

## We don't just get older — we become elders. Here's how you can work with the young to make a better world for all

Elders are an untapped resource. We need you. Forget Freedom 55 and think Impact 55 — our future depends on it.

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By **Susan V. Bosak** Contributor

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Scientist and broadcaster David Suzuki is one of the most respected people in Canada. As he announced his upcoming retirement from CBC's "The Nature of Things" at 86, he had a call to action: "I'm in a very privileged state. I'm an elder. This is the most important part of my life. I have no vested interest in the status quo. I'm in the position of sifting through a lifetime, and saying what have I learned that I can pass on? That's my job. I say to every elder, what have you learned from your life? *Be an elder.*"

When we talk about older adulthood, we tend to focus on programs and policy to meet needs. This diminishes and marginalizes elderhood. The pinnacle of life becomes empty when it's only about needs and leisure activities, rather than the rich tapestry of life experiences and skills.

As a society, we're facing converging climate, environmental, economic, political, technological, health and social crises. There are more elders than ever before — and they are an untapped resource. We need you.

Elders today are healthier and more educated than previous older generations. Research shows getting older can come with more insight, creativity, complexity thinking and emotional skills.

Elders can rise into a meaningful role of support and stewardship for both younger generations and the planet. This starts with all of us seeing ourselves, at any age, as elders-in-training. We need to understand the meaning and purpose inherent in the last third of our lives.

We don't simply grow up and older; we create meaning as we *grow into ourselves and create a legacy*. Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson studied human development, identifying two psychosocial tasks in older adulthood. First, we must come to terms with our own story, the life we've lived (ego integrity). Second, we have a need to create a legacy, our contribution to the bigger story of the world, leaving a piece of our "selves" in the minds and hearts of generations that follow us (generativity).

In a deeply age-segregated society — children in schools, elders clustered in other parts of the community — we need to reunite generations. Intergenerational connections are valuable in themselves, bringing mutual support and wellbeing. But there's more to the intergenerational dynamic.

Because they're respectively closer to the beginning and end of life, young and old can be truth-tellers. They're less invested in the status quo. They also remind us what *really matters*, often simply by being.

In some Indigenous cultures, there's an understanding that if you want to get something done, you bring together a "fired-up youth with a feisty granny." Young and old balance each other and become a formidable force. Science supports this idea. Some brain research indicates that neuroplasticity slows significantly in your mid-20s and then ramps up again after 50 years of age. That means if you want creative innovation, your best bet is old or young people — even better combined.

We often praise the young, saying "the future is in good hands." The future isn't in the hands of the young; it's in all our hands. The young bring energetic potential, and the old lived experience. One without the other is only one side of the coin. Generations working together can become a kind of "super organism."

What does this look like in practice?

- It means Elders-in-Residence in every school, helping students with skills from reading to gardening. Students at one school even started eating healthier lunches under the watchful eyes of the "grandparents."
- It's students interviewing elders about their life stories, learning about real life from real people, and creating powerful videos and written narratives. A high school student commented it was "an eye-opening experience because they talk about things you don't learn in school."
- It's Village Learning, as young and old learn from and with each other in their real-world community. In an intergenerational energy program, students and elders learned how to do energy audits — and were more convincing as a team to get homeowners to make changes.
- It's elders and students working together on Legacy Projects about the things that really matter in lifetimes across generations. "We took a walk along the river not just to have a nice time, but to learn how to regenerate the river ecosystem together," said one participant.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead asserted that "connections between generations are essential for the mental health and stability of nations." Forget Freedom 55 — think Impact 55. Our future depends on it.

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