



Connecting Niagara's Preschoolers with Seniors ~ A Journey of Friendship, Kindness and Laughter



Lorrey Ariel Bonilla OCT, B.A. (Hons) Child Studies, B.Ed. Executive Director, ECCDC
Katelyn Robins, RECE, B.A. (Hons), Early Learning and Child Care Program Consultant

Our Team at the Early Childhood Community Development Centre (ECCDC) had no idea that we would be embarking on such a heartwarming journey with the acceptance of a proposal we had submitted to the New Horizons for Seniors Program of the Government of Canada in August 2014.

We were absolutely thrilled in being the successful recipient of a \$25,000 grant. We quickly brought together a variety of community partners to form an Advisory Committee to inform planning and to offer guidance throughout the project. We were fortunate in having a range of expertise and skills from across our community, including representatives from three seniors' residences; Lookout Ridge, Gilmore Lodge and Chartwell Niagara, Niagara Child Care Sector Executive Committee and the Kiwanis Clubs of Niagara, along with three child care programs; Look Out Ridge-A Child's World, Niagara Nursery School and Fort Erie Regional Child Care Program.

Our journey centered on the following project goals:

- promoting improved life satisfaction and a sense of purpose and connectedness in the community for seniors;
- helping young children develop meaningful relationships, an image of aging that is healthy and active and an opportunity to learn about the history of Niagara;
- enhanced collaboration between child care programs and seniors' residences; and
- the creation of a toolkit to support community agencies in the development of meaningful intergenerational programs including a preschool backpack, senior information pack and strategy handbook.



Together, alongside the ECCDC, this Advisory Committee designed the program which was spearheaded through monthly visits between preschoolers and seniors at residence locations. The visits were supported with open-ended, unstructured, play based learning materials to inspire conversation and to promote the development of trusting and nurturing relationships. In planning for the visits the Advisory Committee explored best practices including appropriate number of visits, length of time, most suitable time of day, transportation options and health and safety considerations. Orientation plans and materials were designed to help introduce seniors and preschoolers to the project and to one another. Lastly, the Advisory Committee offered advice towards the development of a preschool backpack, senior information pack and strategy handbook.

Four visits took place at the senior residence locations from January to April 2015 with eight seniors and eight preschool children visiting one another during each session at three different locations simultaneously. The visits were planned to be one hour in length and included a variety of open-ended sensory





expressed that “Children are the key to a senior’s heart and combining them as much as possible is essential.”

For the fourth and final visit the children and seniors celebrated their new found friendships by enjoying a planting experience where the children decorated pots that would be left with their senior friends to remember them by. Horticulturalist Karin Vermeer brought herbs and guided the residents and children in planting and caring for them. Once the planting activity was complete Mark Chindemi, a Niagara Based drum therapist, gathered all the seniors and children for an authentic drumming performance. This interactive performance enabled both the children and seniors to play and listen to several different instruments from around the world. As the pilot project came to an end all three seniors’ residences and child care centre staff expressed the positive changes they had witnessed and their commitment to continue on with their visits after the project ending.

Reflecting Upon the Project Journey

Upon reflecting on our project learnings what was immediately evident was the power of the deep relationships that were formed. The seniors and children enjoyed each other’s company immensely, so much that their health and wellbeing were impacted. The seniors looked forward to the children visiting and having fun in creative ways together, while the children liked the adventure of a new place, new friends and the opportunity of visiting familiar faces. Residence Staff reported that the visits promoted joy and excitement especially for

materials provided in the preschool backpack and senior information pack. Links to Ontario’s Early Learning Framework, *How Does Learning Happen?* (2014) were considered during the development of the program materials to ensure the visits aligned with Ontario’s early years pedagogy.

The Four Visits

The first session engaged seniors and children together in gardening experiences. The seniors and children were invited to mess about and explore a variety of loose parts and natural materials within the toolkit. The visit culminated in reading *Tap the Magic Tree* by Christie Matheson accompanied by the joyful sounds of a collaborative musical circle. The seniors and children were a little nervous meeting for the first time, but once everyone started digging their hands into the soil and planting seeds, they began helping one another, which created the beginnings of a beautiful friendship. One senior residence partner commented that “everyone enjoyed the experience of singing and playing instruments as well as planting the seeds. The seniors just loved spending time with the children”.

The second meeting involved the children and seniors decorating placemats and aprons with paint and other creative mediums along with a group story sharing of *My Apron* by Eric. We were pleased to hear one of our partners exclaim that “the children were so excited to design the placemats. They enjoyed using various open-ended art materials. The seniors were happy to help and were pleased to be interacting with the children.” - Lookout Ridge Retirement Home and ACW Lookout Ridge Child Care Centre

The third session brought seniors and children together for a cookie baking experience, promoting seniors and children to work together to mix and pour the ingredients included within the kits. The seniors were prompted to share stories from their childhoods. Many seniors expressed their love of cooking and some reminisced about their favorite recipes. The children enjoyed working alongside the seniors and were attentive with the shared stories. A staff member from Gilmore Lodge



seniors who often experienced feelings of isolation and sadness and prompted engagement with seniors who typically did not participate in other activities. The child care programs reported



that the preschoolers developed caring relationships with the seniors and often spoke about their “grandma’s and grandpa’s for days following the visits. Collaboration between child care program teams and residence staff flourished with the development of meaningful relationships that will continue beyond the project. The Teams shared a collective spirit of dedication, passion and genuine concern for children and seniors and their respective careers. We also learned that the relationships flourished with the creative and fun materials used collectively by the preschoolers and seniors.

Intergenerational Project Next Steps

To assist us in distributing the Intergenerational Toolkits to Niagara’s early learning and child care community, the ECCDC will be holding an informal *Meet and Greet* this fall where all of Niagara’s child care programs will receive a free kit. Additionally educators will have an opportunity to meet staff of local senior’s residences, learn more about the resources in the toolkit, and connect with those staff who were involved in the pilot, to learn more about their recommendations for establishing nurturing intergenerational programs.

How May Other Early Learning Programs Outside of Niagara Benefit?

The Intergenerational Toolkit and Strategy Handbook will be available to purchase from the ECCDC’s Online E-Store at www.eccdc.org for a small fee. Additionally the ECCDC Team would be pleased to share their project experiences and learnings with other communities. Interested individuals are asked to contact our Team at by eccdc@eccdc.org.
