

Intergenerational Interactions in Japan: Their Examples and Outcomes

1. A variety of approaches

In Japan before the full-scale industrialization, people lived in large families and intergenerational interactions were quite common. However, since the beginning of the rapid economic growth in the 1960s, nuclear families have become more common with a decline in interactions among different generations. Meanwhile, a growing number of people have started to point out the importance of intergenerational interactions.

Intergenerational interactions have been promoted from various perspectives. One example is promotion of multi-functional public facilities. While this trend is mainly created by financial reasons, to reduce costs to develop and maintain facilities, it is also expected to have a secondary and positive effect, such as promotion of intergenerational interactions at multi-functional facilities for both children and older people. Such public facilities have services for children (e.g., nursery, children's center, elementary school) and for older people (e.g., residential home, day care center) under one roof or next to each other. There were already about 560 such facilities by 2000, when the national long-term care insurance started.

Moreover, according to a survey on combining school and other public facilities (MEXT, 2014) with 1,731 municipalities throughout Japan, 113 out of about 10,000 public elementary and junior high schools had facilities for older people (e.g., nursing homes, day care centers) next to them. Since there were only 13 such schools in 1996, the number keeps increasing.

2. Recent trends

Japan has become a hyper-aged society, with the proportion of older people reaching 27% by 2017. Meanwhile, its population has been decreasing due to declining births. Against this background, an increasing number of people think that it is undesirable for both society and older people themselves if they continue to be just "recipients" of social security.

There are great expectations for older people to actively participate in society, not only to prevent their own frailty but also to play roles as community resources in enriching people's lives and local communities. Hence, it is important for older people to participate in a wide range of voluntary activities.

Intergenerational interactions are expected to revitalize communities as well as older people. They also provide valuable opportunities for healthy growth of children.

Therefore, with the aim of building intergenerational and cohesive communities, a number of activities for intergenerational interactions have been promoted by service providers throughout Japan, including day care centers and residential facilities for older people, senior centers, facilities to support childcare, and *Takuyorojos* (small-scale care centers that provide flexible services in the home-like environment for various users, such as older people, people with disabilities and children).

3. Examples of activities

(1) Senior volunteers to nurture children in the community

“Aoba School Support Network (ASN)” is a civic group founded in 2005 by volunteers who have completed the “training course for coordinating school support volunteers” organized by a local municipality. Older individuals make up more than half of the coordinators and volunteers. They strongly believe that schools, families, societies, and communities should nurture children and that communities should be involved in education.

While ASN started out as a group to support schools, now it involves communities and has expanded its activities to “supporting schools while developing communities.”

i. Supporting classrooms and outside activities

As teachers’ assistants, these volunteers help children with daily living, school lunches and learning. For example, they give advice to children who are struggling with math problems. Every April, at the beginning of the new school year, about 50 volunteers help with new first grade classes intensively for a month. Volunteers also accompany children on outside school activities like field trips. Schools also think that having relationships with a variety of people is essential for healthy growth of children.

ii. Hands-on learning activities on weekends

ASN rents classrooms, where volunteers hold workshops on science experiments and crafts. The program for making chopstick guns is quite popular among children. Sometimes, older people who like science teach in class, such as lighting an electric bulb with batteries using *Binchotan* charcoal. This is a wonderful opportunity for older people to demonstrate what they know or can do from their experiences in the past.

iii. Local activities

Haunted House is an annual event everyone looks forward to. People of all generations, from 3rd graders to those aged around 80, get together, call each other by their nicknames regardless of age, and have fun preparing for the event.

At a day camp, the groups enjoy making solar cookers and solar powered toys. Volunteers plan and implement their own programs.

Through these activities, older volunteers make an extra effort to stay healthy. They shouldn't spread a cold to teachers or children, and above all, they never want to fail to show up. Accordingly, they try to stay healthy every day, which results in frailty prevention. Also, their greatest joy is receiving words of appreciation from children, teachers and parents for contributing what they are good at.

(2) Intergenerational interactions between older people and children at a care facility

Older people at a care facility provide care to children whose parents work till late in the evening.

"*Enza*," a small-scale multifunctional in-home care facility for older people in Kagawa Prefecture, also operates "Kids Day," an after-school child day care program. Elementary school students come to the facility every day after school, have a snack, finish their homework, then enjoy their time together with older people, watching TV and playing games. The older people teach children how to play games of the old days and enjoy housework with them.

Today, most people live in nuclear families and have little communication with neighbors. Many children have never interacted with older people. Spending time together nurtures the children's sense of caring for older people, while taking care of children also gives the older people *ikigai* (meaning of life, life worth living).

As people become older with declining physical strengths, they tend to become gloomy, thinking that they are useless, just receiving care. However, interacting with children seems to revitalize their bodies and souls because it gives them roles to teach the wisdom and experiences only older people have.

