



Intergenerational activities: positive, motivating and fun

Working with people suffering from dementia cognitive, physical and functional simulation is key. That is why we do our best to keep these abilities, that this illness will take from them little by little, at its maximum potential.

We insist they keep reading, writing and doing mathematics... since the required mental agility, and processes involved, are implicated in many activities that are essential to maintain their autonomy and have quality everyday life.

But...on some occasions, while doing these efforts, many forget something vital; the emotional state and psychological well-being of people suffering from dementia. What good is it that Maria or Pepe do adding or subtracting operations without any flaw if they don't want to live?

With that in mind, those of us who work every day with these people should try to search for other activities, (besides the conventional ones, that are, of course, very important) that pursue the same goals using different stimuli.

That is why, today, I wanted to talk to you about the intergenerational activities and programs I have had the privilege of implementing over the last few years; and that children, older people and professionals alike enjoy.

Several studies have found that interaction between children and older people has benefits to both groups, individually and socially. Furthermore, the data suggest that people suffering from a cognitive decline, or dementia can experience a higher level of affection during interactions with children, than during non intergenerational activities.

Many attempts have been made to define these programs, personally I prefer the one provided by McCrea, Weissman and Thorpe-Brown: "An organized program to foster interactions between children and youth, and older persons that are ongoing, mutually beneficial, and result in the development of relationships." (McCrea, Weissman and Thorpe-Brown, 2004).

It's not only about children and older people sharing the same space, or being together, they also have to "make together"; exchange experiences, knowledge and affection.

Contact and work with children is something so familiar (almost all of us are parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles, brothers or sisters...) that even



people suffering from a severe cognitive decline react to stimuli that involve children.

Let me give you a couple of examples: a person with dementia that cannot remember what they ate, perfectly remembers when a two-years-old child came to the workshops, climbed on top of the table and started singing.

Another person suffering from a moderate stage and with severe difficulties to get dressed instinctively, without anybody asking her, fixed the collars, and rolled up the sleeves of the kid's smocks so they didn't get dirty in a painting activity.

Knowing all this it's clear that simple contact with children in activities is positive in itself; fun and motivating too. This suggest that, if we implement ongoing programs, we could go further and see benefits in people suffering from dementia such as the ones listed below:

- + Reduced drowsiness, apathy and the characteristic behavioral/emotional symptomatology of dementia.
- + Reinforcement of identity and self-image, which will increase their feeling of "being useful" to others integrating them the in society.
- + A break from the, necessary, every day routine (for those people suffering from dementia who are institutionalized); a needed breath of fresh air to both people suffering from dementia and professionals.
- + Strengthening of cognitive abilities such as memory, language, perception thanks to the different activities being carried out.
- + increased mobility and social activity.

In conclusion, after analyzing the theory and practice of these activities and programs, I will keep doing them in my work with people suffering from dementia as often as I can, since, to them, such activities are a source of energy and they get to enjoy themselves. They even get to remember sometimes.

Even if doing new activities implies a tremendous effort for professionals, doing new activities means assuming risks, seeing those smiles, that happiness, brief as it might be, that satisfied face when children call them by their names... that makes all the effort worth it.

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