



## Song Partners for Kindergartens: An Intergenerational Program in Switzerland

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## FROM THE FIELD

### Program Profile

# Song Partners for Kindergartens: An Intergenerational Program in Switzerland

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Switzerland has an expanding network of intergenerational programs and resources, which allows community leaders to share goals, ideas for community-based activities, and reflections on lessons learned to improve practices (Schweizerische Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft, 2014). The Song Partners for Kindergartens program was founded in 2008 to empower older adults in the city of Bern to teach and learn traditional songs with young children. The city of Bern financially supported the initiative out of a desire to create new opportunities for older adults to actively engage with the youngest generation in their community and to build capacity for networking and learning. As director of vocal-music instruction and program development at the conservatory of music, one of the authors of this article was responsible for facilitating the intergenerational activities in a total of 33 kindergarten classrooms.

### Goals of the Song Partners program

The program was designed to benefit educators, children, and older adults. Kindergarten teachers who are not used to singing traditional songs may neglect to sing them due to limited time or because they assume that children are not interested in old songs can benefit from learning how to teach traditional songs. The educators can learn songs that contain references to past experiences young children may not relate to or understand—for example, cutting hay with a scythe. Equally, children in kindergarten can benefit from opportunities to hear and sing traditional songs that they may not learn otherwise. Older adults who participate as “Song Partners” can benefit from free voice lessons and ideas for teaching selected songs to young children. Overall, educators, children, and older adults are forming new intergenerational connections and friendships as a result of the weekly singing sessions that take place in individual kindergarten classrooms.

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## Participants

The program coordinator recruited older adults via newspaper announcements and kindergarten educators via e-mail messages. In preparation for the voice training for older adults and teaching of songs to young children, a manual was produced which was shared with the older adults (*Song Partners*) during voice development lessons. As part of the training, Song Partners decided which types of songs they wanted to rehearse and sing with children. The singers formed groups consisting of three to four older adults. Each group was matched with an educator and children in a kindergarten classroom. The teachers formed partnerships with individual groups of Song Partners and coordinated weekly visits to their classrooms over the course of a 9-week trimester. The aim was that the regularity of visits would contribute to a sense of belonging for the Song Partners and allow them to build partnerships with the kindergarten teachers.

## Activities

In preparation for teaching songs to children, the older adults received orientation and voice training that the program coordinator provided at the conservatory of music initially during four 3-hour blocks. Once the Song Partners began teaching in kindergartens, they gathered once per month for voice-development lessons and for the rehearsal of songs, which were compiled in a book. The orientation sessions allowed the Song Partners to practice the use of playful approaches for motivating young children to learn and sing traditional songs. One aspect of the methods training focused on structuring a 45-minute session into three parts including: (a) a welcome song and review of learned songs, (b) teaching a new song through activities and singing, and (c) a concluding activity and song. Groups of three to four Song Partners prepared for the weekly singing sessions. The program coordinator explains how she structured a training session:

First, everybody sang together and we developed a welcome song and then we decided who would introduce the new song, who would wrap it into a story or other activities and who would repeat something from last week. Then, we had the concluding ritual and song. Some older adults also played an instrument. By bringing the instrument along, they did not all have to always expose themselves vocally. But there were groups that sang richly with three voices and it sounded like a lot more.

After completing the 12 hours of initial training, the Song Partners spent weekly sessions with kindergarten teachers and children. In [Figures 1 and 2](#), older adults are seen engaging in songs and activities with children in two different kindergarten classrooms. At the end of a 10-week trimester, Song



**Figure 1.** Song Partners for Kindergartens practice a traditional song with children. They reinforce the song's words with gestures and movements.



**Figure 2.** A Song Partner plays a zither and accompanies the children in a song.

Partner teams could be assigned to new classrooms or continue in the classroom they had been in, depending on the wishes of the kindergarten educators and Song Partners. The placement of teams was carefully monitored by the program coordinator to ensure that optimal outcomes could be reached for both children and older adults participating in the program.

Coaching visits conducted in classrooms, follow-up discussions held with Song Partners during voice lessons, and e-mail correspondence were crucial vehicles for reflective practice. Furthermore, cooperative reflection helped in deciding whether changes in grouping or placement would be beneficial for children, educators, and the older adults who were called Song Partners.

## Outcomes and benefits

The Song Partners' active engagement in planning activities indicated their high level of motivation for providing children with meaningful singing experiences. Overall, the program enjoyed more enthusiastic participation from older adults than from kindergarten teachers. One possible suggestion for the kindergarten teachers' lack of response to participating in the program is that they may lack information about the value of intergenerational learning and/or may be feeling overwhelmed by the increasing curricular demands on kindergarten programs. Among the Song Partner teams, the majority of older adults worked well together. They learned early on that a very important factor in preparing singing sessions was team building. When the communication within a team worked well, kindergarten educators felt positive about the program. When communication faltered, individual teams required more-intense coaching from the project coordinator.

Kindergarten teachers observed that children learned the traditional songs well, including children who spoke Swiss German and German as foreign languages. The joy of singing in a group that includes older adults was a new experience for many children. Additionally, many kindergarten teachers recognized how children sought out the older adults for attention, especially the male Song Partners. The children connected with the older adults beyond the singing sessions. Toward the end of the 5-year initial phase of the program, coaching focused on encouraging Song Partner teams and kindergarten teachers to plan for future activities. The network that older adults built has empowered many to continue meeting and volunteering in kindergartens or other school programs.

## Unique features

The project was presented at various events publicly to show to the larger community what Song Partners for Kindergartens can do to build understanding and appreciation for traditional songs among generations. Song Partners and children sang at the Older Adult Forum in 2009, an intergenerational-movement meeting in 2012 and various concerts to which families of children, older adults, and neighborhood residents in the vicinity of the conservatory were invited. While the program is no longer funded by the city or organized by the conservatory, several kindergartens continue to welcome

older adults into their classrooms. In addition, the city of Bern continues to invite new applications for start-up grants for intergenerational programs (Stadt Bern, 2014).

The program described in this paper is embedded in Swiss cultural traditions. To consider replicating the program in other contexts requires that community leaders and educators understand the traditions that families and educators of young children and older adults value and desire in their community. Simply duplicating this project would not work for several reasons. First, the songs that older adults sing in Switzerland would not work in other parts of the world, not even in French-speaking regions of Switzerland, except for a few songs. Second, kindergarten classrooms have unique setups, schedules, and curricula that are influenced by educational guidelines and norms. Educators in other regions may not respond to the invitation to participate in an intergenerational program in the same way educators in Switzerland did. Third, specific procedures to ensure safety for children are region specific; for example, in the United States, background checks of older adult volunteers would be required in most schools. Background checks are not required for volunteers who serve in Swiss schools.

To learn more about opportunities and approaches for organizing programs similar to the Song Partners framework, the authors are happy to provide further information about the Song Partners in Kindergartens program.

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