

Seniors and Tots Enrich Each Other's Days



Pac Man and cribbage: both are exciting, challenging games but they are unnecessarily separated from each other by the social structure that keeps generations of young and old people apart.

Today we have a penchant in America to segregate people by age, according to Dr. Shirley J. O'Brien, human development specialist for the University of Arizona School of Home Economics. Many young people have a distorted picture of senior citizens. They see little that seniors have to give or seek to accomplish. Adults do little to encourage sharing between generations.

One bridge for the gap is Volunteer Intergenerational Caregivers (VIC), started in Tucson last fall. It has provided educational experiences for senior citizens who want to care for preschool-age children in a group child-care setting, said Dr. Frank R. Williams, UA family life specialist. The program helps young children appreciate older adults and gives the seniors a chance to learn ways of interacting with youngsters. Also, it supplies a base for intergenerational research.

"We are excited about the program," said Williams. "Our senior citizens really enjoy the experience and help in the classroom." The program is open to men and women over 55. Participants meet two hours twice a week for eight weeks. Information about preschool children, child care settings, and adult-child interaction skills is given in lectures and discussions, and through practical experience with children in child care settings.

VIC is a joint project of the UA Cooperative Extension Service, the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, and the Tucson Association of Child Care working with Catalina Methodist Church.

This project does not include children older than six years old. O'Brien noted, though, "Parents can do a great service for their children by encouraging involvement with the older generation. Cutting grass, taking flowers to an older person, visiting nursing homes and retirement centers, or just sitting and listening to tales of other years enlighten and benefit their development," O'Brien added.

Will the game plan be cribbage or Pac Man when our crop of 15-year-olds reach the 70-year mark?

By Carol Beumler

Above left: Betty Ritt (left), a participant in Volunteer Intergenerational Caregivers, and toddler Amber Watson listen to Alissa Bain's story as Ritt ties Alissa's shoelaces.

Right: Ritt shares outdoor playtime with preschooler Jenni Krueger. (Photos by Julia Anderson.)