an end—and that is how it should be. But, by knowing how we'd like to be remembered and acting accordingly, we have the chance to see past the illusion of remaining young forever, plant some new seeds, give away what we've learned, and foment hope in the next generation.

Prepare for a new life stage. Rather than running from the generative purpose of your later years, embrace it. Take this stage of life beyond midlife on its own terms, as a time with its own integrity—it could last 30 years or more. It's worth spending the time to think about what matters most to you in this period and preparing for a new course.

Combine purpose and a paycheck. Many people need and want some combination of paid work and new purpose as they head into the period opening up beyond the middle years. Search for your own encore career or second act for the greater good.

Get proximate. Be conscious of your choices around housing, work, activities, religious congregations, and the other places where you spend your time. It's difficult to create intergenerational relationships when you're segregated by age. As my colleague Marci Alboher advises, "Collect younger friends with a vengeance."

Listen up. One of my mentors, John Gardner—Lyndon Johnson's Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare and a remarkable social entrepreneur—used to talk about how easy and seductive it is to be interesting. The much harder but more worthwhile trait is being interested. Young people want mentors who are focused on listening more than talking.

Find creative ways to connect. So often, technology is blamed for driving apart people, particularly young and old. But technology can connect people across distance and generations—and actually feed face-to-face connections. For a few ideas, check out this list of 10 ways to volunteer across the generations from home, then sign up with the Gen2Gen campaign for more ideas, delivered to your inbox.

Live on by letting go. Being truly generative means using our accumulated wisdom and experience, such as it is, to instill confidence in others, help young people embrace risk and failure as the best route to learning, and do whatever it takes to find their own path to their destination.

Whatever you do, do it with love. Planting, tending, and bequeathing to the next generation is the essential human project, one we've long understood yet let slip over the past half-century. Our task is not to try to be young, but to be there for those who actually are. Embracing this may be the only way we can survive as a more-old-than-young society and bring happiness and fulfillment to all.

This article was originally published by Greater Good. It has been edited for YES!

Magazine.