

The Positive Impact of Intergenerational Friendships

Friendship: Attitudes and Behaviors Across the Ages



Friendship is a voluntary relationship that entails companionship, reciprocity, mutual support, trust, and affection.¹ Although the depth of friendships varies, nearly all adults (90%) believe that friendships are an essential part of living a happy and healthy life.

While close friends are often similar in age, nearly four in ten adults (37%) have a close friend who is at least 15 years older or younger than they are. This result holds true for men (38%) and women (36%), but it differs by generation: Gen Xers (41%) and Boomers (39%) are both more likely than Millennials (32%) to have a close friend of a different generation. This isn't surprising since Millennials who are ages 22-38 are less likely than Gen Xers and Boomers to have a close friend who is 15 years younger.

A multigenerational workforce fosters close friendships between older and younger workers.

Previous research shows that a majority of workers like working with other generations.² Older workers say that their younger colleagues bring creativity, fun, and a fresh perspective as well as new skills and knowledge. Younger workers say that their older colleagues also bring a different perspective, that they are potential teachers, and that they make the workplace more productive.³

Not surprisingly, the most common way of meeting close friends of another generation is at work (26%). This way of meeting close friends who are older or younger is more than twice as common as other ways of meeting close intergenerational friends.

Top Ways of Meeting an Older/Younger Close Friend*



26%
At Work



12%
Neighbor



11%
Church/
Temple, etc.



10%
Mutual
Friends

A new survey on adult friendships finds that **having friends of a different generation brings unique benefits.**

*Other ways of meeting: High School 8%; Through family 6%; College 5%; Shared hobby/interest 4%; Elementary school 4%; Gym/Sports team 3%; Online 2%; Same social circle 1%; At child's school 1%; Other 6%

1. Blieszner, Rosemary. "The Worth of Friendship: Can Friends Keep Us Happy and Healthy?," *Generations*, 38, no. 1 (2014).
2. Anderson, G. Oscar. "Mentorship and the Value of a Multigenerational Workforce" (January 22, 2019). doi:10.26419/res.00270.001.
3. Anderson, G. Oscar. "Mentorship and the Value of a Multigenerational Workforce" (January 22, 2019). doi:10.26419/res.00270.001.

Although a quarter of close intergenerational friendships are formed at work, only 13% of respondents say that work is what drew them to become close friends with someone of another generation. Instead, they say that they were drawn by personality (22%), having things in common (20%), and having shared interests (17%).

Older respondents seemed to expect to form close friendships of a different generation. Though nearly half of Millennials (46%) were surprised that they were developing a close intergenerational friendship when it first formed, significantly fewer Generation Xers (29%) and Boomers (22%) were surprised.

Intergenerational friendships stand the test of time.

Almost half (45%) of close intergenerational friendships have lasted at least 10 years, with a fifth (20%) lasting more than 20 years.

Spending time together in person is common among close intergenerational friends, with just over half (51%) indicating that they communicate primarily in person. As anticipated, ways of communicating with close friends vary by generation. Generation Xers (56%) and Boomers (55%) are more likely than Millennials (39%) to rely on getting together in person, while Millennials (27%) are more likely to rely on text messaging than Generation Xers (11%) and Boomers (11%). However, even Millennials cite communicating in person as their primary mode of communication with a close intergenerational friend.

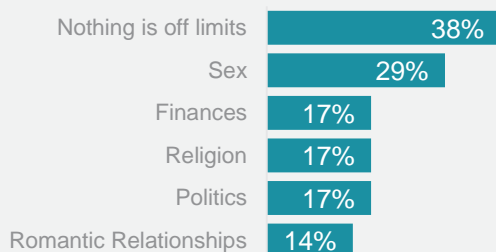
In fact, close intergenerational friends get together often: 17% see each other daily and 34% see their friend weekly.

Despite the age differences in these friendships, how they enjoy each other's company is typical of friends in general: Socializing/entertainment, such as going out to the movies (39%), dining (in or out) (26%), and talking/sharing (25%) top the list.

Given how often they see each other, perhaps it isn't surprising that more than eight in ten close intergenerational friends are comfortable sharing on a personal level: 39% say they hide nothing, and 47% say they are fairly open despite not sharing everything. Only 14% say they don't share much on a personal level.

What is shared among close intergenerational friends is no different from what is shared with friends in general: Children/family (21%), hobbies/interests (27%), their pasts (21%), and career/work (21%) are the most commonly discussed topics.

Taboo Topics

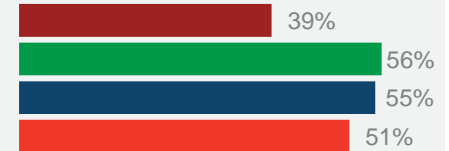


And while 38% claim that no topic of conversation is off limits, nearly three in ten (29%) say that they do not discuss sex. Boomers (39%) are almost twice as likely as Generation Xers (22%) and Millennials (20%) to shy away from discussing this subject.

