

Leading intergenerational service projects and trips that stick

Sticky Faith Service Guide excerpt

Serving together beyond the church can be a powerful catalyst for the intergenerational relationships young people need. Whether these are weekly or monthly experiences in your community or short-term mission trips out of the country, following are a few helpful tips based on what we've learned from experienced leaders:

1. Start small.

While we do know several youth pastors who canceled their typical summer youth mission trip so they could host an intergenerational trip, few leaders attempt that kind of leap as a first step. Look for a local opportunity to serve alongside adults in your congregation or jump on board with something another ministry is already doing. Serving with your children's ministry can also be a great first step.

2. Give lots of framing.

Many leaders have found that they need to frame the "why" of serving together both for young people and for adults. You might want to share the insights from Sticky Faith that point to the importance of intergenerational connection. For example, share that every young person needs a web of support that ideally includes at least five nonparental adults. Teenagers with such a web in place tend to stick with faith and church into adulthood. Serving together creates a natural context for building these kinds of supportive relationships.

3. Mix it up.

As soon as you have opportunity to do so—whether at a pre-trip planning meeting or at the start of your service day—mix up the generations with get-to-know you games, table assignments, or mixed work teams. Be sensitive to the level of awkwardness that everyone can handle at first. Ideally any mixed group should include at least two students who know each other.

4. Spread out jobs evenly.

Look for opportunities to level the serving field to set up young people to contribute in significant ways that might surprise adults. For example, you might invite a teenager to lead the morning devotions while a middle-aged CEO is placed in charge of filling water coolers for the day. This can be fruitful for both of them. Also be sure students don't get let off the hook on tasks like cooking or cleaning up after meals. Create mixed teams for these tasks as much as possible.

5. Create skill-building opportunities.

Keeping the above in mind, if someone is skilled in a particular area and another person wants to learn that skill, pair them up. The motivation to learn can help relationships grow. And note that it might be a teenager who is teaching that skill to an adult!

6. Look for the little wins.

When you get adults and young people serving side by side, celebrate that as a win! Then look for every little win you can find. A smile, a conversation, an approving nod, a teenager choosing to sit by an adult for lunch without being asked. Treasure these moments, and make sure someone is capturing photos so you can talk up these stories in your congregation later.

7. Debrief together.

During any debrief or reflection time, make sure both adults and students participate. Listen for insights that are both similar and different across generational perspectives. As time allows (or over meals or while traveling), invite the older generations to share about a meaningful experience they had when they were younger. Then let the younger participants speculate about what they want to be like when they are older.

8. Don't stop now!

If you've been able to get adults and young people serving together once, that's a great start. Gather input from all age groups who participated, and start planning your next shared experience.

Since intergenerational service can feel daunting to those of us who have built our ministries around youth-based projects, we thought we'd close with an inspiring story shared by our friend Keegan, a Sticky Faith leader who has been leading intergenerational trips for the past handful of years:

We began experimenting by mixing our traditional youth summer mission trip with an equally traditional adult summer mission trip. This was a huge change, and one of the important components of those trips was to be intentional about intergenerational connections. I did not realize how difficult this was going to be for us. We have become so accustomed to segregation by ages in the church that we do not know how to engage relationally with one another. People tend to think that if all ages are in the same space together it's an intergenerational gathering. This couldn't be further from the truth, because more often than not none of those age groups is actually talking with another.

In the months leading up to the trips, I would remind the adults, "We are in this together." I would even say they could get work done faster without the teenagers, but if they would take the time to teach the skills and be present with the teenagers, they would be offering more than just skills in building a park or church office.

After two months of our pre-trip meetings, I finally got them to split up and sit in mixed groups. We offered specific questions to get conversation going. About the time we left for the first trip, a few adults actually began to interact with students. Slowly the walls began to come down.

After the first trip, life on Sunday mornings back at church began to change. Students would call the names of adults from across the patio and run for a hug. People began to notice this change, even Vic, the general contractor on our work sites both years.

By the third year, Vic couldn't wait to go on our summer trip again. He became known that as "the guy who would buy ice cream every day after work." It was one way he could relate with the kids.

The students fell in love with Vic too. When we came home one summer, I asked several students what they thought about Vic joining our volunteer staff on a regular basis. They thought it was the best idea! The coolest part? Vic was sixty-six years old.

Sitting down with him and inviting him to share his life with students wasn't that hard because he'd already told me how great they were. It was affirming for him to hear appreciation from teenagers too. Vic became an amazing ministry volunteer.

Getting adults and teenagers to learn to serve with each other—and like each other—was hard work. But our church is less fragmented today than we were before we started this journey. That's another step in the right direction.