

*Pen Pals:  
An Intergenerational Exchange  
for Education and Health*

# Activity, Time and Materials

## ACTIVITY:

Pen pals are friends who get to know each other by exchanging letters on a regular basis. It was common for elementary students prior to electronic communication to have pen pals in other communities or even other countries. It was a rich way for students to learn about others. This activity is easily translated into an inter-generational activity, whereby students from a class at an elementary school are paired with residents in an elder care facility that live in the same community. Fourth grade is the focus for the school partnership because that is the grade level where students study their state and its history. To enhance learning about their state's history, the students will interact firsthand with someone, an elder, who remembers way back when. . . .

## TIME:

Three to four hours over three sessions plus preparation work (for a short, one-month minimum project). However, it would be best to extend the project throughout a school year with letters exchanged every two to three weeks. This will result in more hours (approximately one hour every two weeks for this extended exchange).

## MATERIALS:

- Pencil or pen
- Paper or blank book
- Punch and cookies
- Microphone
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

## **“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):**

This activity takes place almost entirely between pairings of two people, an elder and an elementary student. It encourages meaningful interaction that helps to prevent loneliness. Prompts are given for the letter exchange. Thinking about what they want to write and anticipating a response will encourage the elder participants’ creative thought and thereby help with boredom. It gives the elders an activity in which to participate and to help others, therefore helping themselves by combating a sense of helplessness. For those who have difficulty writing but want to share, their sense of helplessness can be eased by having a volunteer do the writing for them. If they are unable to read the responses from the students, a volunteer also can read to them.

## **ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:**

In a study by Michelle C. Carlson et al., “149 older adults [were randomized] to Experience Corps® (EC) or a wait-list control arm. Participants randomized to EC trained in teams to help elementary school children with reading achievement, library support, and classroom behavior for 15 hrs./week during an academic year. We compared baseline and follow-up assessments of memory, executive function (EF), and psychomotor speed at 4 to 8 months by intervention arm, adjusting for exposure duration. . . . Overall, EC participants tended to show improvements in EF and memory relative to matched controls. . . . Short-term participation in [the EC] community-based program designed to increase cognitive and physical activity in a social, real-world setting may train memory and, particularly, executive functions important to functional independence. [The EC] community-based program represents one potentially effective model to bring high doses of sustainable cognitive exercise to the greatest proportion of older adults, particularly those sedentary individuals at elevated risk for health disparities.” [Abstract]

*--Carlson, Michelle C., Jane S. Saczynski, George W. Rebok, Teresa Seeman, Thomas A. Glass, Sylvia McGill, James Tielsch, Kevin D. Frick, Joel Hill, and Linda P. Fried. “Exploring the Effects of an ‘Everyday’ Activity Program on Executive Function and Memory in Older Adults: Experience Corps.” *The Gerontologist* 48, no. 6 (2008): 793-801.*



# Activity Plan

## PREPARATION WORK (1 TO 2 HOURS):

1. Develop a relationship with a local elementary school's fourth grade teacher. Approach the teacher about developing an ongoing pen pal relationship between fourth grade students and elders at an elder care facility. Explain that the pen pal relationship would benefit two separate groups of people. The students are required to learn about their state and its history. This ongoing communication with the elders can provide a personal connection and perspective to help enhance the students' curriculum. Ongoing communication with the students can help the elders combat a sense of loneliness, helplessness, and boredom, in this way improving their physical and emotional health.
2. Between the fourth grade teacher and the elder care facility, discuss the duration of the letter exchange. One month is the minimum, but it would best extend throughout the school year, with letters exchanged every two to three weeks. Because the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers* focuses on the folklore and folk art found in North Dakota, South Dakota, western Minnesota, and eastern Montana, it should be used as the guide and prompt for the letter writing. The fourth grade teacher, with input from the students and the person directing this activity on behalf of the elder care facility, should review, discuss, and select general subjects or areas from the book that will be used as the basis of the correspondence. The teacher should then edit the list if necessary to fit classroom needs and educational goals. Determine

who should write the first letter; the elders or the students.

3. Determine how the students and elders will be paired. If there are not enough elders to participate one-on-one with the students, consider creating small groups of students who will write to one elder.

## SESSION 1 (1 HOUR):

1. The activity director should introduce the pen pal plan to the elders. Tell the elder participants that over the next month (or whatever timeline has been agreed upon beforehand with the schoolteacher), they will exchange letters with fourth grade students from the community. Explain that the students are studying their state and its history, and that the elders will be helping them learn by sharing through letters. Explain to the elders that they also will share the lost art of letter writing with a generation that is used to sending texts and tweets. (For those elders who don't know what those are, please explain.) Inform the elders that at the conclusion of the letter writing, they will have the opportunity to meet their pen pals.
2. The first letter between the elders and the students should be one of introduction. The writers should tell each other their names, where they are from, a little about their families, and what their hobbies or interests are.

