

NEIGHBORHOOD PEN PALS: ACROSS GENERATIONS

A READY-TO-USE INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAM

Hello! Are you interested in creating an intergenerational community center at your settlement house? These are spaces that intentionally bring together community members of all ages. They offer regular programs building on the resources all generations have to offer and benefit participants of all ages.

Generations Connect, an initiative of United Neighborhood Houses (UNH), helps settlement houses make intergenerational program approaches a core practice. This guide is part of a series of tools to support organizations embarking on the multi-year and iterative process of developing an intergenerational community center. Browse them all here: unhny.org/intergenhub

What is Neighborhood PenPals: Across Generations?

This program connects older adults with younger folks living in the same neighborhood through letter writing. Each young person is assigned an older adult as a pen pal. Letters are hand-written and delivered by a project lead who travels back and forth between the school and the senior center. This program helps combat age-specific stereotypes and builds relationships between older adults and younger folks who otherwise might not have opportunities to connect.

Why run Neighborhood PenPals?

"This program is special in connecting older adults and youth in a safe space where they can exchange goals, experiences, and ideas. Knowing that they will get to meet and try to identify themselves in a safe space gives participants something to look forward to and prompts conversations when they actually meet. The connections that were made positively impacted both youth and older adults as they all expressed a sense of belonging in the community."

- Kerly Serrano, Director, Older Adult Center at Sunnyside Community Services

Where did this program come from?

This program was co-developed by Afnan Faiza, a high school student at the Academy of Finance and Enterprise and participant at Sunnyside Community Services and Kerly Serrano, the Director of the Older Adult Center at Sunnyside Community Services. Together, Afnan and Kerly collaborated on creating the program with Kerly establishing the connections with the older adults and Afnan selecting students from her community service club to participate in the program. Afnan facilitated the delivery and exchange of letters between the school and Sunnyside Community Services.

Where did this program come from? (continued)

“Kerly was the first person I went to when I came up with this idea and she pushed me to go for it. I told her I didn’t know if it would work, but she loved it and helped me kick-start it.”

- Afnan Faiza, high school participant at Sunnyside Community Services, creator of the Neighborhood Pen Pals program

“It was exciting to develop a program that became significant to so many individuals. Afnan has the gift of being able to engage both her peers and older adults and so, making such a program possible. Her willingness to serve as the connecting force was a major contributing factor in the success of the program.”

- Kerly Serrano

Who should participate?

- A group of older adults and a group of younger folks who feel comfortable writing letters. If anyone is uncomfortable writing (because of mobility issues, literacy levels, or language barriers), they can also dictate their letter, and someone can write it down for them (and translate, if necessary). You can also pair pen pals who speak a language other than English.
- You want equal numbers of each so that an older adult can pair up with a younger person. It’s easiest to manage the process if all of the older adults are gathering in one place, like a senior center, and all of the younger adults are in the same place, like a high school or afterschool program.
- You also need a project lead, either a student with easy access to the student participants or someone who works with the older adults (or both!). Their job is to give letter-writing instructions and coordinate the delivery of letters back and forth. They should set aside a couple of hours a week to manage the process.

How many people should participate?

It depends on how many project leads you have. You should assume you need one project lead for every 5 - 7 pen pal pairs.

How long does the program last?

5 weeks (though you can make it longer or shorter depending on how many rounds of letters you do, and how much time you allow in between letters). We suggest a schedule for writing and distributing letters, but feel free to change that based on your needs.

What prep do I need to do?

None! There is a clear structure for the project lead to follow. That said, feel free to adapt the questions in the instructions as you see fit.

PROGRAM STEPS

Find your participants

Make sure there are the same number of older adults as there are of younger folks. You may want to find out whether students can receive some community service hours or some other form of school credit for participating. Ideally, everyone has opted in to the program because they are excited to get to know someone from another generation.

Learn a little about your participants

Ask participants to write their hobbies on a piece of paper or index card, along with a code name they'd like to use for the letter-writing. The code name could relate to a hobby or interest (but doesn't have to!). This way, participants can remain anonymous if they want to. We've found it also helps them feel more open to share things about themselves in their letters.

Create pen pal pairs

Pair older adults and younger folks based on shared interests. It's ok if there's not an exact match for everyone, go with your gut on who would make a good pair.

Have students write the first letter

On Friday during the school day, give the younger folks instructions for how to write their first letters. Provide them with a series of prompts for their letter (see attached "Instructions for Week 1 - For Students"). Let them know you'll be collecting their letters on Monday. Students tend to be very busy during weekdays, so we found weekends to be a good time for them to work on their letters. Ask them to hand-write their letters (and write clearly and in large letters). We have found hand-written letters feel more personal than typed letters. You may need to send a reminder over the weekend.

