

Living Lives Together

The impact on children's holistic development when learning alongside grand-friends in a Froebel inspired intergenerational nursery.



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Ready 
Generations
Nursery in Belong

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The research could not have taken place without the support and enthusiasm of the nursery leaders, educators and parents.

Thanks are also extended to Belong Chester team for their interest and warm welcome. Throughout the year the children demonstrated their capabilities and an openness to sharing their learning. For this we are most grateful.

In response to one of the grand-friends who urged, 'please tell our story', and the children, families and grand-friends who shared their experiences openly with us, we present this report.



Nursery Graduation 2025
Ready Generations

All flourishing is mutual - Robin Wall Kimmerer

Foreword

Visiting this intergenerational setting is nothing short of extraordinary - a living, breathing example of what community and connection can look like. To see grand-friends and children learning side by side is profoundly moving. It reminded me that learning, at its heart, is not confined to age or stage, it is about belonging, purpose, and shared humanity.

Having nursed my mother through end-of-life care, I witnessed the deep tenderness and vitality that flowed when the youngest members of our family entered her room. Their laughter softened the hardest moments. That same magic is alive at Ready Generations Nursery. Here, the lines between young and old dissolve, and what emerges is mutual joy, curiosity, and growth.

This Froebel Trust funded research, conducted by Northumbria University, beautifully captures such spirit. Using the Mosaic Approach, it honours every voice, from the smallest child to the wisest grand-friend. The four themes of environment, relationships, agency, and learning and development are not abstract ideas but living principles, visible in every shared story and smile.

Spending time at this special place offers hope for a brighter future, if only we open our eyes to the possibilities and share the insights gained from observing the rich interactions.

The environment nurtures children's learning through trusting relationships and genuine reciprocity, elevating their sense of identity and agency. Children thrive as they choose, contribute and develop in this secure place.

The research doesn't only report outcomes; it paints a vision of what is possible when we see learning as life shared. It invites us to consider early years spaces as places of interdependence, empathy, and continuity, where all generations can contribute and recognise that they have something precious to offer each other.

Ready Generations Nursery is quite simply, a place where humanity is felt deeply.



Alice Sharp
Early Years Consultant and Champion



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Summary

Intergenerational practice is growing in research interest (Murray et al., 2025). However, the evidence around what and how young children learn in an intergenerational context is less understood. There is also a gap in knowledge of the child's perspective and the impact intergenerational practice has on their holistic development and wellbeing. Following three years of intergenerational practice at Ready Generations nursery, and, having already sought the views of early years educators during prior research (Heslop and Caes, 2024), it was timely for researchers to return to gather insights into the perspectives of the children and to observe their learning and development within such a unique care and learning environment.

This report presents the findings from a Froebel Trust funded research project which set out to explore the impact on young children's holistic development, as they learn and play alongside grand-friends in an intergenerational early years education and childcare setting located within an older people's care village.



It is presented in three main sections. Section One covers context, underpinning philosophy and research design, Section Two reports findings and Section Three concludes with insights and considerations for practice.

The research was conducted at Ready Generations Nursery located in the Belong Chester Care Village between July 2024 and June 2025. It was led by two academic researchers from Northumbria University, together with the two co-founders of Ready Generations charity.

The qualitative research involved young children, their families, educators and grand-friends. Using the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001), data was collected through village tours led by the children, drawings, photograph elicitation, focus groups and observations. Research notes maintained throughout the research period informed reflections and insights. Photographs are used throughout the report to illustrate findings and with permission.



Findings indicate the interconnectedness of environment, culture and relationships within intergenerational practice and how they impact children's learning and development.

Four themes were generated:

- Environment
- Relationships
- Agency
- Learning and development.

Outcomes demonstrate the positive impact of relationships between young children and their grand-friends within this all-age inclusive environment. Children's confidence as active learners was enhanced through their progress in oral communication, vocabulary personal agency and independence.

Insights for intergenerational practice and pedagogy are shared at the end of the report.



Section One

1:1 Context



Ready Generations

Ready Generations is a national research charity working at grass roots level alongside local communities and multi-agency partners. The purpose of the charity is to better understand ageing across the life course. It connects people of all ages, cultures and backgrounds to create vibrant, self-serving communities, prioritising preventative health, wellbeing and life-long learning, alongside holistic support for those living with neurodiversity.

Belong Villages

Belong Villages are a not-for-profit care provider, offering high quality support and accommodation for older people, primarily through vibrant community villages and bespoke home care services. Belong is a value based organisation, founded on the vision that older people have the right to enjoy the same community belonging they have always known.



Ready Generations Nursery

Ready Generations Nursery is situated within Belong Chester Care Village, in the North West of England. This unique early years education and care setting, opened in 2022, and is attended by twenty-five children aged between eight months and five years. It has been intentionally designed to encourage reciprocal care, learning and connection between multiple generations (Egersdorff et al., 2024; Heslop and Caes, 2024).

The nursery occupies the lower ground floor of the care village and has direct access to the shared garden area where grand-friends and children regularly come together. Other areas within the village are also shared. These include a library, venue (large gathering space), creative hub and garden room. Mealtimes take place in the village bistro which is a community space open to the public alongside residents, families and the children.

The nursery received an Ofsted rating of outstanding across all areas in December 2024 and is currently UK National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) Nursery of the Year 2025.

Educators support the children to make use of all the shared spaces across the village alongside their grand-friends. The intention being to maximise opportunities for meaningful interactions that support learning by fostering exploration and curiosity for both groups. This reflects Froebel's view of freedom with guidance, supporting children to think for themselves, make choices, solve problems and explore interests with measured guidance from the adults around them. Such guidance has the potential to open-up further learning possibilities enabling the development of autonomy and self-determination



The shared spaces also make it easy for children to interact spontaneously and informally with their grand-friends throughout the day alongside more structured and planned experiences. For example, the bistro provides opportunity for daily social dining experiences for the children with their grand-friends. This involves sitting at shared tables where conversations flow and extend as well as allowing for the effective modelling of behaviours and table manners that support the development of self-help skills and personal agency.