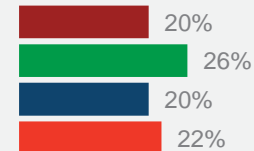
Primary Mode of Communication



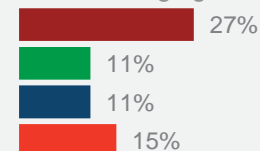
In Person



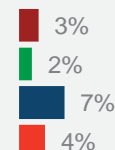
Phone



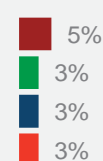
Text/Messaging



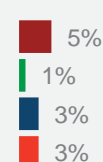
Email



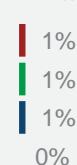
Social Media



Video Chat



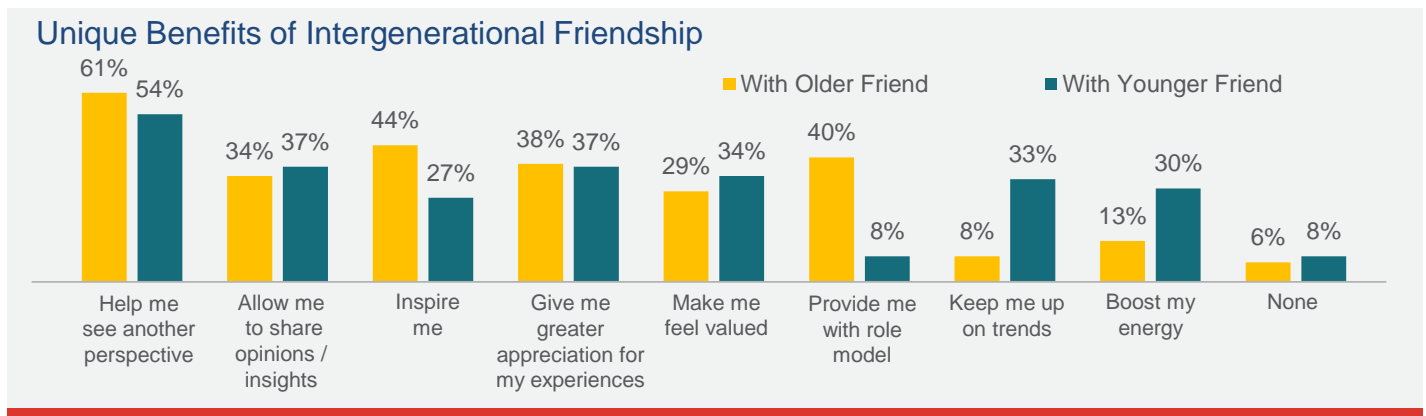
Written Cards/Letters



Intergenerational friendships are unique and as easy as other friendships to maintain.

Nearly all (93%) of those with a close intergenerational friend agree having friends in a different age group has benefits that are different from the benefits that friendships among people of the same age can deliver.

Adults with a close older friend feel their friend is more likely than people similar in age to help them see another perspective (61%), inspire them (44%), and provide them with a role model (40%), among other benefits. Similarly, adults with a close younger friend feel their friend is more likely than people similar in age to help them see another perspective (54%). They also feel their younger friend is more likely to give them a greater appreciation for their experiences (37%) and allow them to share opinions and insights (37%).



At the same time, intergenerational friendships are not more work. Most people feel that they are the same or easier to maintain than friendships with people of a similar age.

Implications

With six generations currently living,⁴ all generations stand to benefit from intergenerational friendships. Social connections, including friendships, have a positive impact on physical health⁵ and psychological well-being,⁶ so the more they can be encouraged and nourished, the better. Healthcare costs are lower for those with social connections,⁷ so society as a whole benefits as well.

Intergenerational friendships also hold the potential to reduce ageist beliefs about people of other generations⁷ and to improve attitudes about aging. In fact, adults who have close intergenerational friendships are more likely to report having a positive attitude about aging (69%) than those who don't have these types of friendships (64%).

Given that workplaces often have four or five generations working together⁸ and that work is the top way intergenerational friends first meet, opportunities to develop intergenerational friendships may grow.

Those with close intergenerational friendships are more likely to have a **positive attitude about aging.**

4. Rimel, R.W. "Six Generations Moving Forward Together," Trend Magazine, January 26, 2018. <https://trend.pewtrusts.org/en/archive/winter-2018/notes-from-the-president-six-generations-moving-forward-together>.

5. Holt-Lunstad, Julianne, Timothy B. Smith, and J. Bradley Layton. "Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-Analytic Review." Edited by Carol Brayne. PLoS Medicine 7, no. 7 (July 27, 2010): e1000316. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316.

6. Blieszner, Rosemary. "The Worth of Friendship: Can Friends Keep Us Happy and Healthy?," Generations. 38, no. 1 (2014).

7. Hagestad, Gunhild O., and Peter Uhlenberg. "The Social Separation of Old and Young: A Root of Ageism." Journal of Social Issues 61, no. 2 (June 2005): 343-360. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00409.x.

8. Trawinski, Lori A. Disrupting Aging in the Workplace: Profiles in Intergenerational Diversity Leadership. AARP Public Policy Institute (2017). <https://www.aarp.org/ppi/info-2016/disrupting-aging-in-the-workplace.html>.



Source: Friendship: Attitudes and Behaviors Across the Ages, 2019. For more information, contact Vicki Levy, vlevy@aarp.org, or Colette Thayer, Ph.D., cthayer@aarp.org. For media inquiries, contact media@aarp.org.