My husband and I regularly visit a seniors lodge to see a dear friend. Without fail, her biggest smiles break out when our preschool grandson appears in her doorway, ready to play. Toddlers have a way of enlivening the atmosphere of any room—often to the delight of the seniors as well. Debbie Sinclair, Linking Generations executive director, says, “When our volunteer says it’s time to pack up, they’ll say, ‘Already? We’ve only just started.’”

Research confirms our experience: intergenerational interactions bring companionship, learning and joy. Yet in an age of far-flung families, young and old often exist as separate solitudes. Knowing that, innovative Albertans are taking deliberate steps to bridge the generation gap. Below are a few examples that deserve imitation.

**Intergenerational trios**

Linking Generations in Sherwood Park connects students from six junior and senior high schools with seniors at nearby care centres. Each participating senior is matched with two students. Then, every week or two during the school year, the trios meet at the care centres. Some weeks, seniors take the lead, sharing memories and skills. Other weeks, students demystify iPads and other aspects of modern life. "Each week, it’s one more achievement in our seniors’ presence," says Linking Generations executive director Debbie Sinclair. "When our volunteer says it’s time to pack up, they’ll say, ‘Already? We’ve only just started.’"

Midway through their year together, one member of each participant’s family is invited to join a session. The guests are often amazed to see how close the trios have become. As a result, it’s not unusual for entire families to become engaged in the lives of the seniors their children have come to know.

“This isn’t just visiting,” Sinclair says. Recalling a senior who shared with two students war experiences that he had never revealed to staff, she adds, “This is building understanding and relationships.”

**Daycares in senior complexes**

Calgary-based AgeCare welcomed a daycare into one of its senior centres more than a decade ago. The success of that venture has spawned daycares in six AgeCare facilities, including Seton.

Oaks & Acorns, the daycare at Seton, follows a Montessori curriculum that stresses respect and teamwork. “Children here get opportunities to practise those skills with seniors,” says Carol Truong, Seton’s recreation manager. “And the residents just adore them.”

A glass wall between the senior centre and the daycare gives residents front-row seats to preschoolers at play. “Children leave little notes on the windows to the seniors to let them know what they’re learning,” Truong says. “And residents have said the best part of their day is walking past that window and getting waves and smiles.”

An active Grand Friends program brings the generations together for crafts, baking, reading, gardening, active living and holiday celebrations. Even seniors reluctant to attend other programs come when Oaks & Acorns children join in, Truong says. “Seeing how residents and children create bonds really makes everything worthwhile.”

“When they told us what they had done or hop a ride on a visiting donkey. “The residents just love to see children having fun.”

**Memory kits**

With funding from Age Friendly Edmonton, the Edmonton Public Library drew seniors and teens together to create themed memory kits containing items from decades back and recent years. Librarians are using the “then and now” kits to spark conversations about cooking, fashion, toys, school, and music. As the generations swap tales about artifacts in the kits, they fill the room with chatter and energy. “Both seniors and youth experience isolation and prejudice,” says community services librarian Kate Charuk, who started the project with youth services librarian Jennifer Waters. “Both benefit from doing things together.”

The very act of creating the kits challenged stereotypes. “When they told us what they had done through what they’d built, how they improved their lives and our lives, I see it all differently,” says one student. He now makes a point of visiting with his older neighbours, whom he’d never even noticed before. As he puts it, “They have a lot of cool stories to tell.”

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**MATCHING SENIORS AND YOUTH**

Find out more about resources and programs in Alberta and beyond.

Age Friendly Edmonton’s Intergenerational Programming Toolkit. Go to edmonton.ca and search intergenerational toolkit

AgeCare in Calgary agecare.ca

LINKages in Calgary link-ages.ca

Linking Generations in Sherwood Park linkinggenerations.ca

HomeShare Canada homesharecanada.org