

Care for toddlers and elderly side by side, says Matt Hancock, health secretary

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It has been argued that the young and old would benefit from spending time together CHANNEL 4

Nurseries should be opened next to NHS services for the elderly to encourage generations to mix, the health secretary has said.

Matt Hancock argued that the physical and mental health of old and young would benefit from spending time together after positive reports from early schemes.

“Intergenerational care” began in Japan in 1976 and has enjoyed success in the US and Europe. Calls for the concept to be widely applied in Britain have been growing as families increasingly live further apart, but Mr Hancock is the first senior politician to say that it should become routine.

In an interview with *The House* magazine, Mr Hancock spoke of the importance of maintaining community hospitals to provide routine services, insisting the era of closing them was over. “I want community hospitals increasingly to become health hubs where you have the physios, some of the day cases, the GPs, mental health services and some of the charity-provided services like Age UK,” he said.

“And in some cases, also the nursery, because there’s increasing evidence that if you put services for old people and services for very young people together then you get a better outcome for all of them. I’ve seen this work incredibly well in different parts of the country.”

Last year, *The Times* reported how a nursery in south London had become the first to open a site at a care home. Apples and Honey has been followed by larger groups such as Busy Bees, Britain’s largest childcare provider with 342 nurseries, and Anchor, which provides housing for older people.

The think tank United For All Ages wants 500 cross-generational housing, care home, school and nursery sites to break down “age apartheid” in Britain.

In the interview, Mr Hancock also said that social media “has a part to play” in rising levels of mental ill health among teenagers. “If you look at the figures, there’s an increase in self-harm among teenage girls but not among teenage boys. And that implies that something happened in the last decade to increase the pressure on teenage girls,” he said.

Simon Stevens, head of NHS England, has called for tech companies to pay a levy to fund mental health treatment, but Mr Hancock said: “What I want to see is social media companies paying their fair share of tax and adequate funding for mental health services. Now, whether you link the two directly or not is less important than whether we get the funding into children’s mental health services.”

Studies have shown that loneliness is bad for physical health and staying socially active can not only slow mental decline but also help lower blood pressure. A 2013 study in Japan found that elderly people in such “intergenerational care” programmes not only engaged more with the toddlers but talked to other older residents more often.