BRIDGES TO PLAY FOR WELLBEING

CONNECTION COMPASS

Finding your way to intergenerational play



Written by: Dr Lois Peach, Mia Wright and Professor Lisa Kervin AM

Overview



Why this guide?

Intergenerational play environments thrive when they are intentionally designed to support shared presence and purpose across ages.

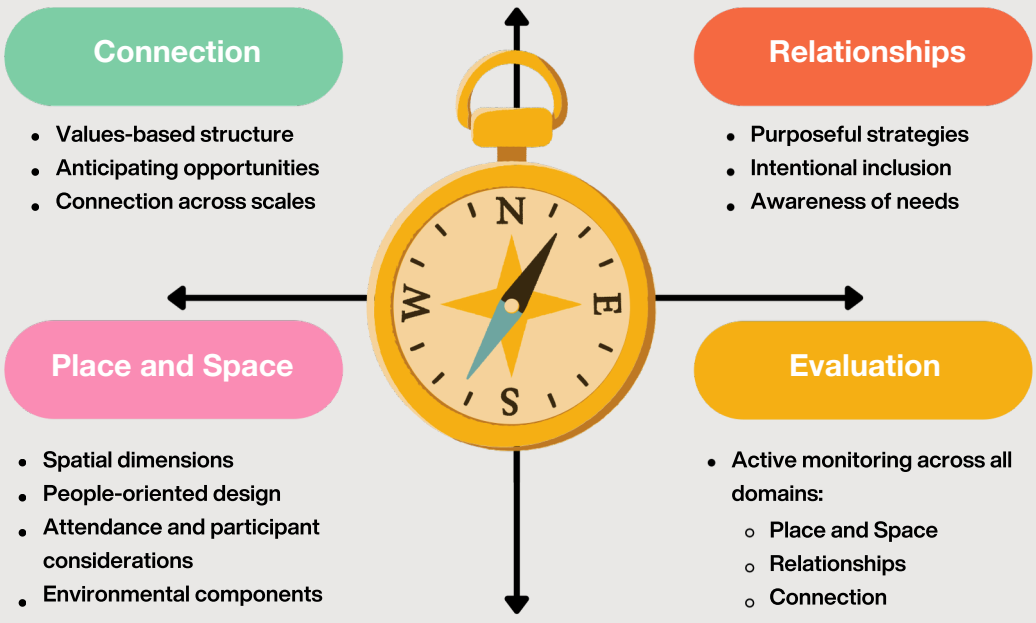
We define intergenerational play as multiple groups (children, young people, parents, grandparents and other adults) coming together for shared purpose, connection and playful encounters. The environments that support intergenerational play and connection must consider not only physical design but also the psychological, cultural, environmental and cognitive dimensions that shape how people feel mobe and related to one another. Effective spaces balance safety with autonomy, familiarity with flexibility and structure with openness.

Meaningful intergenerational encounters do not emerge simply from co-location; they arise from environments that thoughtfully integrate Place and Space, Relationships and opportunities for Connection. Intentionality and active, ongoing Evaluation of shared spaces support agency, reciprocity and emotional comfort, while also challenging generational segregations and traditional power imbalances.

How to use this guide?

- This guide is not intended as a checklist - not all aspects will be appropriate to all intergenerational environments.
- This can be used as a reflective tool to guide conversations to consider how to enable and support meaningful intergenerational encounters.

Just as a compass has four directions, this framework considers four key areas:



Each direction is critical for meaningful intergenerational connection.
Consider each when planning, implementing, and reflecting upon intergenerational play experiences.

BRIDGES Intergenerational Connection Compass





Place and Space

Things to consider in the **Planning Phase**

Inclusive spatial mapping:

Is there a clear layout, flow, and legibility for all ages and cognitive abilities?
Can participants easily see destinations, people, and activity areas?
Do environments feel manageable, not overwhelming?
Are spaces broken into understandable zones?
How does the design of the space support varied processing styles, memory needs, and attention spans?

Unobtrusive safety, including psychological safety:

Are safety features present?
How are dignity and autonomy preserved?
How are participants able to access emotional comfort?
How do generational ratios support comfort and interaction (e.g. too many adults/ too many children)?
Is there predictability in the schedule or organisation?

Diversity and accessibility:

Is it easy for participants to get to and from the space?
Does the time align with routines, energy levels, nap times, school hours, different seasonal patterns (e.g., daylight, temperature, activities)?
How does the space support cultural practices, traditions, heritage?
Is there a range of differently sized and supportive furniture (e.g., chairs with arms) available?
What are the acoustics of the space like? Are there quiet zones?
What is the light level? If outside, is there shade?

