



# *from* What Happens When Old and Young Connect

by Marc Freedman, 2019

*When older and younger people form meaningful relationships, it improves both groups' well-being.*

- 1 This year, for the first time ever, there are more people over 60 in the U.S. than under 18. That milestone has brought with it little celebration. Indeed, there are abundant concerns that America will soon be awash in a gray wave, spelling increased health care costs for an aging population, greater housing and transportation needs, and fewer young workers contributing to Social Security. Some fear a generational conflict over shrinking resources, a looming tension between kids and “canes.”
- 2 Without discounting these very real challenges, I’m quite a bit more optimistic. I’ve spent decades wondering what the increasing years beyond 50 mean for crafting more fulfilling lives, and how a more-old-than-young society can thrive. In that time, I’ve sought to find new ways to match the untapped resource of older adults with the unmet needs of our nation’s youth. I’ve seen [intergenerational](#) connection help children learn to read, graduate from high school, and go on to accomplish their dreams.
- 3 But it’s only recently that I’ve come to realize some of the biggest benefits of bringing old and young together. As I recount in my new book *How to Live Forever: The Enduring Power of Connecting the Generations*, when younger and older connect, the intergenerational relationships built are a route to success in early life and a key to happiness and well-being in our later years.

- 4 Forty years ago, the eminent Cornell professor and child psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner famously concluded, “Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her.” The benefits of a caring adult **mentor** on children’s well-being have been reinforced in study after study, as well as reports from youth themselves—including research I was engaged with early in my career.
- 5 In the 1980s, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America served 70,000 children in the U.S., but 30,000 more were **languishing** on the waiting list for an average of 18 months. Our research team was able to take 1,000 kids on the waiting list and **randomly** assign mentors to half. The other half were promised mentors at the end of 18 months, the period they would have waited anyway. But first, during that year and a half, we compared the young people who had mentors with the young people who didn’t have them.
- 6 The contrast was **staggering**. There was a 46 percent difference in drug use, a 50 percent difference in school **truancy**, and a 33 percent difference in violent behavior. The conclusion was inescapable: Relationships with adults matter in young people’s lives.
- 7 But what do older adults gain from relationships with young people? One powerful answer comes from the Harvard Study of Adult Development, which began tracking more than 700 men in 1938 and continues to this day. Of the study’s findings, one towers above all others: Relationships are the critical ingredient in well-being, particularly as we age.
- 8 Harvard psychiatrist George Vaillant led that study for more than three decades. In his book *Aging Well*, Vaillant illuminates the importance not only of bonds with partners and peers but of ties spanning the generations. “In all three Study cohorts,” he wrote, “masters of Generativity tripled the chances that the decade of the 70s would be for these men and women a time of joy and not of despair.” Generativity means investing in, caring for, and developing the next generation; older adults who did so were *three times as likely to be happy* as those who did not.
- 9 Research from Washington University in St. Louis and Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine shows that intergenerational volunteering is good for older people’s mental and physical health. A separate study by Hopkins professor Michelle Carlson found that, after six months of tutoring students with Experience Corps, older adults had “improved brain and **cognitive** function.” According to Dean Linda Fried of Columbia’s Mailman School of Public Health, working with the students “dusted off the cobwebs in their brains.”

- 10 Today, an accumulating body of research on purpose, generativity, relationships, and face-to-face contact suggests that engagement with others that flows down the generational chain may well make you healthier, happier, and possibly longer-lived.