



Could you help to tackle loneliness and isolation?

Guidelines for setting up an intergenerational penpal initiative

If you are looking to build closer ties with MHA care homes and community groups in your area then we'd encourage you to consider taking part in a penpal letter writing initiative. This guidance has been produced by the Methodist Children, Youth and Family Team for anyone looking to establish intergenerational letter writing between their children/young people and residents living in MHA care homes or part of MHA community groups nearby. It takes you through the preparations and steps to help you get started, hopefully leading toward great friendships being formed through putting pen to paper.

Introduction

Why does being intergenerational matter?

Bringing different ages and generations together is not always easy as the opportunities to do so seem to be fewer today than ever before. It can present us with some real dilemmas as often different generations seem to have grown wary of each other and misunderstandings have arisen. Overcoming these barriers isn't always a simple task!



Getting to know people of different ages has enormous benefits for all involved as we learn from the experience of others, hearing their stories and understanding more of their lives. It builds empathy and broadens perspectives: helping us to stand in the shoes of another, seeing life from their point of view.

Specifically in faith settings, Dave Csinos and Ivy Beckwith make a strong case for being intentional about bringing different generations together believing there's power in doing so. Not least for the sakes of children and young people, who benefit greatly from having relationships with others who aren't parents. It's not enough, in their view, to simply bring people together. We need to work at helping them get to know each other, building a 'common life'. As they say:

"The kind of intergenerational community we imagine is one in which children are spiritually formed through relationships that span the generations and in which adults receive spiritual renewal from the young people in their congregation who they get to know in meaningful ways." (*Better Together: The Formative Power of Intergenerational Community*)

So being intergenerational can impact everyone's discipleship but also generates a greater sense of what we have in common. Whether talking of faith is a feature in these relationships or not, everyone benefits from building better connections with people of different ages.

Penpal project overview

Establishing an intergenerational penpal project therefore seeks to nurture these life-enhancing relationships between older people in MHA care homes (or who are supported by

MHA in their own homes) with younger people in local Methodist churches or groups. Letters are written and replied to, with a younger person being connected with an older person. The key features of the project are:

- Small, locally based groups committed to exchanging letters over a period of time with residents in a local MHA home or community group.
- Any child from the age of seven can participate, whether able to write or not (as a scribe can put their words down on paper for them).
- The frequency of sending and receiving letters can be decided by those participating.
- Group leaders and MHA staff coordinate and oversee the project to ensure everyone taking part is safe and comfortable with what is shared.
- Children, young people and older people supported by MHA can enjoy sharing thoughts, experiences and asking questions to get to know each other and build friendships.

There is a great deal of flexibility in how groups choose to establish their pen pal project. It's good to have a clear and realistic understanding of what can be offered by all those taking part.



Statement of intent

Being sure of the purpose of the project, the intended outcomes and what is hoped will be gained by doing it is essential. We believe that this penpal scheme has the potential to:

- tackle isolation and loneliness
- build bridges between generations
- generate better understanding and challenge stereotypes of different generations.

Step-by-step process

If the idea of creating intergenerational penpals is one that appeals to you, then the information that follows outlines the next steps so you can get your own locally based initiative off the ground.

The process for setting up a penpal scheme of this nature consists of **6 steps**.

Step 1: Research and scoping

At the outset there's a need to do some research and scoping: talk to people locally, find out what is already available and happening in your local area. You can find your local MHA home or community group by visiting their website www.mha.org.uk and using your postcode in the search function. Your nearest care home or community group's contact details will be available, which you can use to enquire if letter writing from young people would be something they would welcome. It may be that similar schemes already exist so it's worth exploring ways to join in with these rather than starting a new project. Spend time speaking with children and young people in your church, asking them if this might be something they're interested in? Discover if there is support from other significant adults, for instance their parents and carers. Will they give consent if their children wish to participate? If the research suggests there is enthusiasm and interest in creating intergenerational friendships and writing letters then you're ready to move to step 2.

Step 2: Project details

Spend time considering some essential matters and features of the project before you start, here are some questions to reflect on:

- Who else in the church might be willing to get involved or offer some support?
- Who is the best person for you to liaise with at the MHA home or scheme?
- How long would you like the penpal scheme to run for? Six weeks? Three months? A year? This will depend on how often you anticipate letters being written, sent and received.
- Consider ways to best match young people with a penpal, bearing in mind age, abilities, personal circumstances and hobbies or interests.
- Agree where the letters will be sent, opened and read by both children and young people as well as MHA service users. Letters should not be sent to any participant's personal addresses.
- What budget is available? The costs are relatively low: there may be a need to purchase stationery such as notecards, paper and pens. Will the letters be delivered by hand or require postage?
- How can everyone involved stay safe? Are there specific sensitivities bearing in mind the children and young people taking part? Ensure you check safeguarding guidelines and have a conversation with your District Safeguarding Officer for advice. In your risk assessment you may wish to think about: children and young people's emotional responses, appropriate language, dealing with bereavement, supervision of children and young people as they write and read letters.

Step 3: Statement of intent

Once you have considered steps 1 and 2, put into writing what you plan to do. Share this draft outline for your project with parents and carers, MHA staff you're liaising with and the District Safeguarding Officer to ensure everyone is happy to proceed. We'd recommend also spending time exploring this with your children and young people to help everyone understand

the nature of the project. Share with your church what you are planning to do and ask them to pray.

Step 4: Prepare your children and young people

Spend time helping them get ready to write and explore some of the potential issues they may meet during the letter writing process. It is also important to build intergenerational empathy and understanding through doing this. Encourage the children and young people to help them know they are making a difference in the lives of those they write to. You may wish to run sessions for children and young people to set their expectations and on how to write a letter and reply sensitively to what is shared with them. Brainstorm some good questions that could be asked to get to know their penpal better.

Step 5: Begin writing letters

Here are some helpful starting points and topics that could be written about in the letters:

- the town you live in and the church or group you are part of
- your school and the subjects you enjoy
- your family and pets
- sports and activities you enjoy
- your hobbies and pastimes
- your hopes for the future
- the issues you care about
- books, games, TV shows and films you enjoy.

Young people may well have suggestions of their own to include and encourage them to share their creative ideas with each other.

Step 6: Review and evaluation

After there have been a few exchanges of letters check in with your children and young people about how it's going: what have they learnt or noticed? Find out if they're enjoying being part of the project. Seek out feedback from the MHA service users, to see if they have experienced similar feelings, what they have learnt and if they have enjoyed the experience. Share this as a means of encouraging your children and young people. Discuss with your MHA contact how you want to proceed and whether anything needs to be changed or adapted. It's worthwhile reviewing the project regularly. Consider ways to ensure the project ends well if that's the outcome, with an opportunity to celebrate achievements.

Final Thoughts



We very much hope this proves to be an enjoyable and beneficial project for all involved.

Do please share your stories with the Children, Youth and Family Team by emailing childrenandyouth@methodistchurch.org.uk as we would love to hear what you've been doing and, in turn, inspire others.