## SESSION 2 (1 HOUR):

(One hour every two weeks over a month, school year, or whatever period of time has previously been agreed upon.)

I. The elder participants should gather every two weeks to discuss the new suggested theme for the letter exchange. A copy of *Sundogs and Sunflowers* should be made readily available for the participants to review. The activity director should read selections from the book aloud to the elders and encourage short discussions to stimulate ideas about what to write. The elders then should compose their letters. (The prompt or idea is only a suggestion. After reading the examples, the elders may generate their own ideas for correspondence.) When the letters are sent to the fourth grade students, the students will respond, and that response may generate a future conversation that requires no further prompting. However, because one can write, “How are you? I’m fine,” only so many times, it is important to utilize the book as the basis for prompts and to inspire ideas for other areas about which to write. This will keep the conversation interesting from letter to letter and help maintain focus on the educational objectives required by the teachers.

For instance, if the correspondence is in October, the activity director might choose to focus on Halloween. If so, Halloween pranks, as described on page 209 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, may be read aloud to the elders, thus prompting recollections of their past experiences. The activity director should very much encourage the elders to share their Halloween recollections with everyone else in the group. The elders then should be encouraged to write about what happened on Halloween when they were children to their pen pals.

When the children receive the letters, they, too, should be read the Halloween selections from *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, as well as the letters they’ve received from the elder participants. These readings and the elders’ letters will prompt a discussion by the children and foster ideas for them to write in return.

Or one may get more specific. For example, on page 206 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, a narrative describes the Fourth of July and ice cream. After reading that item, the elders may choose to write about ice cream when they were a child. Did it come on a stick? Were there ice cream trucks and what did they look like or sound like? Did the trucks deliver around the neighborhood? Did you make your own ice cream? What is your favorite flavor?

Many folklore and folk art items in the book can be used as the basis for educational pen pal exchange and sharing: blizzard stories, weatherlore, ghost stories, traditional foods, children’s games, counting-out rhymes, family stories about immigration or great epidemics, proverbs and other folk sayings, and traditional foods.

## SESSION 3 (1 TO 2 HOURS):

I. For the final event, it is suggested that the pen pals meet at either the school or the elder care facility for a small program that highlights some of the best parts of the pen pal exchange. The participants should bring all of their letters with them. The activity director should introduce the students to the group of elder participants, and then to their individual pen pals. After the introductions are made,

the pen pals should have a period of time to visit, preferably over punch and cookies. The pen pals should be asked to find one section of a letter that they found the most interesting.

2. After the visit, gather the elder participants and the children. Ask each set of pen pals to read and share a highlight from their respective letters with the entire group. A microphone will be necessary. When all the pen pals have shared their selections, both the activity director and the fourth grade teacher should thank the elders for participating in the education of the students and thank the students for their thoughtful letters to the elders. Encourage the pen pals to continue future letter exchanges on their own.

#### **RECOMMENDED OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES:**

1. The exchange of letters can include the exchange of artwork for the mutual betterment of the paired children and elders. Various activity plans in this compilation can be used in the generation of that artwork. For example, if weatherlore is discussed, the activity plan dealing with Haiku can be used to exchange not only letters about weather-related beliefs, but also Haiku based on those same beliefs. If traditional foods are used to discuss family stories, immigration, and state settlement, the activity plan dealing with recipe cards and Fraktur can be used and the recipe cards exchanged. Also, the activity plan for quilted greeting cards can be used to generate the medium itself for the letter exchange, and so on.

#### **AUTHOR • BONNIE TRESSLER:**

Bonnie is a teaching artist who lives in Jamestown, North Dakota. Her artistic interests and skills are centered on book and box making, decorative Polish Easter eggs, willow basketry, poetry, writing, and collage. She is very active with the Jamestown Fine Arts Center. She works with the *Art for Life Program*, where she coordinates a pen pal letter exchange between the elders at Ave Maria Village, a skilled care facility, and local schoolchildren. In addition to this experience, Bonnie had a pen pal for many years in the United Kingdom and knows firsthand the anticipation of waiting for a letter and the joy of sharing her life with someone very different from herself. Bonnie has done art residencies with elementary schools, senior citizen groups, the Sons of Norway, and numerous other organizations.