1:2 Influence of Froebel

The nursery is influenced by the work of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852). Froebel is recognised as the father of the concept of kindergarten and historically, is one of the most revered early childhood pedagogues and educators. He believed that healthy communities play a critical role in supporting and assisting families to place children's interests centre stage. Many of his ideas remain highly relevant to quality provision today. For example, his interest in self-determination, play, relational learning, nurturing care and freedom to access nature.

Practice within the nursery follows Froebelian principles as both co-founders have extensive early childhood experience and considered the principles applicable to all ages and of equal value in supporting the needs of older people.

The Froebelian principles

The eight Froebelian principles offer a comprehensive structure to scaffold planning, assessment and evaluation across both the nursery and wider village intergenerational offer. The principles have strong operational relevance for both age groups and are used consistently to guide everyday practice and the provision of intergenerational experiences.

Unity and connectedness

Helping children to understand that everything in the universe is connected and as children, they can play an active part in uniting their community and bringing people together.

Autonomous learners

Children who feel safe and secure in environments where they can thrive and follow their unique interests.

The value of childhood in its own right

Allowing children to explore freely and enjoy such freedom.

Relationships matter

Children's relationship with themselves and others are valued alongside universal recognition of the centrality of healthy relationships to children's holistic health, wellbeing and learning.

Creativity and the power of symbols

Supporting children to represent their own ideas in their own way, supported by enabling environments and people.

The central importance of play

Recognising that play and playfulness are important features of being human and that children should own their own play.

Engaging with nature

Experiencing and understanding nature and our place in it.

Knowledgeable, nurturing educators

Who are secure in their understanding of child development and early learning.

Practice and leadership

Securing success, accountability and continuous development.

Sustained levels of collaboration and connectedness

With partners and the wider community.

Appropriate use of knowledge, understanding and research

To inform children's development and support them to represent their own interests and ideas.

1:3 Relational pedagogy

The open accessibility of shared spaces across the village supports an integrated approach, making full use of both the nursery space and village environment to maximise opportunities for learning. The village design offers an environment that connects people naturally with minimum effort allowing children and grand-friends to develop and sustain meaningful and trusting relationships as they go about their daily routines. Furthermore, the design provides an intentional environment that can align care, education, health and family engagement in ways that create a strong interdependent and relational community. All ages know each other and are concerned about each other's wellbeing. Such a community focus supports children as they develop a growing awareness of personal identity and belonging within their immediate neighbourhood and beyond to the wider world.

1:4 Role of educator

All educators have a core responsibility to ensure that daily provision makes a difference to children's development and learning in partnership with parents and carers. An intergenerational setting is unique in that there is constant presence of both educators and multi-agency professionals from other sector disciplines, for example, health, adult social care, nutrition and exercise services.

Together they bring a rich additionality, supporting a range of interventions across the life-course, and offering diverse perspectives from which children can gain a wider and deeper understanding of how the world operates and their place in it. This requires early educators who recognise, value and plan to make full use of this potential to expand the parameters of children's experiences and learning.

1:5 Importance of gifting

As an intergenerational community, the nursery has established a strong culture of giving and receiving care as a means of supporting reciprocal interactions and building trusting and enduring friendships between children and their grand-friends. This focus on the responsibilities that gifting brings helps to create a sense of both connection and interdependence. For example, when the nursery dolls needed new clothes the children requested help from their grand-friends. As a result knitters and sewers from across the village responded, working together to make a wonderful collection of clothes. Equally, the children often carry out small errands in the locality for their grand-friends when they are out and about with their educators. The overall impact is tangible in terms of strengthening children's feelings of security and nurture expressed as I belong here and I am understood here whilst also affirming a sense of purpose and meaning for grand-friends. Such reciprocal exchanges are warmly relational as opposed to being simply functional or transactional. Educators plan carefully to ensure opportunities for interaction are prioritised and given appropriate space and time to develop and deepen over time. Planning includes thinking about both tangible and intangible exchanges and how these can be encouraged as a feature of daily routines.

Tangible exchanges

include use of shared spaces such as the library or garden room where resources and equipment are carefully selected to be shared easily and used by both the children and their grand-friends in ways that foster reciprocity. For example, a grand-friend leads the daily wake-up, shake up exercise session for the children and they encourage her to take part fully, building her personal exercise regime as she supports them.

Intangible exchanges

may be planned and/or spontaneous as part of living alongside each other in an intergenerational community. Children and grand-friends embrace human interactions and behaviours gifted freely to each other such as kindness, empathy, dignity and compassion. For example, a postal system operates between the nursery and the village with home-crafted postboxes dotted around the main areas. Children and grand-friends send messages to each other to celebrate birthdays, offer get-well wishes and welcome new children and residents to the village.

Both tangible and intangible exchanges play an important role in strengthening the intergenerational community and the relationships within it through consistency, repetition, and sensitively responding to each other. Over time, this has helped to create a way of being which reinforces that *we all belong here and this is how we like to do things*.

1:6 Research aim, questions and design

The research aim was to identify the impact on children's holistic development when learning alongside grand-friends in a Froebel inspired intergenerational nursery. To achieve the research aim three questions were framed:

- How do regular intergenerational connections impact children's development and learning?
- What are children's perceptions and experiences of learning alongside older people?
- How does use of the Froebelian principles support intergenerational pedagogy?

The following actions were taken by the researchers over a period of one year from July 2024 to June 2025

- The views of children were gathered through observations, drawings and conversations.
- Discussions took place with grand-friends, parents, leaders and educators.
- Exploration was conducted around the shared use of common spaces across the care village.
- Evidence was gathered of intergenerational approaches that benefitted children's development and learning.

Participation underpinned all aspects of data collection. This ensured everyone was heard and their perspectives considered. Nursery leaders, educators, parents and twelve children, aged three and four years, together with eight independently living grand-friends were involved. All took part in initial discussions around the ways in which data would be collected and stories told and reported.

