

Work, Leisure and Social Participation

Staying Connected: Exploring Older Adults' Self-Reported Effects of In-Person and Virtual Intergenerational Programming J. Downer & N. Dalmer. *Gerontechnology* 25(s)

Purpose The widespread isolation experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated the critical importance of sustaining social connection across all ages and relationships. One notable shift during this period was the rapid movement from in-person to online programming. As individuals adjust to their 'new normal' post-pandemic, virtual programs remain integrated across healthcare, education, community, and long-term care settings, offering new options to enhance accessibility, flexibility, and innovation [1-3]. In response, this research project highlights the ways in which in-person and online intergenerational programming are received and understood by older adults, including perceived benefits, shortfalls and outcomes. This project also aims to critically examine what factors are most important to older adults when planning intergenerational activities. In doing so, this research addresses gaps in both comparative analysis of both modes, as well as examining the opinion's held by older adults in regard to intergenerational programming. **Methods** Using qualitative methods, 9 semi-structured interviews took place, each consisting of a 1-hour conversation. The aim of these discussions was to develop a better understanding of individual experiences regarding in-person and virtual intergenerational programs. Participants were recruited from the Greater Hamilton Area and were made up of older adults (aged 55+) who had taken part in some kind of intergenerational programming in the past 5 years. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and cleaned. Using Braun and Clarke's [4] thematic analysis, codes were developed and grouped into parent themes to identify patterns across interviews. **Results and Discussion** Themes including (dis)comfort with technology, social and geographical location barriers, mobility challenges and cost as factors that are at play when older adults choose to engage in either mode of programming. Findings informed the development of a best-practice guide for community organizations and facilities offering intergenerational programming. Participants identified several benefits of virtual participation, including reduced travel and preparation time. However, they also reported challenges such as diminished sense of connection and barriers related to technological competence. Importantly, organizations who offer virtual intergenerational programs should clearly outline target audiences, level of knowledge required to take part effectively, and adequately prepare for the event prior to its occurrence. These insights highlight key considerations for designing effective, accessible intergenerational programs in evolving post-pandemic contexts.

References

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