(3) Old but new way of living

NAGAYA TOWER, which opened in 2013 in Kagoshima City, is a rental apartment that aims to build a community without dependence on blood ties as a place where "every resident lives independently and lends a friendly hand when needed." People of all generations, aged 4 to 95, currently live there together. NAGAYA TOWER has a variety of innovative features, both tangible and intangible, to promote interactions with other people in daily living. While the six-story building for 37 households looks quite modern from outside, the building is v-shaped so that residents can interact with each other at the courtyard. The balcony is connected from one household to another without a partition wall. On the first floor, they run a day care center for children with developmental disabilities. There are also tenants on the first floor to facilitate

convenience for the residents, such as a convenience store and a café where the residents are actively involved. The building has a number of common spaces for residents, including “Living/dining room and kitchen (LDK) for everyone” on the second floor, a garden on the third floor, and rock bathes with great views on the fifth floor. Moreover, on the third floor, there is a house for children who live with foster parents for various reasons. A hospital and a hospice run by a doctor, who is also the owner of NAGAYA TOWER, is right next to the apartment. As for various services, a residence life coordinator is available full time, not only to solve minor problems in daily living but also to organize events so that the residents can get out of their rooms and interact with each other. While older people can receive support in long-term and medical care according to their conditions and needs, healthy older people are to play roles as providers of support. Students can get rent discounts by assisting other residents.

These innovative initiatives at NAGAYA TOWER contribute to formulation of a bond among the residents on a daily basis, and children play significant roles there. For example, the residents always care about the children in NAGAYA through the time spent together at the courtyard. They have also launched *Kodomo-Shokudo* (children's cafeteria) at “LDK for everyone.” This is a community-based program recently developing as a social movement, where local residents and a municipality play a main role to provide meals to children for free or at a discount. The program has created new networks with those outside the building, and NAGAYA TOWER is now becoming an important community hub.

4. Outcomes and evaluation of intergenerational interactions

There are not necessarily many studies to examine effects of intergenerational interactions on older people, children, communities and society. For example, in a literature review mentioned below, there are about 10 research articles on this subject between 2001 and 2011. Also, according to “[Dial \(Dia's Library on Social Gerontology\)](#),” only 16 research papers were published on this subject between 2010 and 2017 (searched on April 13, 2018). Most of these studies are based on observation at small programs, probably due to difficulties in finding clear evidence because intergenerational interactions take so many forms and the number of participants tends to be small.

According to the literature review on intergenerational interactions between 2001 and 2011, older people's motivations for taking part in intergenerational interactions include “passing on their knowledge and skills,” “self-fulfillment” and “contribution to communities.” In this review, there are several insights on effects of intergenerational

interactions, including: “Volunteering in childcare, which often involves interactions with physical contact, can be an effective program for older people’s *ikigai*,” and “Parents of small children think interactions at multi-functional facilities can nurture their children’s compassion toward other people and communication skills.” There is also a report that suggests positive effects, particularly on small children, if a study examines children’s daily speech and behavior and older people’s subjective health through these activities.

(Hayashitani, H. (2012). Daily interactions between older people and children: The current and ideal states. *Sonoda Journal*, 46.)

Kamei and her colleagues observed older people and elementary and junior high school students at an intergenerational day program in an urban area for 12 months. For the older people, the study found a significant effect on their overall QOL and a significant decline in their depressive symptoms. This program seems to provide a meaningful place for different generations through intergenerational communication and interactions based on a sense of solidarity. In particular, the results suggest that the program prevents isolation and has positive effects on emotional health among older people.

(Kamei, T., et al. (2010). Longitudinal examination of 12-month effects on participants of an urban intergenerational day program: Mixed methods analysis focusing on emotional health of older people and changes in intergenerational interactions. *Journal of Japan Academy of Gerontological Nursing*, 14(1).)

Another paper proposes guidelines and evaluation methods for intergenerational interactions practiced at institutions.

(Child Future Foundation. *FY 2009 Research Project on Services Related to Children: Analysis of Activity Evaluation and Development of Generalizable Guidelines for Community-based Childcare Support Programs*.)

Moreover, there is also a project to develop a tool (checklist) in order to scientifically evaluate the “depth of intergenerational involvement.” Another project is conducted to develop a scale that evaluates, through observation of intergenerational interactions among participants, how continuous programs for intergenerational interactions are operated for older people and elementary school children in a community.

(Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology. *Research Team for Social Participation and Community Health: Checklist for Evaluation of Intergenerational Interactions*. St. Luke’s College of Nursing. *St. Luke’s Intergenerational Exchanges and Relations Observation (SIERO) Inventory*.)