1:7 Research activities

Using The Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001), research activities were planned which facilitated and provided researchers with an understanding of the children's experiences, perspectives, development and learning within this intergenerational environment.

Children were observed during both free play and organised experiences alongside their grand-friends. The observations included:

- Planned and structured experiences. For example, the intergenerational choir (a weekly age-friendly singing session), mealtimes and ‘prambles’ (a pramble is a ramble with prams open to all ages).
- Spontaneous experiences such as visiting grand-friends in their own homes to relay messages and deliver gifts, outings to the park and wider community visits.

Time for shared reflection alongside the children was also built in. This included conversation, feedback, and some drawing. Researchers took notes independently which were shared and discussed with nursery educators and used to confirm data analysis.

Table 1: Research activity

What	Who	Purpose	Description
Child led tour of the care village	12 children in two groups	To determine children’s perspectives of their environment	Digital cameras were used by the children to record the tour
Focus groups	8 grand-friends, nursery leaders and educators	To gather views about what children are learning and how their development is impacted more widely by intergenerational approaches	Conducted in informal spaces with light refreshments and relaxed feel
Focus groups	Parents and family members	To gather views about what children are learning and how their development is impacted by intergenerational approaches	Conducted in informal spaces with light refreshments and relaxed feel
Drawings and reflections	12 children individually and in small groups	To invite children to express themselves in their own way about their experiences	Informally as part of the daily nursery routine

1:8 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by Northumbria University

Initially, researchers spent time getting to know the children and their grand-friends by engaging with them in the comfort of their familiar environment. This took place before any formal research activities began. It helped to establish trust and familiarity between researchers and the intergenerational community. For example, before starting, researchers ensured that the children understood what research is. To introduce children to the concept of research, or finding things out, the story of the Little Mole (Holzwarth and Erlbruch, 1994) was shared. In the story, not only is little mole on a mission to find out the answer to a problem, but he must also ask questions, meet different people, including experts, and explore the wider area. This introduction led to ethical discussions with the children about how we treat and respect each other helping them to explore their understanding of how to find things out, exercise their right to choice and ultimately, to make their own decision about whether to take part in the research. Interestingly when a small group of children were invited to participate in an observed activity with their grand-friends, one child, whose educator said she usually joins in, declined by saying no thank you and offered a sound rationale for not engaging.

Participating grand-friends all lived independently in village apartments and were able to make their own decision about participating in the research, wider engagement in intergenerational experiences and involvement with the children. Finally, with parental consent and the children's assent in place (Flewitt, 2005), the research commenced.



1:9 Data Analysis

Using reflective thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) around children’s learning and development, researchers identified four distinct themes with associated sub themes.

Table 2: Themes and sub themes

Themes	Sub Themes
Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• spaces and places• intentionality• free flow• exploration
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• nurturing adults• trust connection and belonging• collaborative communities• empathy and kindness
Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• choice• resilience• voice and personal power
Learning and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• constructing understanding of the world through play• literacy and numeracy• story telling

Section Two

2:1 Nursery models

The Inner Development Goals

As an Ofsted rated outstanding nursery, the team already used a range of models and frameworks to plan, assess and evaluate children’s learning and development. For example, the Inner Development Goals (2025) were used to support sustainable practices and focus on children as resilient and autonomous leaders of their own learning. The Inner Development Goals are researched competencies which complement personal agency and self-awareness. Additionally, they encourage children to recognise themselves as effective leaders of a sustainable future where innovation and social action drive change and accountable citizenship from the earliest age.

1	2	3	4	5
BEING – Relationship to Self	THINKING – Cognitive Skills	RELATING – Caring for Others and the World	COLLABORATING – Social Skills	ACTING – Driving Change
Inner compass Integrity and Authenticity Openness and Learning Mindset Self-awareness Presence	Critical thinking Complexity awareness Perspective skills Sense-making Long-term orientation and Visioning	Appreciation Connectedness Humility Empathy and Compassion	Communication skills Co-creation skills Inclusive mindset and intercultural competence Trust Mobilization skills	Courage Creativity Optimism Perseverance

Table 3: Inner Development Goals, 2025

The Mirrored Care and Learning Framework

Over three years of operational practice, the nursery team have developed a bespoke intergenerational curriculum, The Mirrored Care and Learning Framework. This has six domains that have been designed to align with both the Froebelian principles and the English Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (EYFS) (DfE 2025). During the research period, researchers worked alongside educators to understand how the framework helps to improve professional observations and guide both formative and summative assessments of children’s attainment, achievement and progress.



2:2 Findings

Research findings emerged from the observations of children as they went about their everyday routines within the intergenerational community. Using the four themes established at the research design stage and outlined in Table 2, it soon became clear that whilst distinct, the themes consistently overlapped. For example, while theme four offered specific examples of children's learning and development, these often interfaced with other themes emphasising the holistic and non-linear nature of early development and learning.

In this section the four themes and their associated sub themes are explored with a series of short illustrative vignettes taken from researcher observations.

Theme One: Environment

This theme includes the sub themes of:

- spaces and places
- intentionality
- free flow
- exploration

Sub theme - Spaces and places

On the tour of the village, children demonstrated confidence in their surroundings and an awareness of how and when diverse spaces were used. They took a lead in escorting the researchers around the village, confidently navigating stairs, lifts, rooms and obstacles and cheerfully greeting people they met on route. They had digital cameras to record the tour in their own way.

Child 1: "I've got a camera... it can go like this... I'm 3"

Child 2: "You press the button to open the door"

Child 3: "Hello Steve" (as they met the receptionist).

They were able to specifically name areas such as the library, venue and bistro and had secure knowledge of what happens in each space at particular times of the day. They also revelled in sharing their knowledge with the researchers and any other familiar grown up they met on the tour.

Children were able to make independent decisions about how they used their camera and what they chose to photograph. No child copied or followed another. They were also clear in informing the researchers of their favourite places and spaces around the village. While some children focused on people or objects, one child was particularly interested in the minute detail of the structure of a houseplant, and another child was interested in a digital signage feature. Children confirmed these observations in their reflection discussions following the tour.

