

Socialization With a Capital "S"
*The Importance of Building and Sustaining Social Capital in the
Activity Program*
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Friendliness. Warmth. Reciprocity. Good Will. Touchy -Feely terms or critical ingredients for human survival and endurance? Social engineers are engaged in a torrid discussion of the impact of **Social Capital** on the public square, the workplace, politics, land development, economics, and families. In the smaller circle of your activity program, **social capital** may be the most important issue that you will address. Let's talk about "Socialization With a Capital S".

Definition

Social Capital as a defining term is attributed to L. Judson Hanifan, a social reformer, who used the term first in 1916, and then again in 1920 during a talk he gave at Penn State University . Here is an excerpt from his talk: "*We not refer to real estate or to personal property or to cash, but rather to that in life which tends to make those tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit, -the rural community, whose logical center is in most cases the school. In community building, as in business organization, there must be an accumulation of capital before the constructive work can be done....*"

Today, most of us consider **Social Capital** to be *social networks and the morals and reciprocity that emerge as a natural outcome of those connections*. Simply put: people need people. That may never be more true than when one becomes a senior adult. I think there are five reasons why social capital becomes of capital importance in the senior years:

- ✓ After retirement, the workplace is no longer available as a source of **social capital**. Seniors need opportunities and sometimes facilitation to develop and nurture networks of friendship and common interest.

- ✓ Seniors have more time to invest in building **social capital**.
- ✓ The natural aging process means that friends from youth may pass away or move away, and spouses may pass away, leaving seniors with deficits in **social capital**.
- ✓ The wisdom that comes from a long life often allows seniors to re-examine their priorities and may lead them to crave more and better **social capital**.
- ✓ Research clearly compels us that **social capital** is a critical element in keeping the brain healthy and engaged.

Here's what health writer Tara Parker-Pope reported in the Wall Street Journal in June 2005:

"The MacArthur Foundation study, which evaluated 4,000 older people from Massachusetts, North Carolina and Connecticut, focused on the one-third of the group that had the highest mental and physical function at the outset. Researchers then followed up with them at three and eight years into the study. As it turned out, whether or not the study subjects had a high frequency of emotional support -- meaning they spoke and met often with family and friends -- was a powerful predictor of who in the group ended up improving their physical function over time. Having friends and family in your life increases the likelihood that you will get out more, keep moving and actually improve with age, rather than decline."

Moreover, the American Psychological Association notes that those who are less socially connected have a lower immune system (*Only the Lonely*, May 2005). Students who reported being "lonely" had worse reactions to flu shots than those who were more socially attuned. One can easily see the implications for the Senior Activity Program. Senior adults face both physical and mental challenges. What a wonderful mind and body tonic **social capital** can be if prescribed effectively in your curriculum!

Give Me an S for Socialization

Let's examine a dozen "S" words that may help to infuse your Senior Activity Program with a healthy dose of **social capital**.

S.....Set up the physical environment to encourage social interaction. Cozy groupings instead of long work tables. Colored bulbs in lamps. Warm colors of paint. Lots of greenery. Colors, scents, and textures that induce warm, relaxed feelings may help to induce **social capital** as well. Create small lounges or meeting areas on the campus, including benches and rocking chairs in unexpected places both indoors and out.

S.....Sew the seeds of **social capital** with silly, simple "meet and greet" activities at the opening of every session or gathering. Don't leave folks on their own to make friends. As the teenagers say today: "Hook them up". Try an activity like "Match-Maker" found in the box at the end of the article.

S.....Send the right message yourself if you want to increase **social capital**. Use eye contact, proximity, smiles, and gestures that help those who may be feeling reserved or lonely to open up. Use name tags for yourself and participants and make sure that they are easy to read and attractive.

