This paper presents an activity program designed to have therapeutic value for the institutionalized elderly. Nursing home residents utilized their life experiences to teach an oral history class to third-grade students. The implementation of this program in a long-term care setting resulted in improved self-esteem among the nursing home residents and heightened community understanding and involvement.

Key Words: Intergenerational program, Nursing home, Oral history

An Application of Reminiscence in an Activity Setting

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Activity programs for institutionalized elderly are ideally designed to provide opportunities for independence, emotional health, socialization, mental/physical stimulation, and creativity. Unfortunately, in practice activities often seem to provide an “unchanging diet of ‘recreation’—mindless games and purposeless activities” (Feier & Leight, 1981, p. 410). In order for activity programs to have therapeutic relevance, they must take the residents’ strengths and life tasks as a focal point for activity planning. This approach can assist aged individuals to continue to meet the challenges of life in the nursing home environment.

Ascertaining Concerns and Strengths

Prior to entering a long-term care setting, much of the aging process has already affected the elderly. Coping with multiple physical/mental losses becomes more difficult because past support systems have disappeared or changed dramatically. Familiar daily patterns of life have of necessity been altered or may be entirely impossible to maintain. Frequently, memories seem more meaningful than current events.

The negotiation of these changes can be notably altered upon entrance into a nursing home. Many of the institutionalized elderly suffer from low self-esteem associated with a perceived loss of control over their lives and environment. The resident’s sense of self-worth and meaning in life may disappear with the perception that independence and self-sufficiency have been replaced by dependence, and inability prevails. An aggressive activity treatment plan, however, can effectively redirect these negative perceptions.

An initial step in redirection is an awareness of the strengths of the elderly. Years of experience provide a broader perspective about life. Changes that come with aging may be difficult to accommodate, but patterns for coping have long been established. An awareness of senescence leads to an assessment of the past. Butler acknowledged the significance of life review when he wrote, “The personal sense and meaning of the life cycle are more clearly unfolded by those who have nearly completed it” (Butler, 1963, p. 72). The value of reminiscing was also recognized by Eliot Wigginton and his students as they compiled Foxfire, an outstanding compendium of the vast resources available through the elderly. The students gathered the information contained in the books by interviewing older people in their communities. Wigginton wrote that the elderly “have something to tell us about self-reliance, human interdependence, and the human spirit . . .” (Wigginton, 1971, p. 13). This paper will describe an activity specifically designed for nursing home residents that utilizes the elderly’s reflections on the past.

The Oral History Class

The activity, which is ongoing, was given the title “The Tiny Hearts and Aged Hands Program.” It was designed as an oral history class and took place throughout the school year. It involved a third-grade class and nursing home residents. To accommodate scheduling and encourage one-to-one contacts, the students were divided into two groups, 13 visiting the nursing home during one week and 13 the next. The 26 participating residents were also divided into two alternating groups. Meetings took place in the nursing home in a large, well-lighted room. The classes met for 35 minutes; the first 20 minutes were spent in a group discussion, followed by a 15-minute one-to-one question-and-answer period.

The oral history class was to be taught by the nursing home residents from their own experiences. Therefore, preparation and selection of appropriate residents were carefully managed. Residents who met the following criteria were interviewed.

1. Good verbal skills.
2. Good remote memory skills.
3. Ability to concentrate for 20 to 30 minutes.
4. Ability to function appropriately in a group.

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The program was explained during the interview. Residents who chose to participate agreed to answer questions during group discussion or on a one-to-one basis, and they expressed a willingness to attend meetings regularly.

Preparation of the students was an important step in forming the program. Prior to the first class an orientation for the students was held at the school. They were given a presentation which included comments regarding the aging process and aspects of nursing homes such as wheelchairs, catheters, incontinency, and disorientation. The children were encouraged to ask questions, express feelings, and share personal experiences. The discussion provided a forum for expressing enthusiasm about the program and uncertainty about the elderly and the nursing home environment.

Topics chosen for the oral history class were arranged according to resident and student interest. Fads, schools, music, storage and preparation of food, clothing, and games were among the topics included. Other subjects were of a more personal nature (e.g., family and religious traditions, values, and politics). The time period emphasized was the early 1900s. Activities such as making taffy, stringing popcorn and cranberries, and an old-fashioned picnic were interspersed throughout to provide actual experiences of topics discussed.