Sub theme - Intentionality

Educators were thoughtful and intentional in their organisation of intergenerational spaces to offer a range of invitations, opportunities and experiences. Awareness of routines and rituals taking place in the spaces emerged from the children's conversations on the tour. One child, for example, informed researchers of the intergenerational choir, the Sankofa Songsters, taking place in the venue every Tuesday and 'Fish Friday' every Friday in the bistro. All children confirmed that the Sankofa Songsters took place on Tuesday mornings and that '*Pete plays the piano for us.*' They were able to sing some of the songs learned such as '*love is something if you give it away*' (child). This learning is shared at home with families, as confirmed by parents during focus groups. Several parents commented on how their child's repertoire of songs was much greater and more sophisticated than they would have expected at this early stage of education. Grand-friends also commented on the intentionality of experiences across the village spaces:

"We're mixing all the time... there's playtime for us as well and we play games with the children. Stay and Play is wonderful, isn't it... and the choir! The activities with children inspire and motivate ... we especially come down for the choir and get there earlier to do the session with the children."



An important intentional experience occurs when children and their grand-friends share mealtimes together around a large table. This happens every day in the bistro at lunchtimes and snack times. The area is open to the wider community, including families and visitors. It is a well-used and busy space.

This leads to spontaneous conversations and rich social exchanges. Children and grand-friends know each other and call each other by name. Of note are the children's table manners, use of cutlery, pouring skills, one-to-one correspondence skills and intuitive capacity for sharing and turn-taking. Parents and grand-friends reported and emphasised surprise and pride at the range of children's competencies demonstrated through regular sharing of food and mealtimes.



Sub theme - Free flow

The children have free flow access to outdoor spaces with full use of a secure nursery garden alongside a shared sensory garden with garden room which are also available to the whole intergenerational community. This was confirmed by one grand-friend who said of the children:

I see them outside. They're always playing outside even in the rain. I see them from the balcony [of her apartment]. I can hear them... it's not just an old person's place.

She went on to say how the children *give life*.

During outdoor observations, children pointed to the different balconies and windows of their grand-friends apartments, naming who lived there and explaining how they watched, smiled and waved to each other. Opportunities for sharing the joys of nature together were also observed. For example, a bird watching and naming project was enhanced through the knowledge of grand-friends about local and native birds, their behaviours and habitats.



Sub theme - Exploration

Freedom to explore was an established feature of practice within both the nursery space and village environment. Wider community-based experiences were evidenced during the tour, observations and focus groups. For example, one mother discussed the growing boxes within the shared sensory garden and how her child chose to grow potatoes and onions which she would not have done at home. The children also talked about their 'prambles' and park visits especially in relation to the grand-friends who accompanied them, describing what they did and wore. Researchers noted how children could correctly name trees, leaves, flowers and mini beasts without adult prompting.

While the overall focus of this theme is the environment, parents consistently commented about the value of generations coming together to benefit everyone. For example, a weekend intergenerational experience in the park led to the extension of learning for all ages. One parent said:

It's not like it's a nursery that just happens to be in a residential home – they are fully integrated at every possible opportunity...they're doing it for the benefit of everyone.

The following vignettes illustrate some of the children's experiences linked to Froebelian principles.

Theme One Vignettes

1-Wander and wonder nature morning

Froebelian Principle: Engaging with nature.

Families often joined adventures alongside their children and grand-friends. For example, the wander and wonder nature morning involved educators setting up different experience stations in the local park which the children and grand-friends visited to complete various nature related tasks. This took place over a Saturday morning and included making a nature wand or crown, collecting and identifying leaves and making a twig person.



2- Summer hedgerow

Froebelian Principles: Autonomous learners and engaging with nature

On an early summer walk around the local area with their grand-friends, the children looked carefully at hedgerows and learned how they were ecosystems providing a home to a range of plants, animals and mini-beasts. The children then chose to make their own hedgerow using a self-selected range of natural materials, ribbons and rags which they wove into a mesh frame.



Theme Two: Relationships

“I like it that our grand-friends are at nursery everyday” (child)

“Age matters not. Relationships matter” (parent)

This theme includes the sub themes of:

- nurturing adults
- trust, connection and belonging
- collaborative communities
- empathy and kindness

The Froebelian principles of knowledgeable, nurturing educators, unity and connectedness and relationships matter permeate strongly throughout this theme. For example, learning conversations were extended and enhanced through trusting relationships underpinning them. A significant number of grand-friends demonstrated a real interest in what the children were learning and ably scaffolded their learning in ways that progressed their knowledge, skills and meaning making. This collaborative community approach to meeting the needs of children lies at the heart of what the nursery aims to achieve taking into consideration the view of parents who supportively agree that it feels like the right thing to do.

Sub theme: Nurturing adults

Relational pedagogy is at the centre of Ready Generations vision for integrated intergenerational approaches. The overall findings highlight the profound significance of nurturing socio-emotional relationships and interactions in the shaping of children’s learning experiences within both the nursery and wider village. Universally, adults accepted a role and responsibility for looking out for the children’s needs and wellbeing whether directly or indirectly from a distance. One parent stated how the whole community feels like an extension of your house while another explained how her daughter had friends of all ages:

“We don’t know when she is coming home talking about some of these people whether they are 2 or 82.”

The children were observed to be confident around people of all ages and abilities, sharing friendships, resources and communicating warmly and effectively.



Sub theme: Trust, connection and belonging

The foundations of trust, connection and belonging were supported and embedded through the consistency of all-age friendships and integration of sustained relational practices over time. For example, on the tour, one child noticed a framed photograph displayed on the wall of a corridor:

“It’s a photo of when I was really little.”

he said, with a sense of pride in his voice. The child felt a clear sense of belonging to the place and went on to explain how long he had been attending nursery and that his baby brother would be coming soon too.

