Recreation teams in long-term care and retirement homes work hard to provide activities and programs that improve quality of life and a sense of well-being for their residents.

At The Village of Riverside Glen in Guelph, Ontario, for instance, they have seen first-hand the benefits to residents of running intergenerational music therapy programs. But, so far, there hasn’t been any qualitative research on how or why their particular programs work.

What’s different about the current program at Riverside Glen is the age of the children involved – they’re all under four.

Professor Kate Dupuis, Schlegel Innovation Leader in Arts and Aging, says there is little research focused on children this age interacting with older adults in music therapy.

"From a research perspective, we’re really adding to our current knowledge of these types of intergenerational programs," she says.

Dupuis was awarded an Ontario Trillium Foundation grant to observe and document the relationship development between the children, their care providers, the residents and the team members involved.

To do this they are conducting in-depth interviews with parents or guardians of the children to find out why they chose the intergenerational program and how the experience affected them. They will also interview the music therapist to see if she found value in the program session and what improvements she thinks could be made.

As well, residents will be observed before, during and after the program to see if they experience any benefits.

"One of the main goals is to document for the first time whether an intergenerational music program with children this small can have benefits for the personal expressions of residents," she says, "we’re really paving the way here."

Dupuis says research shows connecting children and their parents or guardians with older adults in a comfortable care setting – developing bonds between the generations – not only benefits older adults, it also helps young children learn about older adults in a positive way and challenges the stigma and stereotypes about aging.

"I am hopeful that this research will help strengthen programs like the one at Riverside Glen, and perhaps inspire more communities to create space for their oldest and youngest citizens to find common ground through music," she says.

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So, she and her research team are evaluating an eight-week program at Riverside Glen, happening this spring.

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