The residents’ contributions were brought together in a weekly newspaper written, edited, and published by the students. The children came prepared to ask specific questions about the weekly topic in order to prepare their news articles. Copies of the newspaper were distributed to the students, residents, families, and nursing home staff.

During the beginning of the program, staff members interrupted the sessions to remove residents for medical treatments and personal care. It became obvious that, to create a classroom-type atmosphere, staff education about the program would be imperative. The program’s purpose and value to the residents were outlined to staff members, and the staff’s responsibility in promoting an optimal response was emphasized. Staff members were provided with the names of residents participating and asked to assist them in appropriate dress and punctuality. Baths and medical treatments were scheduled around the class. Distribution of the weekly newspaper to staff members helped to increase their awareness and enjoyment of the program’s progress. After these steps were taken, interruptions of class sessions were rare.

Emotional and Educational By-Products

The program resulted in many expected and unexpected benefits. As anticipated, a high level of interest was maintained by the students and residents. An increase in self-esteem was demonstrated by residents forming personal relationships with the students. As a result, students and their families visited frequently outside the classroom setting. Residents’ communication with each other increased as they discovered common interests. The staff expressed a positive attitude about the program, which led to an unexpected feeling of pride in their jobs and a better understanding of the residents. The weekly newspaper proved to be a vital link between students, residents, families, and staff members. The families of the students exhibited their support by volunteering time throughout the summer to continue the program until a new third-grade class began visiting the nursing home in the fall. The residents’ families provided recipes and short family histories for a cookbook which was distributed to all participants. Community involvement was reflected by broad and positive coverage of the program by local and regional news media.

Educational links to the classroom were numerous. The newspaper acted as a catalyst which increased motivation to learn correct spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. The students became more aware of the relevance of history to their own lives, and, in many cases, the nursing home experience expanded into the students’ relationship with their grandparents. The students began experiencing their own heritage as a valuable resource for educational growth.

Results for individual residents were reflected in changed behavior patterns. Prior to the start of the program, one resident had refused to borrow books from the library because of failing eyesight. When he discovered that the students were interested in local history, he asked for a book with pictures of the community in the early 1900s and used it to illustrate changes in the community.

Another resident, who had refused to participate in the program initially, started to attend after receiving a personal invitation from one of the students. He had attended no previous activities and had continually voiced complaints to his family about the nursing home. After participating in the oral history class, he began to attend other activities regularly, and his daughter reported that he was expressing a positive attitude toward his environment. He offered constructive suggestions for activities and became involved in achieving these changes. For example, he assisted the activity department in scheduling his nephew to provide an educational slide program.

A third resident had expressed an interest in being visited by the children in her room, but she did not want to join the group activity. When encouraged to attend by her granddaughter, who was a member of the class, she reluctantly agreed to participate. After a few sessions, this resident became an important contributor to the group. Previously, her relationship with family members had consisted of sparse, strained visits. When she became a prominent part of the oral history class, her relationship with her granddaughter grew stronger, and family visits became more relaxed and increased in frequency.

Many participating residents initially displayed feelings of anger and depression, but for the most part, these feelings interfered only with attendance. For example, some residents felt that their participation was not valuable and had to be personally invited to attend by staff or students. Only one resident had
to be dismissed from the program. Following the third session, an article appeared in the newsletter about her life, and she subsequently reported that the information was erroneous. Although the teacher offered to make a correction, the resident continued to complain bitterly and asked that the student writer be punished.

The unexpected death of one of the residents occurred during the spring semester. The teacher asked all of the students to write articles about their memories of this oral history teacher, and the articles were published in the newsletter. After receiving the newsletter, the residents and students openly discussed death with each other, and the experience was viewed positively by all concerned.

From the Past to the Future

Acknowledging reminiscence as a vital part of the aging process and providing an environment that encourages life review recreates a once-natural family pattern—the elderly passing knowledge and values on to a younger generation. The children's recognition of the importance of the oral history lessons led to each resident's validation of his/her own life experiences.

Activity programs in long-term care institutions which utilize the resources available in the elderly can have a tremendous impact. For the nursing home resident, a positive intervention into the adjustment to institutional living can be provided, and youth who become involved in these programs can approach future decisions about the elderly through a personal acquaintance with their situation.

References

