Inter generational bonding

A changing population profile is going to demand a greater understanding between young and old, says Deborah Sturdy

The increasing number of older people and decrease in the birth rate means that the future is going to be a very different place in terms of population profile than today. And our response to the future older citizen will be different too.

For one thing, people of today's generation, who have lived through the post-war years, are likely to be better informed, educated and wealthier than previous generations. They will work until they are older, and industries such as the media and retail will have to respond to quite a different readership and purchaser. Gracie Fields will not be playing as background music in care homes, but Elvis Presley and the Rolling Stones will.

As for attire: forget the traditional image of old women wearing drip-dry polyester dresses, they are more likely to be in jeans and designer clothes. And bingo will come a poor second to a tournament of Wii boxing, baseball or tennis.

Fundamental to the differences between generations will be the number of older people compared to that of the young. There will be a need for a better understanding between the generations as the number of taxpayers become fewer and the number of older people requiring health and social care becomes greater. This needs to start now. The old and the young need to engage in shared learning through art, history, cooking, craft and technology to improve their understanding of each other, and value the similarities and differences.

A changing society

Society is forever changing. I was brought up in a close extended family where my grandparents were very much part of my life; my grandfather spent his last eight years living with us. But this does not reflect how many younger people experience older people today. Many of my friends have had babies at the very end of their thirties, their parents have died and therefore their offspring have no knowledge of grandparents. At the other end of the spectrum, teenagers who have babies means their children will have relatively young grandparents in their thirties and early forties. Bringing together generations to understand each other is an essential part of developing a sustainable society, where young and old can live together with some appreciation of each other's needs and aspirations.

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My 18-year-old nephew has just started volunteering for a charity and recently told me of an occasion when he worked with an 85-year-old. ‘We had much more in common than I would have thought. We shared similar opinions and views,’ he said. We need to challenge stereotypes, both within and outside the family.

This year Older People’s Day was marked on October 1, led by the Department of Work and Pensions. The theme was ‘Full of Life’, and focused on intergenerational activity. Bringing together the old and young has enormous benefits for both groups. Examples of best practice have been provided by The Beth Johnson Foundation which has established a centre for inter generational practice (www.eagle-project.eu/welcome-to-eagle/policies-programmes-initiatives)

Shared experiences

I recently visited Liverpool Primary Care Trust, where I was impressed to see that they have a nurse-led model of intergenerational practice which is flourishing under the leadership of Diane Singleton, in partnership with St Julie’s High School in Woolton and head teacher Sister Ann Marie Gammack. The imagination, determination and creative approach to joint learning was impressive. For example, a GCSE drama course is available with participation from older people; NVQ level 1 beauty therapy practicals are undertaken on older people attending other groups; intergenerational meals take place where students sit with their own family members and other people’s relatives; and health promotion days were scheduled where leaflets about incontinence were ‘bestsellers’ as students took them home for grandparents.

This initiative, I have no doubt, should influence those young people to consider a career in health and social care services, which is good, because they are the carers of the future; and not only the doctors and nurses, but the porters, cleaners and catering staff of our hospitals, and communities.

Creating the opportunity to involve young people in learning and sharing experiences is an important contribution that we can all make to the future, particularly since, one day, our care will probably be in their hands.

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