There is limited evidence of intergenerational interventions’ effects on mental health and wellbeing of older people

Intergenerational interventions are activities designed to bring younger and older people together, and may contribute to small improvements in self-esteem and levels of depression in older people.

However, this systematic review shows that it is not clear if these positive effects are consistent or last beyond the intervention. The evidence in this review also suggests that it is not clear if intergenerational interventions have any impact on quality of life, agitation, stress and loneliness in older people. There is no trial evidence looking at the effects of intergenerational interventions on social isolation for older people.

What is this review about?

Mental health and wellbeing, including loneliness, is a huge global issue, shared by younger and older people. The Covid-19 pandemic has increased loneliness for many, with generations being kept apart for safety.

Intergenerational interventions aim to promote greater understanding and respect between generations and help build communities. Intergenerational interventions can take many forms: school children visiting nursing home residents to share activities and stories, younger and older people coming together to share in music-based activities, older people volunteering in schools, and older people from outside the family helping/mentoring students.

This review looks at the impacts of intergenerational interventions related to the mental health and wellbeing of older people including depression, anxiety, quality of life, self-esteem, social isolation and loneliness. The review also looks at impacts on life satisfaction, agency (a sense of control and desire to do things in life), generativity (sense of purpose/meaning in life), happiness, intergenerational interaction or interaction with others, social activities, self perception, perceived emotional wellbeing, spiritual health, and sense of community.

We still know very little about what works and how or why. The differences between the included studies means we cannot be certain that the findings are true and consistent across intergenerational activities.

What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review describes trials of intergenerational interventions that have reported on the mental health and wellbeing of older people, and how effective they were.
This review includes 14 trials from six countries: USA, Japan, Italy, Spain, Australia and Canada. Interventions were mainly delivered in person and often in groups. They included visiting programmes, school volunteering programmes, music based interventions and task-oriented interventions such as activities set in a multigenerational park, reminiscing activities, aggression management programmes, learning a language, making local environmental changes and in-school project work.

The trials had some important weaknesses that may have affected their results.

What are the main findings of this review?

Intergenerational interventions showed a small positive trend towards improving self-esteem and depression for older people participating. However, due to the small study sizes and low number of studies available, we cannot be confident about any effects.

Results for other mental health and wellbeing outcomes are reported. There were no data about social isolation, spiritual health or sense of community.

The lack of consistent outcomes reported and the lack of studies on interventions that are similar or have similar elements means it is difficult to determine if any one intervention or element is effective for any given outcome.

How do these interventions work?

We still know very little about what works and how or why. Whilst some interventions do use known theories or techniques to articulate how something is thought to have an impact, others do not. It is therefore difficult to establish why any particular intervention might have an impact on any particular outcome.

What do the findings of this review mean?

The differences in the included studies means we cannot be certain that the findings are true and consistent across intergenerational activities. We need more robust research with larger numbers of participants who are studied for a longer period and after the intervention.

This field of study would also benefit from using agreed outcome measures consistently across interventions, to aid future comparisons and the development of research and practice.