Sub themes: Collaborative communities, empathy and kindness

Regular and close interactions with grand-friends clearly matter to the children. They see themselves as an important component of the mixed age community. The acknowledgement and interest they show their grand-friends is real and authentic. They demonstrated their awareness of the importance of using people’s names and knowing about their interests and individual personalities. For example, they could talk about how each grand-friend contributed uniquely, from helping with phonics teaching to storytelling, creativity, and a dynamic mixture of other skills.

Children demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of other people’s perspectives and had ideas about why someone might be feeling a particular way.

This capacity to pay attention to the needs of others extended to the children actively choosing to take flowers or write to their grand-friends. For example, one child saw a grand-friend sitting on their own and said:

“She is sad, when the babies and children are there, she is happy.”

The following vignettes illustrate some of the children’s experiences with links to the Froebelian principles.



Theme 2 Vignettes

1. Learning lunches

Froebelian Principle: Knowledgeable, nurturing educators



“We value our time in nursery and use it well. We are a committed team and want to develop and improve. We identify areas of practice that are of particular interest to our community. For example, we have experts in block play, language development, physical activity and nutrition (PANCo), trauma informed practice and many other specific areas. We also host regular learning lunches where we enjoy food together and reflect on particular areas of our practice.”

Nursery Manager

2. Empathy and kindness

Froebelian Principle: Relationships matter

“The children are always interested in the health and well-being of their grand-friends, often becoming concerned when someone is unwell. They like to take flowers to them, so we started our own growing project based around seeds and plants that produce cut flowers for vases. We purchased a portable greenhouse, so frail grand-friends can join in even when they are unable to leave their room. The children show interest in watching their tiny seedlings grow and grand-friends teach them about different types of compost and how to effectively prick out seedlings and pot them.”

Educator



3. Everyday relationships

Froebelian Principle: Relationships matter

Entering one of the resident households, a child clambered up onto the sofa next to a grand-friend. She beamed a huge smile at her grand-friend and cuddled into her.

'Come on everyone', she said, **grandma's here'**. Three children followed her onto the sofa. 'Grandma' smiled, with a twinkle in her eye. Both child and grand-friend were animated. Connections between the children and their grand-friends were natural and not forced or coerced.



4. Visits to the nursery

Froebelian Principle: Relationships matter



Furniture within the nursery includes adult-sized armchairs for grand-friend visits. One afternoon a grand-friend arrived at nursery for his daily visit.

'It's our grand-friend!' called the children.

One child took him by the hand while others, knowing the daily routine, hovered as he sat in his chair. Several children stayed around him and for a short time a toddler was placed on his knee. Later, two children were playing, building with blocks outdoors. They kept looking over to their grand-friend who gave them a thumbs up of approval. They proudly showed off their completed design to him. The children were genuinely delighted to see their grand-friend. He was a keeper of the toys, showing approval and praising their efforts, and they were keen to share their choices and experiences with him.

During a further observation, during the same session, children were drawing at a table. One child approached their visiting grand-friend offering him several crayons saying **'which ones would you like?'** The grand-friend chose his colours. The child then realised her grand-friend could not reach the table so, with a friend, she pulled the table closer to the grand-friend. This demonstrated the child's inclusivity, recognition of the needs of others and power to act autonomously.

Theme Three: Agency

'I'll be the leader... I'll show you' (child)

This theme includes the following sub themes:

- choice
- resilience
- voice and personal power

Sub themes: Choice



Throughout the research period, the children consistently demonstrated agency in making choices, taking leading roles and in ownership of their own learning. For example, during the village tour, children pointed out postboxes situated outside nursery and near the main reception area of the village, each with a little box of paper and pencils where the children chose to write letters to their grand-friends. They talked excitedly about receiving mail from their grand-friends in return. They particularly liked the jokes they regularly received from one particular grand-friend.

Trusting and warm relationships made with grand-friends through regular engagement around the village enabled children to make independent choices about experiences they would like to have and with whom. They were aware of their grand-friends' personal preferences and interests too. For example, one grand-friend was a keen singer and all the children knew how much he loved to sing. They often made the spontaneous choice to ask him to sing and join in with him. He would also start to sing to attract the attention of the children, drawing them around him in joyful, spontaneous singing that other residents often joined.



Sub theme: Resilience

During all research activities children demonstrated their ability to plan, think and reflect for themselves. They were curious, creative and persistent during their encounters and experiences seeking answers to their questions which often led to more questions. Grand-friends displayed enduring patience and responded to questions thoughtfully. These competencies were noted consistently across all recorded observations. The data demonstrates that children owned their learning and were given every opportunity to follow their particular interests leading the direction of their playful explorations. The presence and availability of grand-friends brought additionality and diversity to the choices available, consequently extending learning and adding layers of meaning.

Sub theme: Voice and personal power

Children were encouraged to make decisions and solve problems for themselves before seeking the help of adults. This developed a sense of responsibility and personal power. With the gentle guidance of caring and knowledgeable educators, they learned that they could navigate mistakes, problem solve and also make a difference by taking action themselves. Children's ideas were respected, often acted on and incorporated within the ongoing learning journey. This practice, which developed personal power, was observed regularly throughout the year of observations and supported with evidence from parents and grand-friends.



Theme Three: Vignettes

1. Animated discussions

Froebelian Principle: The value of childhood in its own right

Valuing childhood in its own right is core to the ethos of the nursery. Children experience freedom with guidance, receiving affirmation and effective support in all they do. Educators were observed stepping back and choosing carefully when to intervene and when to progress learning through sensitive observation and open-ended questioning. Such approaches scaffolded and extended learning opportunities and experiences. This was also observed with grand-friends who, using their wisdom and experience, often skillfully intervened in questioning children in ways that opened new learning possibilities. This included enabling children to think about how they might resolve differences and find solutions together.

Observation of a group of children playing outside with their educator:

Three children to educator: We are playing Bingo and Bluey

Child 1: "Bingo is 4 and Bluey is 4"

Child 2: "Bingo is 3, Bluey is 4"

Child 3: "I am not that number. I am six. I'm not playing any more" (although the child stayed)

Educator: "Do you want to correct your friend?"