Resource availability:

Are materials and equipment safe, accessible, age-appropriate, interesting, and cognitively supportive?
Does the space include resources with diverse textures, materials, and sensory elements?
Is there opportunity for time in built and natural settings?

People-oriented design

Placing people at the heart of the design and planning of intergenerational play experiences is important. This means considering attendance practicalities as well as participant needs and preferences. Consider asking participants directly about some of the questions above or discussing together:
How does the space feel to them? Where do they feel there are opportunities to share their knowledge, interests, sociocultural practices and traditions in the space? How does the design align with their routines, energy levels, and different seasonal patterns (e.g., daylight, temperature, activities)? Do generational ratios support them to feel comfortable and to interact with others?

BRIDGES Intergenerational Connection Compass





Evaluate → **Place and Space**

Remember: Evaluation doesn't just happen after, it happens in the **action,** both during and after intergenerational play experiences!

Things to consider in the **Implementation Phase**

Ease of orientation

Could participants find the space?
Was wayfinding appropriate and supported by the layout, flow, zones or activity areas?
Was visual signposting effective?
How did inclusive features, familiar objects, and environmental cues support orientation in the space?

Degree of Flexibility

How flexible was the space?
Were there possibilities for zones within the space to be adapted to meet participant needs? Could furniture to be moved?
Did activities enable different uses or types of participation?

Nature of the interaction

How did the design of the space promote interaction? If not, why not? What could improve this?
Did the design enable a balance between structured and unstructured interaction (e.g., guided activities, spontaneous exploration)?
Did the space and design of the experiences offer a supportive amount of stimulation (e.g., managing noise, lighting, sensory and cognitive load)?

Place identity and neutrality

How did the space support interactions across generations?
Was the environment neutral (e.g., no generation "owns" the space)? Did everyone feel welcome? How did the space support a sense of belonging?

Consider: How responsive is the environment to participant needs?

When evaluating the place and space of an intergenerational play experience, a key question is how adaptable to changing needs is the environment. An environment that can evolve with participants' abilities, needs and relationships will help support meaningful interaction across generations.

BRIDGES Intergenerational Connection Compass





Relationships

Things to consider in the **Planning Phase**

The purpose:

What is the intended purpose of the intergenerational play experience?
How will intergenerational relationships be fostered?
What intentional strategies will there be for building trust, reciprocity, familiarity?
What type of human or other resources will be required to support relationships?
How will participants understand the purpose of the intergenerational experiences and how might they feel about what they are being asked to do?

Facilitators:

Do facilitators feel prepared and confident to support and scaffold relationships?
How do facilitators understand their role and the extent of their involvement?
What other aspects (such objects, people, activities, or familiar routines) might support or facilitate interaction?
How will a positive atmosphere be created and maintained?
How will generations be positively positioned in ways that counter stereotypes or age-based assumptions?

Intentional inclusion:

How can cultural and social backgrounds be recognised and supported in relationships?
How might respect for diverse traditions, expectations, and communication styles be fostered?
How might age diversity be acknowledged and accommodated in ways that do not affirm assumptions or limitations?
What influence might different community roles or social standing have upon relationships?

Awareness of different needs

Awareness of how experiences might be felt by different people is crucial factor to being able to effectively support relationships. Reflect on how awareness might be demonstrated without making assumptions about participants' abilities.

The needs and abilities of participants might span **physical** (mobility, stamina, sensory needs, accessibility); **cognitive** (neurodiversity, memory differences, processing styles); **emotional** (security, confidence, autonomy, validation); and **practical** domains (food, drink, toilet breaks, point of contact).

In identifying and planning for needs, consider asking participants directly about some of the questions above or considering how proactive assessment and responsive design may help support relationships in the moment.

BRIDGES Intergenerational Connection Compass





Evaluation → Relationships

Remember: Evaluation doesn't just happen after, it happens in the **action,** both during and after intergenerational play experiences!

Things to consider in the **Implementation Phase**

Autonomy and Agency

How is autonomy and agency fostered in intergenerational play experiences?
How are participants supported to make choices about when and how to engage?
How do relationships enable participants to take on different roles and opportunities?
Are there opportunities for participants to share their feedback or thoughts in appropriate, age and culturally responsive ways?

Nature of relations

What types of relations are being supported?
How reciprocal are relational moments (e.g., what forms of interaction, roles, and power relations are present)?
How do participants respond to structured and unstructured interaction?
How might the environment enable or constrain the diversity and/or depth of relational connection?

Safety, privacy, dignity

How do relationships influence participants' feelings of emotional or physical safety?
Do participants feel welcomed, secure, respected, and free from judgement?
Do participants feel they are able to share information freely and do not feel pressured to disclose aspects of their lives?
How is dignity upheld within relationships?
Do participants feel they can withdraw, rest or regulate involvement without consequence?