S.....Surround activities with music as a method for encouraging **social capital**. Music helps people to relax, reduces the perception of pain, and increases endurance. All of this is useful in a senior program. Vary selections of classical, New Age nature sounds, ethnic music, and lively pop to keep things jumping. Play a "Guess that Tune" by putting folks in pairs to increase interaction and then changing partners when a correct guess is made.

S.....Seek out *Service activities* to build **social capital**. Research suggests that giving back to the community is critical in growing **social capital**, so set up opportunities for

your participants to mentor, mail letters to military service men and women, make blankets for shelters, or mingle and greet at community events. Be sure to provide a variety of choices for service, so that the interests of individuals are served. Personalize this by identifying family connections that could be tapped. Is Mr. Smith's grandson in the army? Care packages to his platoon might be welcome.

S.....Single out individuals who have done interesting things in their lives and let them tell their stories. Listening skills help to grow **social capital** and everyone needs to share. You may have to draw folks out, but giving them a voice can go a long way in increasing connections.

S.....Search for ways to involve your seniors in the community. Tickets for the local little theater? Band concerts in the park? The idea is not so much that seniors attend, though that is important for stimulation and recreation, but that they play an active role in the events. Can they usher? Stamp tickets? Pour punch? **Social Capital** is an investment by individuals in the fabric of community.

S.....Savor **Social Capital** with cooking and eating opportunities in which seniors can play active roles. Sharing food is a central focus of bonding and rituals in our human family. Celebrate ethnic events. Religious days. Pancake supper for Lent?

S.....Share **social capital** by making membership in community, fraternal, or religious organizations available and accessible. Hold meetings on site or make sure that your participants have travel arranged to meetings of clubs and societies in which they have an interest or investment. The wildly popular "Red Hat" groups are one example, but not the only one. The Alpha Delta Kappa Teacher's Sorority in which I am a member has a healthy group of senior, retired teachers who attend and contribute regularly.

S.....Slide **social capital** into recreation. There is substantial research in the field showing that recreation is a natural extension of social capital. Participate as a group in

the annual October Breast Cancer walks or in other fund or awareness raising walks. Water aerobics, chair aerobics, and yoga are other healthful ways to build endurance and social connectivity.

S.....School your participants in **social capital** through a partnership with a local school. Reading aloud to a kindergarten class, playing the piano for a school musical, making costumes for a play, monitoring achievement tests, answering the phone in the office, or eating lunch with a lonely child builds **social capital** for seniors and youngsters. Many high schools, especially private or parochial ones are adding requirements for social service or service learning. Perhaps you can match up with one to meet both or your needs?

S.....Seal **social capital** with rituals and routines that bring people together. Saturday night dinners with candles and wine glasses. (Wine is optional). Birthday parties with themes and games. Wednesday afternoon Bible Study. Tuesday morning water balloon fights on the lawn. Friday night movies with popcorn and rating cards. How many stars did Mrs. Washington give to the new Tom Cruise flick? Post participants' ratings on a bulletin board and then discuss the film at another event.

Social Capital gives all of us a reason to live and adds substance and meaning to everyday experiences. Being alone and feeling lonely can be as destructive as any disease unless careful steps are taken to weave frequent, fun fellowship in your activity program. It is a real challenge for all of us. Researchers at Duke University reported in the American Sociological Review (June 2006) that Americans are increasingly lonely and have fewer friends. That which was once natural and accessible must now become planned and deliberate. Even so, the challenges must not deter us when the stakes are so high. Perhaps St. Thomas Aquinas had it right when he said:

“Friendship is the source of the greatest pleasures, and without friends even the most agreeable pursuits become tedious.”

Match-Maker Game

Use the heart shape provided and write one word on each half of the heart.

One word should be the name of someone in the group. The other word or "match" should be a descriptor of that person that begins with the same letter as the individual's name.

Example: Sweet/Susie
Daring/Dan
Elegant/ Evie
Playful/Paul

Give each participant a half of a heart, making sure that he or she does NOT have his or her own name. Direct them to mingle and chat until they make a match.

