

Intergenerational Issues in Nursing: Learning From Each Generation

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The nursing workforce is comprised of multiple generations, resulting in differences in communication, expectations, and work priorities. Better understanding of each generation's point of reference will improve collaboration and foster collegial relationships.

Each generation is shaped by global events, family culture, parental influences, technology, and communication. A challenge occurs when all generations exist within one facility. Without understanding each generation's frame of reference and communication preferences, the workforce may not function as a cohesive team, and conflict may arise among members. To tackle the challenge, nurses should have a certain level of understanding about each generation.

Popular culture has labeled the generations born since the 1900s (see Table 1). Each generation has been attributed with certain characteristics that enhance and challenge workplace roles and communication. For example, why do Baby Boomers (born from 1946–1964) have a difficult time relating to younger teammates? One consideration is the parental influences of the Traditionalists (born from 1900–1945) on the Boomers. Traditionalists withstood the Depression and world wars. As a result, their mantra to their own children, the Boomers, was work hard, save, be loyal to a company, and do not waste. Historically, hospitals have been hierarchical in structure, with the most experienced nurses (Traditionalists) placed in positions of leadership. Boomers were taught traditional family values at home and by the media, as television aired programs that taught them the satisfaction of a job well done. They became workers, and many were defined by their jobs and the successes they achieved. Today, Boomers sometimes are defined as driven over-achievers who often feel that they pull an unfair load in the workplace and receive no respect or appreciation from younger

nurses. Many Boomers are managed by younger, less experienced nurses (Swearingen & Liberman, 2004).

Generation X (born from 1965–1980), the children of the Boomers, grew up in a different world than their parents. Both parents (Boomers) often worked outside the home, and Generation X became “latchkey children” who learned to be independent problem-solvers and self-focused. Television programs of the generation depicted nontraditional households, including blended families and single-parent homes. Society taught Generation X to be suspicious of strangers, lock doors, and be cautious. Generation X observed closely as companies “down-sized” or “reorganized,” leaving parents without jobs. Now many Generation X’ers are determined to place importance on family before work and may lack clear career paths. They are intent on learning marketable skills and having portable careers. For many, their first loyalty is to themselves and the career paths they choose (Weston, 2006).

Parenting issues often vary by generation. The parents of generation Y (born 1991–1999) tend to be late Baby Boomers and early Generation X who established their successful careers before having children. They arranged their work and personal schedules to attend their children’s activities. If both Generation Y parents worked, established infrastructures were in place, such as day care, preschools, and organized classes and teams. Unlike

Generation X, Generation Y was not sent home alone and required to function independently. They grew up in a world of constant stimulation, multicultural marriages, and acceptance of diversity (Weston, 2006). Parents interceded when Generation Y failed, resulting in Generation Y knowing mostly success. Electronic innovations allowed Generation Y to obtain global news and instant messages. They embraced “texting,” becoming accustomed to abbreviated communication anywhere, anytime. Television influenced this generation through reality programs. Today, Generation Y prefers to work and problem-solve in informal groups (Lower, 2007). They are loyal to a company that provides them with the best schedule, the most money, and the latest electronic gadgets. Generation Y’ers often are multitaskers and likely to have more than one job at the same time. They may be slow to accept additional responsibility. Balance is the Generation Y mantra.

Assessing Generational Values

To explore intergenerational issues in nursing, a survey exempt from institutional review board approval was conducted at a 600-bed, acute-care, teaching medical center located in the Gulf South region of the United States. The sample of 77 recently hired nurses was 84% female and 16% male. Fifteen were Boomers, 26

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