

# Intergenerational and Whole Family Learning

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James White, in *Intergenerational Religious Education* (Religious Education Press, 1988) identified four patterns of relationships that have become the basic pattern of intergenerational learning experiences: 1) In-Common Experiences, 2) Parallel Learning, 3) Contributive-Occasions, and 4) Interactive Sharing. Most churches design their family-intergenerational learning programs using these four movements, adapting the process to fit their particular needs.

1. **In-Common Experiences.** Intergenerational religious education begins with a multigenerational experience of the theme that all the generations share together. In-common experiences of generations are usually less verbal and more observatory than in the other three elements. In this pattern there is something “out there” or “over there” for us to see or do, something that equalizes the ages. Thus, at the same time and place and in a similar manner, different-aged people listen to music or sing, make an art project, watch a video, hear a story, participate in a ritual, pray together, and so on. In-common experiences for the most part remain at what Jean Piaget calls the “concrete operational” level, where all can learn together.

Shared experiences are absolutely critical for building IGRE. They are the stuff by which other patterns of relationships are built. To the point, Fred Rogers, of television’s *Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood*, makes the case for what is prescribed here when he asks rhetorically, “How can older and younger people respond to each other if they have no experiences together?”

2. **Parallel Learning.** Parallel learning is the second major IG relational pattern. With it the generations are separated in order to work on the same topic or project, but in different ways at a “best fit” development, interest, or skill level. Some of the developmental levels we are talking about are cognitive, psychological, physical, moral, valuational, and so on—all the ways that make people different and special.

Though age groups may be separated, each one is focusing on the same learning task or topic. One of the major criticisms of IGRE is “the tendency to view equality or persons across the age spectrum with uniformity of experience,” with that experience only from the vantage point of the child. By engaging in parallel learning, however, this IGRE shortcoming is avoided.

3. **Contributive-Occasions.** The third pattern of learning is that of contributive-occasions. These occasions are often the step after parallel learning. What is involved is a coming together of different age groups or classes for the purpose of sharing what has been learned or created previously. The joining or rejoining becomes a contributive-occasion where separated pieces to a whole are added together for everyone’s benefit.

Contributive-occasions are more participatory than the other three patterns. If the contributions come from a previous period of parallel learning, the last part of that parallel learning would have been concerned with how to communicate acquired insights or behaviors to other age groups. By engaging “in mutual contribution” to one another, IG learners discover that the educational whole is great than the sum of its parts.

4. **Interactive Sharing.** Interactive sharing is the fourth major pattern in IGRE relationships. It is a distinctive style or way of learning. Here persons are provided with an opportunity for interpersonal exchange, which may involve experiences or thoughts or feelings or actions. At its best, interactive sharing facilitates a “crossing over” to hear and respond to another’s perspective.

In an ideal IGRE program or event, all four of the patterns of relationships will be enacted. People come together and have an in-common experience. Then they break to separately investigate the common subject at a level appropriate for their highest learning abilities. They come back together to present their insights and work in a shared program. Finally, different generations interact with one another, giving and receiving in the exchanges. In the latter case the participants are sharing, reflecting, debating, and dreaming from the side of the other but for their own edification.

(See James White, *Intergenerational Religious Education*. Religious Education Press, 26-30)

Together with my colleagues Mariette Martineau, Leif Kehrwald, and Joan Weber we developed a model of intergenerational learning based on White’s four patterns.. This process is also described in the book *Intergenerational Faith Formation* by Martineau, Kehrwald, and Weber (Twenty-Third Publications, 2008). In this model, intergenerational learning experiences are designed around a four movement learning process.

Welcome, Community Building and Opening Prayer

1. An **All-Ages Learning Experience** for the whole assembly that introduces the theme or topic for the program.
2. **In-Depth Learning Experiences** that probe the theme or topic, organized for all ages (intergenerational) or for specific age-groups (families with children or children-only, adolescents, young adults, and adults), and conducted in one of three formats:
  - *Whole Group Format*: learning in small groups with the whole group assembled in one room (age-specific or all ages small groups)
  - *Age Group Format*: learning in separate, parallel groups organized by ages
  - *Learning Activity Center Format*: learning at self-directed or facilitated activity centers (age-specific and/or all ages learning centers)
3. An **All-Ages Contributive Learning Experience** in which each generation teaches the other generations.
4. **Interactive Sharing** in which people reflect upon the learning experience, share their insights with each other, prepare for living their faith at home and in daily life.

Closing Prayer

## Leading a Family and Intergenerational Learning Experience

### Welcoming Participants & Meal

*Depending on the time of day, a meal begins the program. Use the meal time to introduce people into the theme of the learning program, build community among the participants, do table activities (especially for children) or model at-home practices, such as prayer or a table ritual.*

### Gathering and Opening Prayer

*Welcome people to the program, provide an overview, and lead the opening prayer service.*

### **Part 1. All-Ages Learning Experience**

*Conduct an All-Ages Learning Experience to introduce the whole assembly to the theme/content of the program. Select or design learning activities that will engage all ages. Examples of all-ages learning activities include:*

- ritual or extended prayer service
- dramatic presentation of a Scripture passage or real life story
- storytelling or retelling a Scripture passage with contemporary examples
- witness presentations by church members (of all ages)
- learning games or TV game show formats
- film or media presentation using art/photos and music
- table group activity and discussion in intergenerational, family and/or age-groups.

### **Part 2. In-Depth Learning Experience**

*Conduct learning activities that explore the theme or topic, organized for all ages (intergenerational) or for specific age-groups (families with children or children-only, adolescents, young adults, and adults), and developed in one of three formats.*

1. **Whole Group Format:** learning in small groups with the whole group assembled in one room in one of two ways:
  - age-specific groupings
  - intergenerational groupings
2. **Age Group Format:** learning in separate, parallel groups organized by ages:
  - pre-school children or parents with young children (ages 3-5)
  - parents with children (grades 1-5)
  - young adolescents (middle school)
  - older adolescents (high school)
  - young adults
  - adults
3. **Learning Activity Center Format:** learning at self-directed or facilitated activity centers targeted to specific age groups, or organized by family and/or all age:
  - age-specific learning centers
  - family-centered learning centers
  - intergenerational learning centers

### **Part 3. All-Ages Contributive Learning**

*Determine what participants will bring back from their In-Depth Learning Experience to share/teach the whole assembly or their small group. This can include reports from each age group, presentation of a project or skit, small group sharing, and so on.*

### **Part 4. Interactive Sharing**

*After the presentations, engage small groups in sharing reflections on the learning experience.*

*Prepare the participants for living their faith at home and in daily life with a variety of age-appropriate activities and resources on the topic.*

### **Closing Prayer**