

TOGETHER OLD & YOUNG

# Together Old & Young: How should we live together?

*A spotlight on the benefits of contact between  
the youngest and the oldest citizens in our communities*





# Introduction

'Sustaining development in education and city development requires a deep commitment to a framework of values; an answer to the question: *how should we live together?'*

*Tony Booth, 2016*

We are living in a time when European cities are more culturally diverse than ever before. Many people, particularly those who are most vulnerable, are struggling to achieve a sense of belonging and find a good life for themselves.

The international research project 'Together Old and Young (TOY)' (see box) demonstrates that **social engagement between generations is a key factor for the well-being of all**. Intergenerational learning can make an important contribution to bridging the gap between different social groups in society.

We need an integrated approach to social and educational policy which doesn't divide the learning and development needs of young children and their families from the learning needs of older adults, but rather seeks to capitalize on the potential of both groups to learn from, and with, each other.



The TOY Project researches and develops good practice in intergenerational learning involving young children below 8 years old and older people. It takes place in many countries in Europe in a variety of settings such as libraries, parks, community arts centres, and playgrounds as well as early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, primary schools and care centres for older people.

Amongst our initiatives is a project called '**TOY-PLUS: Practitioners Learning and Upscaling Skills**'. This makes available a **free online professional development course (MOOC)** and promotes a TOY Quality Stamp for municipalities and ECEC and social care services wishing to facilitate intergenerational activities.

A second TOY initiative called '**TOY for Inclusion: Community Based Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for Roma Children**', promotes the active involvement of Roma and non-Roma communities in ECEC services. This promotes the development of **toy libraries (community venues where families can borrow toys and bring them home) and intergenerational learning activities**.

For more information about TOY, please go to [www.toyproject.net](http://www.toyproject.net).

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## *Why is intergenerational learning important?*

**1.**

Intergenerational learning initiatives have the capacity **to counteract the increasing lack of contact between generations and lack of social cohesion** between vulnerable and culturally diverse communities.

**2.**

**Public and shared spaces facilitate connectedness and understanding** between generations and citizens of diverse communities. These provide opportunities to develop social networks and relationships (i.e. social capital) especially for those living in disadvantaged circumstances.

**3.**

Municipalities and Local Authorities - as responsible for policies for children and older people - need **to encourage cooperation between (non-)formal and informal organizations at community level** in order to foster social integration, social support and equal access to resources.

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## *Why is this important now?*

We are living in a period of increasing segregation and tensions in our societies.


Policy makers need to aim to stimulate a democratic approach based on inclusive values such as **equality, the right of participation and respect for diversity** whereby the needs of both the individual and the group are supported<sup>2</sup>.

By creating opportunities for intergenerational learning between children and older adults from diverse social-cultural backgrounds, **new understandings and knowledge of the 'other' will be created, which will benefit both young and old**, contributing to social inclusion and their participation as active citizens in their communities.

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## *The power of intergenerational learning*

Intergenerational learning is the process whereby **knowledge, skills, values and norms are transmitted between generations**. It is actually the oldest method of learning. It is informal and multi-generational and typically involves learning that takes place naturally as part of day-to-day social activity<sup>3</sup>. However, demographic and social changes in Europe make it difficult to maintain this 'traditional' form of learning. This does not mean that learning between young and old in informal and non-formal settings needs to disappear. In fact, current and projected demographics, such as a growing age diversity in society, **necessitate new approaches** to maintain contact between generations.





# Together Old and Young (TOY), a way of bridging the gap



The TOY Approach to intergenerational learning is unique in its focus on young children (0-8 years) and older adults (65 years+). Intergenerational learning activities in TOY are friendly and informal social encounters between young children and older adults in a range of formal or informal settings, involving transfer of experiences, mutual creations, as well as acts of active solidarity towards those who are marginalized or in difficulty.