Consider: How supportive is the environment for promoting meaningful relationships?

What counts as meaningful in the context of intergenerational play experiences will shift and change depending on the participants, circumstances, and possibly even time of day! Talking with participants about their expectations around the relationships or moments of connection within intergenerational play will help determine supportive factors e.g. communication, emotional safety, empathy and reciprocity.

BRIDGES Intergenerational Connection Compass





Connection

Things to consider in the **Planning Phase**

Values:

What are the values and principles that underpin intergenerational play experiences?
What are the aims of the intergenerational play experience (e.g., wellbeing, social inclusion etc.).
How will connection promote these aims?
How will values, aims and goals be developed or shared across participants, facilitators, organisations and the wider community?
How will connection challenge generational segregation or age-based separations?

Opportunity:

How will opportunities for connection - before, during and between interactions - be fostered?
What role will routines and rituals play in supporting connection (e.g., repeated activities, openings, closings)?
What opportunities are there for different types of engagement to support connection (e.g., shared activities, conversation, cooperation, quiet time, observation)?
What role might virtual spaces or digital tools play in enabling or constraining connection?

Scale:

How will connection be promoted across participants, organisations, and communities?
How will decision-making be shared and transparent across different groups and stakeholders?

Looking for connection

Connection can mean different things for different people. Within intergenerational play experiences, connection may happen in unexpected ways or it may not seem to happen at all.

Remember: connection is often something we can ‘t ‘see’, it is something that is felt or experienced, and possibly only noticed in its absence (when we feel disconnected).
Ask yourself what you think connection might look or feel like for your context and participants? You could also ask participants and see if your expectations align.

BRIDGES Intergenerational Connection Compass





Evaluation → **Connection**

Remember: Evaluation doesn't just happen after, it happens in the **action,** both during and after intergenerational play experiences!

Things to consider in the **Implementation Phase**

The experience

How is the experience supporting opportunities for connection?
How is the experience enabling opportunities for mutual learning, teaching, and cultural exchange? How reciprocal is the connection arising from this experience?
Do all participants feel they are able to form or maintain connection within this experience?
Are there opportunities to maintain or develop the connection during, after and between interactions?

Nature of participation

What types of participation are being facilitated?
How are different pathways to participation being supported?
How is participation being upheld as voluntary?
How are varied ways to engage recognised as meaningful for connection?
How does facilitation influence the possibilities for connection arising from participation?
How is connection being supported in ordinary, everyday, domestic or even mundane ways?

Positive involvement

How are all participants supported to be involved in opportunities for connection?
How are positive emotional experiences and feelings of self-esteem, confidence, purpose and value being promoted?
What opportunities are there for connection through fun, enjoyable and playful activities that are responsive to participants' interests and curiosities?

Consider: How does the environment shape possibilities for connection?

Whilst many things play a role in supporting connection within intergenerational play experiences, facilitator expertise and reflexivity are crucial. Think about not only what the role of the experience or activity is in promoting intergenerational connection, but also what practices, biases, the influence of people involved and those facilitating the interaction have on connection.

BRIDGES Intergenerational Connection Compass



A Final Word

- This guide is not a checklist of rules. Rather, it is designed as a reflective tool.
- Take the time to plan for intergenerational experiences.
- Pause after sessions to consider how the places and spaces felt, how relationships were enabled, how participants connected, and whose wellbeing was uplifted.
- Taking time to plan and reflect will refine approaches to intergenerational play, deepen generational bonds and create experiences that are joyful, safe and meaningful for all involved.

Connection

- Values-based structure
- Anticipating opportunities
- Connection across scales

Relationships

- Purposeful strategies
- Intentional inclusion
- Awareness of needs



Place and Space

- Spatial dimensions People-
- oriented design
- Attendance and participant considerations
- Environmental components

Evaluation

- Active monitoring across all domains:
  - Place and Space
  - Relationships
  - Connection

AUTHORS AND CONTRIBUTORS: This resource is a collaborative effort led by Dr Lois Peach, Mia Wright and Professor Lisa Kervin, in partnership with Monash University and UOW Early Start. It reflects the shared contributions of a multidisciplinary community of practice including individuals Christine Evely (ACMI), and representatives from Albion Park Rail Public School, Catholic Care Wollongong, Early Start, Healthy Cities Australia, Illawarra Multicultural services, Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District, Shellharbour City Council, UOW Pulse Kids' Uni and Wollongong City libraries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This resource was generously supported by the Australian Research Council's Future Fellowship (FT240100511) awarded to Prof. Lisa Kervin. The authors have attempted to ensure information contained in this publication is correct at the time of production (September 2026); however sections may be amended without notice in response to changing circumstances or for any other reason.

EARLY START

MONASH University