Child 1: "What does correct mean?"

Child 2: "Bingo is 3 and Bluey is 4"

Child 1: "Bluey is 4 and Bingo is 6"

Child 1: "That's not right"

Educator: "Let's work out how old is Bluey is"

Child 1: "Let's do a Google search"

The educator and three children worked together using a nursery device to search for the answer. Immediately afterwards, once the answer was found and all were satisfied, the three children moved on to another activity and played together. The educator listened to the children and sensitively supported them to find the answer, while allowing differences of opinion and feelings to be expressed.

2. Resilience

Froebelian Principle: Autonomous learners and the central importance of play.

Two children, aged three and four years, were working together to follow a visual block design. There appeared to be insufficient blocks to create the chosen design.

Child 1: “Let’s build that again”

Child 2: “But we need two reds”

Child 1: “We don’t mind what colour it is ‘cause we don’t have enough. We could just use blue”

Child 2: “But we need help”

Child 1: “I know what we can do, we can do a red first... don’t worry. It doesn’t matter”

Child 2: “We need some help”

Child 1: “I will help you.”

This respectful, empathetic behaviour was observed across play and experiences throughout the research period.



3. Making choices and making a difference

Froebel Principle – Autonomous learners

One of the children was aware that a grand-friend who had recently died used to buy his wife yellow flowers every Friday. The child demonstrated empathy for his wife, saying:

“Our grand-friend has died and now his wife is on her own”

The child suggested that they should take her some yellow flowers, instigating a small group nursery visit to buy flowers from the local supermarket which became a part of the nursery routine every Friday.

“Magic occurs when she sees children with yellow flowers arrive at her door every Friday. Her eyes light up.”

Educator

“One of our grand-friends died at weekend and we took flowers and made a card.”

Child



Theme Four: Learning and development

“I like the repair workshop with my grand-friend, he always makes me laugh”

Child

“Our grand-friend helps us with the phonics”

Child

“By being together in a multi-age household they’re learning about life as well and learning how to mix with every age group.”

Grand-friend

This theme includes sub themes of:

- constructing understanding of the world through play
- literacy and numeracy
- story telling

Sub theme: Constructing understanding of the world through play

Froebel recognised the central importance of free, unrestricted play. Experiences observed within the intergenerational village clearly demonstrated this free unrestricted play and aligned with Froebel’s occupations. These occupations helped the children with their practical skills as well as physical and cognitive development. Children ably demonstrated their propensity for learning through play and this supported them to make sense of their world.



Sub theme: Literacy and Numeracy

Every opportunity was used to develop children’s literacy and numeracy skills and competencies with high expectations for steady and effective progress. The children’s oral language, vocabulary, phonological awareness and early literacy and numeracy skills appeared to be sophisticated. An example occurred on the tour when children navigated the village with ease, directing researchers in use of lifts, issuing directions using positional language and their understanding of numerals. They used ordinal numbers, were able to sequence and could compare and contrast the different floors and navigate the complex spatial layouts. The children followed simple maps and could plan routes using appropriate directional language.

Sub theme: Story telling

Oral story telling was used effectively to engage both age groups, increasing memory retention, language and imagination whilst also simplifying complex concepts by offering context and emotional connection. This helped to build even stronger all age relationships as personal stories and experiences were shared. Grand-friends also helped to ensure stories served clear learning objectives, for example, reinforcing moral messages and values.

Theme Four: Vignettes

1. Following unique interests

Froebelian Principle: Childhood in its own right and the central importance of play.

A child was in the home corner, standing by the cooker stirring a pan, with a baby doll on her hip. Two younger children were nearby. **'Would you like to stir?'** said the child to the toddlers. The toddlers approached the four-year-old, took the spoons and stirred the pot. The child then proceeded to feed the baby doll before delivering a waffle and some soup (with bowl and spoon) to one of the observing researchers.

A short time later the four-year-old left the researcher in charge of the baby doll while she went to group time. **'You babysit?'** She returned and collected the doll after group time.

This example demonstrated a child following her own interests during free play, which interestingly involved people of different ages and stages in life. The four-year-old played at being a parent, while involving other children, a baby doll and an adult. The interesting point of this observation being the sustained shared play and interaction with toddlers who developed the play further.

2. Shadow and sensory play

Froebelian Principle: The central importance of play.

Shadow play was observed where the children and grand-friends used their senses to explore. They acted as equal partners in play. This play supported both children and grand-friends to share their ideas and imagination in exploratory and creative ways.



3. Sharing and creating stories

Froebelian Principle: Creativity and the power of symbols

In addition to a print rich environment with high quality, diverse, and interactive literacy resources, the children regularly created stories and published books alongside their grand-friends. A resident storyteller visited regularly to support the development of a culture of oracy, where individual and group stories were valued, collected and recorded using a variety of methods e.g. mark making, audio recording, painting, puppetry, dancing, music.

Oral story telling was also used to develop children's awareness of culture, values and heritage. The support of grand-friends was significant in this area, helping the children to understand their place in the world and how things change over time.



4. Mark making

Froebelian Principle: Creativity and the power of symbols

Mark making was encouraged to celebrate the lives of grand-friends and record their stories. Children were gently and sensitively encouraged to express their ideas, feelings and emotions following the death of a grand-friend. A special book of remembering was created to capture their thoughts, and stories and record their special memories and love for a particular friend. The Remembering Book is deeply treasured by all children and looked after very carefully. Some children ask for the book as a comforter when they are distressed or upset.



Section Three

Conclusion

This research set out to identify the impact on children’s holistic development when learning alongside grand-friends in a Froebel inspired intergenerational nursery. The Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) appropriately enabled the research team to gather children’s perspectives of their experiences in a myriad of ways, for example through tours and photographs, drawings, observations and playful discussions. The following conclusions respond directly to the research questions:

RQ 1 How do regular intergenerational connections impact children’s development and learning?