TOY supported initiatives, which have already taken place in Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain demonstrate that the following approaches to intergenerational learning involving young and old are effective and create sustainable impact:

- **Sharing experiences** like spending enjoyable times together, doing simple activities such as baking, reading stories, dancing and singing together, all of which involve social interaction and relationship building.
- **Sharing spaces** as an opportunity for enhancing social cohesion such as the “Kindergarten for All Ages” in Spain or the “Centro Maritati” in Italy, places where children, parents and grandparents participate in recreational activities together. Another example is the “Generation Garden” in the Netherlands, a place where people of all ages do gardening together.
- **Sharing and transforming knowledge** as an opportunity to show mutual competence and overcome age stereotypes: e.g. seniors showing to children how to play traditional games and children explaining construction games, board games, songs and stories.



Furthermore, TOY supported intergenerational learning activities have contributed to a **better understanding of the lives of families with a migrant background**. Initiatives included home visits of senior volunteers to read stories to children in the Netherlands (“Voorlees Express”); listening to children with a migrant background about their home lives as a volunteer in a library in Italy, or working with children from play-centers with predominantly migrant (family) background children in Spain.

**Bridging the gap** means not only that (older) people with a non-migrant background learn from and share knowledge with children from ‘minority’ groups, it also means recognising the contribution that (older) citizens with a bi- or multicultural background make to young children and their families.



## Action points for policy makers

We propose five actions which give visibility to intergenerational learning in education and social policies, and embed and sustain these activities in the communities:

1.

**ACTIVELY EMBRACE AND DISSEMINATE INCLUSIVE VALUES AND PRACTICES** in policy documents; community settings; vocational colleges; health institutions and educational and social networks, to effectively build and sustain equal relationships in neighbourhoods and foster social integration of vulnerable citizens and groups.

2.

**PROMOTE SHARING SERVICES AND PUBLIC SPACES** as a social binder and as rich community learning places for all ages, facilitating significant encounters and shared tasks between citizens (young children and older adults, with and without a migrant background). This will provide an opportunity for disadvantaged groups to learn to network across cultural barriers.

3.

**ENCOURAGE COOPERATION BETWEEN FORMAL AND NON-FORMAL ORGANISATIONS AT COMMUNITY LEVEL** (schools, ECEC services, play centres, libraries, community and arts centres, voluntary organizations and universities).

4.

**BUILD ON EXISTING HUMAN CAPITAL IN THE COMMUNITY** and actively support community work, especially small local activities involving young children and older adults.

5.

**SUPPORT AND VALUE MEDIATORS:** Facilitate practice placements in services where intergenerational learning is promoted and provide training in intergenerational learning practice to mediators such as ECEC and social care practitioners, teachers, community workers, senior volunteers, parents and people from different a range of cultural backgrounds. Give space and responsibility to senior volunteers.





# We all benefit!

Young children, older adults and the community as a whole benefit by participating in intergenerational learning activities.

- **Young children** learn about traditions, food production, local history, develop new competences (e.g. cooking skills and gardening); build significant relationships with elderly people, experience calm and structure, receive more attention especially in 'time poor families'; learn citizenship values and norms such as having respect, being polite, being helpful; become aware of ageing and of other cultures.
- **Older adults** feel valued and useful for society, which enhances their self-esteem; they experience new energy; their physical and mental health and well-being is improved; they learn new skills such as how to read books to young children; learn from children with a migrant (family) background how they live.
- **Communities benefit** by all generations being together, learning together and having fun together. Not only does the individual wellbeing of citizens grow, the community as a whole benefits. Citizens learn to build social relationships without fear; learn to value and respect each other; learn to negotiate how to do things and how to disagree; and stereotypes about age, gender and culture are challenged.

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- <sup>1</sup> Booth, T., (2016). *On the principles of inclusion*. Presentation at the Childhood Education and City Politics Conference, Amsterdam, 6 & 7 June 2016
  - <sup>2</sup> DECET Brochure (2011). *Diversity and Social Inclusion. Exploring competences for Professional Practice in ECEC*.
  - <sup>3</sup> Jessel, J. (2009). *Family structures and intergenerational transfers of learning: changes and challenges*. London: Department of Education Studies, University of London Goldsmith College.

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