Deliver letters to the older adults

On Monday, collect students' letters and deliver them to the senior center to distribute to the older adult pen pals. It helps to have a central location to drop off the letters, or if the project lead is in a class or club with all the letter-writers.

Have older adults write letters in response

Give the older adults prompts that will help them respond to the letters (see attached "Instructions for Week 1 - for older adults). They can either all sit together at a specific time to write their letters, or they can write them on their own over the course of the week. Just make sure the letters are handed in to the project lead before the end of the day Thursday, so that the project lead can pick up the letters and take them back to the students during the school day on Friday (you may need to remind participants over the course of the week).

Repeat the process

Repeat the whole process four more times, using new prompts each week (see attached instructions for weeks 2 - 5). It's important to follow the worksheets in order because they start off with introductions and get deeper over time.

Get participants to meet

Schedule a final event in-person for pen pals to meet each other for the first time.

Celebrate!

At the final event, decorate a meeting space for a party and provide food. Have participants guess who their pen pal might be. Then introduce pen pal pairs to each other. Share participants' contact information (if they have given their consent) so folks can keep in touch after the project is over.

Do it again!

Consider having one of the students or older adults become the project lead for the next round, since they have gone through the process themselves.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR WEEK 1 - FOR STUDENTS

Thank you so much for participating in the Neighborhood Pen Pals program! Remember to maintain a lighthearted conversation, always with respect above all else. Be mindful of the things that you are sharing. Please write clearly and in big letters. Here are some prompts for what to include in your letter:

- Share the “code name” you’d like to be identified by
- Introduce yourself!
- Write down what grade you’re in (Please use numerical grade, not freshman, sophomore, etc.)
- If you’re comfortable, share your nationality or ethnicity or anything you’d like to say about where you’re from
- Write about hobbies you are interested in
- Share what careers or subjects you are interested in pursuing
- Share why you decided to participate in this program
- Share what you hope to get out of this experience
- If there’s anything else you’d like to include, add that!
- End the letter with enthusiasm and make sure to say you are excited to hear from your pen pal



INSTRUCTIONS FOR WEEK 1 - FOR OLDER ADULTS

Thank you so much for participating in the Neighborhood Pen Pals program! Remember to maintain a lighthearted conversation, always with respect above all else. Be mindful of the things that you are sharing. Please write clearly and in big letters. Here are some prompts for what to include in your letter:

- Share the “code name” you would like to be identified by.
- Introduce yourself. Here are some things you can include:
 - Your age.
 - A bit of your background (i.e. where were you born, your primary language, etc.)
 - How you identify yourself, primarily (a mother/father, professional, sister/brother, grandmother/grandfather, etc.)
 - What hobbies or interests are or have been a part of your life
 - How you chose your “code name,” and what it means for you
 - How your interests have changed over time
- Responding to your pen pal’s letter:
 - Did your pal’s hobby or interest coincide with yours? How are they similar?
 - Were you ever interested in the career or education in the fields that they mentioned or do you have a family member or friend in that field?
- Maintain enthusiasm:
 - Share what you would like to learn about your pen pal as the letters are interchanged.
 - Share something fun or light-hearted, keeping the tone positive. Share a favorite quote, saying, joke, or memory.



INSTRUCTIONS FOR WEEK 2 - FOR STUDENTS

The older adults loved reading your letters last week! This week in your letter we will be talking about school, careers, goals, and accomplishments. Remember to maintain a lighthearted conversation, always with respect above all else. Be mindful of the things that you are sharing. Don't forget to write clearly and in big letters. Here are some prompts for what to include in your letter:

- Thank them for their letter
- Introduce yourself again in a casual manner
- Tell them the name of the school you attend
- Respond to any comments or questions they may have included in their letter
- Share the subjects you are most interested in
- Share what you want to be when your older
- Name some accomplishments you've achieved that are related to your interested career
- Name any goals you have to help you pursue your interested career
- Ask your pen pal at least 2 of the following questions related to this week's topic:
 - What is your proudest accomplishment in your life?
 - What was your favorite subject in school?
 - Do you have any degrees? If not, what degrees do you wish you could have gotten?
 - Do you have a favorite memory from school?
 - Are you in touch with any of your school friends?
 - Or make up your own!
- Closing Remarks- Tell them you're excited to hear from them!