The shared environments were central in offering the right conditions for intergenerational connections to form and flourish across the nursery, village and wider local community. The spaces were age friendly, safe and accessible, enabling rich and diverse opportunities for learning. The environments also fostered easy connection and a sense of belonging which supported prosocial behaviours such as empathy, care and kindness.

Children were knowledgeable about their extended environment, demonstrating a solid awareness of, and care for, the people living, working and visiting there. They knew where their grand-friends lived, their daily routines, what their interests were and what they enjoyed doing together. If a grand-friend was missing from a particular event or experience, they would notice and ask about them. Regular, consistent connections nurtured empathy and care (see Theme Two) while shared experiences (see Theme Four) were effective in supporting social skills, early literacy and much more.

Ready Generations bespoke *Mirrored Care* and *Learning Framework* enhanced planning, formative assessment and evaluation. Parents enthused about their children’s progress and learning while grand-friends showed generativity and interest in supporting the wellbeing of both children and their families. Regular shared mealtimes, creative music sessions and ‘prambles’ were identified as particular highlights.



Without exception, children had a firm sense of ownership and belonging within their nursery, the village and local community. This stemmed from the underpinning components of the integrated model i.e. intentional environments, nurturing educators and the caring, consistent relationships formed with grand-friends. For example, the tour, led by the children, demonstrated their confidence and sense of belonging while further observations revealed the deep connections and excitement when children and grand-friends came together (see sub-theme Trust, Connection and Belonging). New grand-friends were introduced to the children sensitively, with children and grand-friends given freedom and time to learn about each other.

RQ 2 What are children's perceptions and experiences of learning alongside older people

Through observations of both structured and spontaneous experiences, followed by playful discussions, reflections and drawings, the children openly shared their knowledge, learning and views with researchers. They instructed researchers and confidently informed them about their village and village life. They demonstrated their developing understanding of literacy, numeracy and the world around them as they navigated the building and garden areas. It was clear that the children knew and were happy to spend time with people of all ages. Age did not appear to have any significance to them.

“Dorothy (aged 92) is kind she is my friend”

Relationships with grand-friends were not forced. Children chose whether and when they wished to engage. Views of parents were that they cannot tell whether their child's friends are '2 or 82'. The way in which grand-friends are welcomed and greeted demonstrates the strength of the connections made.

“I have lots of friends here... Him is 4. I am 3...”

“Some people here have wrinkly faces and walk slow”

Grand-friends embodied the concept of slow pedagogy (Clark, 2021). This encouraged extended thinking and bolstered children's confidence as they were not rushed into responding. For example, daily conversations with grand-friends, particularly at mealtimes allowed children to reflect on their learning and were used to think together about next steps. They listened to and read stories together, learning about other people's perspectives, views and interests. The children's care for others, and mature supportive play, was clearly demonstrated, while observations of their co-operative play demonstrated how intergenerational living is accepted and enjoyed as part of their everyday experience:

“Our grand-friend helps us with our phonics. He is funny and brings maltesers.”

Some of the children's learning happened organically through established daily routines such as shared mealtimes and play opportunities. However, the children were aware of when specific learning events would be scheduled with grand-friends such as science experiments, creative art and mending workshops.

RQ 3: How does the use of the Froebelian principles support intergenerational pedagogy?

Table 4

Froebelian principle	Supporting intergenerational pedagogy
Unity + connectedness	<p>Children were securely connected to their grand-friends, families, educators, each other and the wider community. They showed a mature awareness of how relationships work and the responsibilities attached to making and sustaining friendships. A sense of how the community feels like an extension of your house was articulated by parents. Observations of how children climbed onto the sofa (theme two) or how families joined in alongside grand-friends in the park (theme one) demonstrated this sense of belonging and connection. Children were confident to initiate actions that made a difference (all themes) and recognised that they had a part to play the overall happiness and wellbeing of their community.</p>
Autonomous learners	<p>Children demonstrated confidence and independence on the village tour. They had a firm sense of belonging to an all age community where people were able to enjoy each other's company and also learn together. They knew both residents and staff, often taking the lead to show researchers their world and what mattered most to them. They asked questions and engaged in playful interactions. They were curious and reflective. The presence of grand-friends provided ongoing and expansive opportunities to extend and develop learning in imaginative and creative ways.</p>
Value of childhood in its own right	<p>Children explored freely and engaged with their environment and resources. This included using their grand-friends as a wise resource, offering ideas, support and guidance. Their views were listened to, respected and built on as appropriate. Having interested and responsive grand-friends meant they had increased opportunities for extended conversations which often served to expand learning around particular interests.</p>
Relationships matter	<p>Children were thriving as a result of the range of supportive and encouraging relationships that surrounded them. They demonstrated personal confidence and agency. They were strongly connected to their peers, families and grand-friends and showed empathy and kindness towards them. The mixed age nature of the setting meant that children knew more about different needs and abilities and were accepting of everyone. Parents could not always determine whether the people spoken about by their children were adults or children. All were friends irrespective of age.</p>

Froebelian principle	Supporting intergenerational pedagogy
Creativity and the power of symbols	Supported by educators and grand-friends, children demonstrated creativity and symbolic play in many of the observed experiences. For example, the home corner, storytelling, puppet play and simple bookmaking sessions. They showed curiosity and interest in numbers, signage and environmental print displayed around the village.
Central importance of play	The intergenerational influence was apparent in children's play (theme 4) which was imaginative and playful both indoors and outdoors. Grand-friends brought additionality and creativity to the children's play by asking questions and/or bringing resources to extend learning opportunities e.g. photo albums, books, artefacts and paintings. In addition, children played sensitively with and alongside their peers and grand-friends, supporting each other in daily tasks and actions.
Engaging with nature	Open and free flow access to both an outdoor play area and shared sensory garden space and growing area allowed children and their grand-friends to meet in both planned and spontaneous ways e.g. planting, weeding, foraging and sweeping. Prambles also offered rich opportunities to explore nature in the local area with grand-friends keen to extend children's learning about features of local habitats and the natural world.
Knowledgeable, nurturing educators	Educators demonstrated a genuine commitment to intergenerational pedagogy and consciously looked for ways to extend and improve their professional knowledge and practice. They understood the complexities of ageing and living with dementias as well as having a firm understanding of early child development and learning.
Early years practice and leadership	Over the research period, the nursery gained an outstanding Ofsted grading. In addition, it was recognised as the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) Nursery of the Year and shortlisted for the Nursery World Nursery of the Year. A plethora of cross-sector professionals, academics and education leaders engaged regularly with the leadership team developing and promoting quality improvement. This added a further depth to practice and supported confident leadership.

