

Bringing old and young together

How Jenny Kossew is bringing pre-schoolers and pensioners together in a project that's changing lives

By Lorna White

Every day on her walk home from school, Jenny Kossew would visit the elderly lady who lived across the road from her. Nicknamed Auntie Annie, this lady would sit alone all day every day in the same room until Jenny popped by to read to her and listen to her wonderful stories.

"There was this real connection between us," says Jenny, now 63. "And this was where my affinity for older people really began."

Since moving to the UK in 1988 from South Africa, Jenny never forgot the joy she and Auntie Annie shared from their special relationship and, as a result, she always looked for opportunities to bring old and young together. Then while working at two separate jobs, teaching music and movement to children and

working as an activity coordinator and entertainer in numerous residential homes, an opportunity to do just that arose...

Jenny started taking the children to see her elderly residents on special occasions and found every time she brought the generations together, they all enjoyed it so much, they wanted more. And so did Jenny as she longed to create real friendships like the one she'd enjoyed with Auntie Annie. That's when she decided to form JOY (Joining Old and Young), a charity committed to connecting pre-school children with senior citizens to help build respect and understanding.

Through the programme, children, aged between three and four, are invited to meet a group of elderly people in a residential home. In the first meeting, everyone sings and plays games, during which time Jenny assesses the group and partners up each elderly person with one child based on their personalities and likes. All the sessions are supervised by teachers, carers and facilitators.



The JOY programme, Jenny's brainchild, brings happiness to old and young alike

Shall we dance? Sharing stories and fun at one of the JOY sessions



"I stand back and look at them while they're all interacting and it's just the most wonderful thing," says Jenny.

By doing this, youngsters get the chance to learn life lessons from those with experience and regularly interact with an age group they might otherwise not meet. "It seems respectful conversation between old and young is missing these days and I think the elderly can help with many important values in children," says Jenny. As the project sees the children work with older people who may be blind, in a wheelchair, or unable to speak, it also teaches youngsters empathy and care. "We introduce them to the real world," says Jenny.

What's more, so many of the children come home from the JOY sessions over the moon that they've made a new friend, especially if they don't have grandparents or older family members who live locally.

As for the older person, these sessions can bring so much happiness and hope at a difficult time, as well as helping them remember how it felt to be young, especially if they don't have any other children in their lives.

Every day at JOY amazing friendships form, but some are extra special. For example, one lady who had dementia hadn't spoken for a long time. But when a child came to visit her at a JOY session, she started interacting and chatting. "This lady's carer was in tears because she'd never seen her so happy in all the time she'd known her," says Jenny.

It's no wonder then, with such amazing results, that many

children and their families continue to meet up with their older people even after the JOY programme officially ends in their residential home.

While JOY currently only operates in North London, Jenny is looking to train more volunteers to help lead the programme so she can spread its impact far and wide. She also hopes to one day get these kinds of sessions incorporated into the national curriculum. "If we can help these children grow up loving, respecting and understanding each other from what they learn with the elderly, that's surely an amazing thing," she says.

■ The programme relies totally on donations and grants. If you'd like to help support it, send a cheque payable to 'JOY' to: 11 Green Lane, Edgware, Middlesex HA8 7PL. To find out more, including if you know of a local residential home or nursery school that could benefit from a JOY session, call 0781 177 1069 or visit www.joiningoldandyoung.org.uk

A growing trend

JOY is part of an amazing worldwide movement promoting intergenerational care. It's thought to have started in Japan in the Seventies when a nursery school and care home combined. The idea soon spread with the first dedicated nursery and care home opening in the UK in 2017. Since then, 40 more have opened. The science backs up the benefits, as numerous studies have found intergenerational care reduces not only loneliness in older people but even delays mental decline, lowers blood pressure and reduces the risk of disease. Youngsters mixing with older people see improvements in reading and social skills as well as a boost in confidence and empathy.



Jenny enjoying a sing song with one of the participants

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