INSTRUCTIONS FOR WEEK 2 - FOR OLDER ADULTS

The students loved reading your letters last week! This week in your letter we will be talking about careers, goals, and accomplishments. Remember to maintain a lighthearted conversation, always with respect above all else. Be mindful of the things that you are sharing. Don't forget to write clearly and in big letters. Here are some prompts for what to include in your letter:

- Thank them for their letter
- Introduce yourself again in a casual manner
- Respond to any comments or questions they may have included in their letter
- Discuss your experience in school. Some things to address could include:
 - What was your favorite subject when you were in school, and why?
 - If you could go back to school today, what would you do now?
 - Share any accomplishments/stories from your time in school
- Discuss your work/life history:
 - What is one of your proudest moments and how did it shape your life?
 - Did you do what you wanted to do or did your path change over time?
 - What path did you take as it relates to your career/job and how did you get there?
- Share your goals and life lessons:
 - Share any goals that you had, whether you achieved them or not, and how that made you who you are today.
 - Share any life lessons that you learned from your experiences.
 - Are there any goals you are currently working on or any new endeavors you're pursuing at this time?
- Try to connect with your pen pal:
 - What recommendations would you give them as they start to work on their dreams and goals?
 - Share an important memory from your youth or days in school.
- Closing Remarks- Tell them you're excited to hear from them!



INSTRUCTIONS FOR WEEK 3 - FOR STUDENTS

This week we will be talking about the effects of social media as it has advanced on different generations. Here are some prompts for what to include in your letter:

- Thank them for their letter
- Respond to any comments or questions they may have included in their letter
- Tell them about the role technology plays in your life
- Tell them whether you remember life before technology. If so, what was it like?
- Tell them whether you think technology is positive or negative and why
- Tell them whether or not you use social media. If you do, tell them whether you think it is a good or a bad thing
- Tell them if there is one piece of technology that you think has changed the world for the better
- Ask your pen pal how they think the world has changed from when they were your age due to technology.
- Closing remarks- Tell them you look forward to hearing from them



INSTRUCTIONS FOR WEEK 3 - FOR OLDER ADULTS

This week we will be talking about the effects of social media as it has advanced on different generations. Here are some prompts for what to include in your letter:

- Thank them for their letter
- Respond to any comments or questions they may have included in their letter
- Tell them about the role technology plays in your life
- Tell them whether you remember life before technology. If so, what was it like?
- Tell them whether you think technology is positive or negative and why
- Tell them whether or not you use social media. If you do, tell them whether you think it is a good or a bad thing
- Tell them if there is one piece of technology that you think has changed the world for the better
- Closing remarks- Tell them you look forward to hearing from them



INSTRUCTIONS FOR WEEK 4 - FOR STUDENTS

This week we will be sharing some memories. Here are some prompts for what to include in your letter:

- Thank them for their letter
- Respond to any comments or questions they may have included in their letter
- Talk about one of your happiest memories growing up
- Talk about any happy memories with your family
- Do you have any embarrassing or funny stories you'd like to share?
- Talk about a time you were sad/upset due to something, but then how you overcame it
- Ask your pen pal any of the following questions:
 - If you could go back to any time in your life, when would you go back to and why?
 - What is your favorite childhood memory?
 - Do you have a story where you learned an important lesson?
- Closing remarks- Tell them you look forward to hearing from them



INSTRUCTIONS FOR WEEK 4 - FOR OLDER ADULTS

This week we will be sharing some memories. Here are some prompts for what to include in your letter:

- Thank them for their letter
- Respond to any comments or questions they may have included in their letter
- Talk about one of your happiest memories growing up
- Talk about any happy memories with your family
- Do you have any embarrassing or funny stories you'd like to share?
- Talk about a time you were sad/upset due to something, but then how you overcame it
- Closing remarks- Tell them you look forward to hearing from them



INSTRUCTIONS FOR WEEK 5 - FOR STUDENTS

This is our final letter! Thank you so much for participating in this letter exchange. We hope you learned a lot and can't wait for you to meet your pen pal at our final celebration.

Celebration date: _____

Location: _____

Time: _____

Here are some prompts for what to include in your letter:

- Thank them for their letter
- Respond to any comments or questions they may have included in their letter
- Talk about anything important you learned during this letter exchange
- Share your biggest takeaway from this experience
- If you want, share any advice you might have for your pen pal
- Tell them you look forward to seeing them!



INSTRUCTIONS FOR WEEK 5 - FOR OLDER ADULTS

This is our final letter! Thank you so much for participating in this letter exchange. We hope you learned a lot and can't wait for you to meet your pen pal at our final celebration.

Celebration date: _____

Location: _____

Time: _____

Here are some prompts for what to include in your letter:

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- If you want, share any advice you might have for your pen pal
- Tell them you look forward to seeing them!