Froebelian principle	Supporting intergenerational pedagogy
<p>A sustained level of collaboration and connectedness with partners and the wider community.</p>	<p>Throughout the research period, the nursery children engaged in many wider community adventures, visits and events including storytelling, picnics, park, river and canal walks, shopping trips, and communal singing events. This active involvement as members of the local community supported children to gain an understanding of the world around them and their place and responsibilities within it.</p>
<p>The appropriate use of knowledge, understanding, and research to inform child development and how children represent their own interests and ideas.</p>	<p>The nursery team are constantly looking at ways to improve and are active researchers of practice. The team engage with academics in action research projects and inquiry-based learning. Using The Mosaic Approach enables educators to not only understand children’s perspectives but also benefit from engagement with academic researchers. Professional development and training opportunities are prioritised alongside involvement in national practitioner networks. This focus on progressing practitioner and leadership knowledge, skills and understanding, is central to maintaining a clear vision for how intergenerational practice supports and enhances children’s developmental and learning outcomes. Furthermore, this has a direct ripple effect for parents and children as they become interested and curious about research, enjoying taking part and finding things out together.</p>

The evidence presented in this report shows that sustained, meaningful, intergenerational pedagogy not only contributes to children’s social-emotional development (Murray et al., 2025), but also to their holistic development and learning. This was specifically noted in the children’s socio-cultural knowledge and understanding of their place within the community and how they can influence and shape it. The report findings build on the current research around learning through intergenerational practice whilst reflecting socio-cultural theories of learning, strengthening the concept that children’s development is embedded in relationships within their social and cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

To conclude, children appear to thrive in this Froebelian-inspired intergenerational setting, where adults of all ages are closely attuned to the holistic health, wellbeing and learning needs of the children and want the very best for them. The availability and constant presence of grand-friends brings something unique and impactful to children’s early learning experiences, providing them with a safe and nurturing environment in which to learn about the world alongside friends who value, respect and love them.

Insights and considerations for practice

“The children, they are the leaders of the future”

Grand-friend

“I have lots of friends here”

Child

Table 5

Number	Insight	Considerations for practice
1	SAFEGUARDING HEALTH AND SAFETY	<p>The safeguarding and protection of both children and vulnerable adults must be a fundamental priority when planning intergenerational experiences.</p> <p>Health and safety matters are also a core consideration with risk assessments used effectively to guide practice e.g. infection control, falls prevention.</p>
2	ENVIRONMENT	<p>It is important to ensure the intergenerational environment is inclusive and organised to meet everyone’s needs. It does not have to be purpose-built, but the right conditions should be prioritised to enable maximum accessibility, engagement and participation. e.g. heating, ventilation, lighting, toilets, refreshments and hand washing facilities. Resources should be selected carefully to be attractive and appealing to both children and adults.</p>
3	ALL AGE SHARED SPACES	<p>Sharing spaces requires open discussion between professionals and teams to ensure that they are used respectfully and sensitively meet the needs of multi-age users. e.g. cleaning, noise awareness, seating, signage. It is vital to remember that care settings are also home to residents and should be cared for as a home.</p>

Number	Insight	Considerations for practice
4	TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS	<p>Intergenerational relationships cannot be rushed or forced and take time, trust and care to develop. For example, for many children, it may be the first time they have experienced a care setting and seen such things as walking frames, wheelchairs and other assistive devices.</p> <p>Parents also benefit from being introduced to the grand-friends, getting to know more about them and making friendships over time that extend beyond nursery.</p>
5	ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE AWARENESS	<p>Knowledgeable, nurturing carers and educators are central to intergenerational practices. Early years educators benefit from professional awareness of the specific care needs of older people, particularly those living with frailty and dementias.</p>
6	ASSESSMENT AND IMPACT	<p>Being clear from the outset about the impact of intergenerational experiences for both children and older people is a fundamental consideration. It enables continual refinement and improvement of planning and provision. Having a clear sense of intention, implementation and impact ensures that experiences meet needs, enabling both groups to make progress and gain as much as possible from being together.</p>
7	LIFE COURSE CENTRED	<p>An intergenerational community includes people of all ages. Such a life course approach requires careful planning to maximise engagement, participation and relevance for everyone.</p>
8	PLAY AND PLAYFULNESS	<p>Play and being playful are important at all stages of life. Playing and learning are two sides of the same coin allowing both children and older people to develop creatively, discovering more about themselves and the wider world in the process of playing alongside each other and co-operatively.</p>

Number	Insight	Considerations for practice
9	INCLUSIVE	A commitment to collaborative approaches that involve staff, families, communities, older people and children helps to create and maintain an inclusive culture where everyone can sense belonging and feel safe to express themselves authentically.
10	DIGNIFIED AND RESPECTFUL	Attention to detail in planning and listening to the views of everyone before getting started means that differences can become strengths through an increase in the range of perspectives heard and a commitment to co-design.
11	NATURE INSPIRED LEARNING	Nature is such a connector across ages. Engaging with nature has no age boundaries and everyone can experience the awe and wonder exposure to nature and the natural world offers. Access to outdoor spaces and nature not only extends learning possibilities but acts as a rich resource for interaction, choice and reflection too.
12	SLOW PEDAGOGY	Older people can be excellent educators demonstrating patience and commitment to supporting children's learning. Their pace of life is slower which enables children to access learning at their own pace too and in ways that encourage extended exploration and investigation. The urgency of time restrictions appears less obvious although a sense of pace can be maintained.

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