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Intergenerational Communication Effectiveness Training

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Abstract

The current study evaluated whether a short communication training (activities and simulations) with university students reduced the number of communication breakdowns that occurred between older adults and college students and improved the use of repair strategies to strengthen intergenerational communication. The study examined the quality of intergenerational interactions between older adult residents in a memory care unit at an assisted living facility and university students participating in the Nursing Home Visitation Program. In the first phase of the study, a small group discussion with the older adults catalogued challenges with intergenerational communication and identified strategies currently utilized to prevent or repair communication breakdowns. The older adult group session informed the creation of a twenty-minute interactive training program implemented with the UWW students. Following the training, the older adults and university students split into intergenerational pairs. The older adults and university students were observed interacting in the assisted living facility during their intergenerational activities before, immediately after, and three weeks after the training. During the observations, the study team documented the type and number of breakdowns and repair strategies used. After each observed intergenerational activity, the older adults completed a survey evaluating their communication experience and any breakdowns and repairs that they noticed the university students using. After the training was implemented, the number of communication breakdowns decreased in both students and older adults, suggesting that addressing communication barriers through interactive instruction increased communication effectiveness. Results from the current study support the implementation of communication strategies training to improve intergenerational communication fluency.

Keywords: Intergenerational programming, Communication training, Communication repair strategies

1. Introduction

Adults over 62 years of age make up just over 16% of the US population¹. These older adults have a desire to maintain high levels of community engagement. However, roughly 45% of adults in this age group experience hearing loss as part of the normal aging process², and individuals with central hearing loss are twice as likely to have mild cognitive impairment³. Hearing loss, as well as memory loss, may prevent active social engagement. Furthermore, depression is common in adults who have other illnesses or whose function becomes limited, rising to 13.5% in those who require home healthcare⁴. To maintain social engagement, intergenerational programming intends to "increase cooperation, interaction and exchange between people of different generations" and allow the "sharing of talents and resources… that benefit both the individual and their community"⁵. Summative reports regarding intergenerational programs revealed that both older and younger adults reported increased understanding of the other generation, positively changed attitudes, and increased skills and engagement⁶. Given the benefits of intergenerational programming, the current project aimed to improve communication between university student volunteers and older adults in an assisted living facility. The project included three phases: (1) identified common communication breakdowns and repair strategies experienced by older adults, (2) created a short training on hearing loss, communication breakdowns, and

repair strategies for the university students, and (3) evaluated the effectiveness of the training in generalizing to intergenerational conversations. Three research questions were addressed. (1) Would the training reduce the number of communication breakdowns in the activities following the training compared to the interactions pre-training? (2) Would implementation of communication repair strategies increase post training? (3) Would older adults report higher levels of communication satisfaction post training?

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The participants included three female older adult residents from a memory care unit at an assisted living facility and three female UW-Whitewater students between the ages of 19 and 22 participating in the Nursing Home Visitation Program.

2.2 Baseline For Communication Breakdown

During the eighth week of intergenerational sessions, the student investigators observed and audio-recorded the older adult and university student interactions. The three university student volunteers sat next to one of the three participating older adults. Each intergenerational pair engaged in an activity lead by the student volunteer coordinator and assisted living facility activity coordinator. The activities included creating arts and crafts projects. Two research team members spent ten minutes independently observing each intergenerational pair. Notes on the number of communication breakdowns and the types of repair strategies utilized by the older adults and the students were compiled and later analyzed as baseline communication prior to training.

2.3 Mini Training Session

Student investigators met with the participating older adults at the assisted living facility. During the small group discussion, the student investigators compiled the older adults' experiences and stories regarding current challenges with intergenerational communication and identified strategies utilized to prevent or repair communication breakdowns. The older adults completed the communication effectiveness survey which included seven Likert scale questions (scale from 1-5) and two open ended questions. The survey was designed to examine satisfaction regarding communication and interactions with the university students and identify existing communication breakdowns and repairs. Following the small group discussion, pure tone hearing screens were conducted with each older adult. The information from this meeting assisted in designing simulations and activities for the university student training.

The training session included four different activities. The introduction activity defined communication breakdowns and elicited students' examples. The second activity created an opportunity for understanding age related hearing loss through a hearing loss simulation. Each student took a turn wearing headphones and listening to a simulation of presbycusis (loss of high frequency hearing with age). Students listened to the simulation and were asked to identify what a talker was saying in a quiet and noisy background. Following the simulation, the study team led a discussion of challenges and then introduced the concept of repair strategies. Students were prompted to give examples of repair strategies. In the next activity, the study team taught the students five different repair strategies (expanding on topics, positioning body closer, speaking loud and clear, repeating yourself, making eye contact). The study team also provided the students with small note cards with the repair strategies on them.

2.4 Post Training Observations

The study team observed the adult-student interactions immediately after the training. The number of communication breakdowns and types of repair strategies utilized during the intergenerational communication sessions were recorded. Communication breakdowns and repairs were recorded and separated by whether an older adult or student initiated the breakdown or repair. All three student volunteers and older adults attended the intergenerational programming activities immediately after the training. Due to the small sample, descriptive statistics were used to explain trends in the data.

3. Results

Both university students and older adults were observed to have a decrease in communication breakdowns and an increase in communication repairs after the training. However, the biggest changes were observed among university students.

The training resulted in a 10% increase (52 repairs pre training to 57 repairs post training) in the number of communication repair strategies used among the older adults. There was a 65% decrease in the number of communication breakdowns between the two observation periods with 26 breakdowns during the pre-training observation and 9 breakdowns during the post-observation (see figure 1).

The training resulted in a 29% increase (78 repairs pre training to 101 repairs post training) in the number of communication repair strategies used among university students. There was a 90% decrease in the number of communication breakdowns between the two observation periods with 20 breakdowns during pre-training observation and 2 breakdowns during the post-observation (see figure 2)



Figure 1. Total observations of adult breakdowns and communication repair strategies across observation periods.



Figure 2. Total observation of student communication breakdowns and repairs across observation periods.

In addition to differences in the total percentage of communication strategies used across each age group and observational time point, differences in the type of communication strategies were observed. Adults maintained five of the same strategies pre and post training (make eye contact, position body closer, repeat yourself, ask for clarification, speak loud and clear). The students maintained four of the same top five strategies from pre and post training (position body closer, make eye contact, repeat yourself, speak loud and clear). In the post training session all five of the strategies included in the training session were in the top five strategies used by the students (expand on topics, position body closer, speak loud and clear, repeat yourself, make eye contact).

The results of the satisfaction surveys were inconclusive due to little change in responses and the memory loss of the older adult participants. The memory loss among the older adult participants likely prohibited recollection and comparison of the pre and post session communication quality.

4. Discussion

The greatest change from pre to post training was the increase in communication repair strategies used by the students. There were large decreases in communication breakdowns for both age groups. It is suspected that because the older adults did not actively participate in the 20 minute communication training with the students, the older adults had more varied implementation of communication strategies. Post training, the students implemented the strategies taught in the training (expand on topics, position body closer, speak loud and clear, repeat yourself, make eye contact). Overall the communication training was successful in reducing communication breakdowns. The training also strengthened the students' use of repair strategies. With the current study design, it wasn't possible to completely separate the effects of the training from the effects of multiple exposures to intergenerational interactions. Therefore, it was likely that the combination of training and exposure/comfort between the age groups supported strong intergenerational communication. Data suggests that communication training improved communication fluency and has the potential to strengthen intergenerational relationships and increase the benefits of intergenerational programs. Future projects training both the older adult and university student may result in even larger gains in conversational fluency and improved intergenerational activities.

5. References

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