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SPECIAL ISSUE PAPER

Leisure education within the context of a childhood obesity intervention programme: parents' experiences

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Parents are viewed as critical agents in preventing and treating childhood obesity. Intervention programmes that target parents have included leisure education as a component. This study explored parents' experiences in a leisure education process conducted as part of a childhood obesity intervention programme. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 parents before and after they had completed the programme. Parents became more aware of their children's free time use, interests, and experiences and developed an understanding of their role as facilitators of their children's leisure including discussing and better guiding that leisure.

Keywords: Leisure education; parents; childhood obesity; leisure facilitators

The World Health Organization (2001) has declared the prevalence of childhood obesity a global epidemic. This is a health risk affecting physical and psychological wellbeing. Its increased prevalence has prompted considerable research into contributing and protective factors (Ogden, Carroll, & Flegal, 2008). Genetic, individual, family, organisational, and societal factors contribute to the epidemic (Davison & Birch, 2001). Among the strategies for addressing obesity is the role of parents as promoters of healthy lifestyle choices (Golan & Crow, 2004).

Parents play a key role in facilitating children's leisure (Shannon & Shaw, 2008). They introduce and expose their children to activities that help with the formation of preferences (Raymore, 2002). Parents support engagement in physical activity through encouraging, co-participating, organising, financing, and transporting (Beets, Vogel, Chapman, Pitetti, & Cardinal, 2007). Parents also act as role models via their own leisure preferences and habits (see, e.g., Anderson, Hughes, & Fuemmeler, 2009).

Parents cite numerous barriers to adopting strategies to reducing sedentary behaviour such as television watching and video game playing (Evans, Jordan, & Horner, 2011). Parents are reluctant to restrict such behaviour because it keeps children occupied and gives parents time to do other tasks (Evans et al., 2011). Lack of time, money, information, and transportation, along with child preferences, are cited as barriers to increasing physical activity levels. Parents also report the following as barriers: the presence of children's siblings; weather; access to facilities; safety; and their own motivation (Weir, Etelson, & Brand, 2006). Researchers suggest that parental attitudes toward physical activity are a barrier to adopting obesity prevention strategies since these attitudes influence what they introduce, support,

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and model (Lopez-Dicastillo, Grande, & Callery, 2010). For example, parents' perceptions of unsafe neighbourhoods can limit children's access to outdoor spaces for physically active leisure (Boufous, Finch, & Bauman, 2004).

Because parents face barriers in preventing or addressing childhood obesity, they may require assistance to negotiate them (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2010; Golan & Crow, 2004). Obesity intervention researchers have identified the need to educate parents about how to increase children's levels of physical activity (Smibert, Abbott, Macdonald, Hogan, & Leong, 2010; Sothern, 2004).

Leisure education is a process of developing the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to make positive leisure choices (Robertson, 2007). Leisure education can provide a framework for understanding individual responsibility for leisure. Leisure education can assist parents to develop the tools needed to facilitate positive change, including assessing and better understanding their children's leisure interests. Perceived barriers to the facilitation of healthy leisure can also be addressed and realistic goals for changes to leisure behaviours put in place. Such leisure education programmes can foster positive results when parents are viewed as the primary inducers of change in their child's sedentary lifestyles. The present study aimed to explore parents' experiences of a leisure education process conducted as part of an intervention programme targeting parents of obese children.

The Paediatric Lifestyle Management Program (LMP)

This programme, operated by the Faculty of Kinesiology at the University of New Brunswick, served parents of children between the ages of five and 16 with a Body Mass Index $\geq$ 85th percentile. Parents were referred by their family physician or paediatrician. The goal was to improve the children's lifestyle choices and behaviours. The programme consisted of an orientation, three group education sessions (health, nutrition, and leisure education and physical activity), and six 30-minute, one-on-one parent sessions with professionals in each of the three areas. The LMP was the only known obesity intervention programme to include a specific component on leisure education. The goals of the leisure education component were to assist parents in: (1) assessing their use of free time; (2) assessing their child's use of free time; (3) exploring their child's interests; (4) determining constraints their child faced; (5) determining constraints in facilitating more active leisure pursuits for their child; and (6) identifying strategies for negotiating the constraints.

Prior to the group session on leisure, parents participated in an intake interview with a member of the leisure education team. During the leisure education session, leisure problems faced by young people in relation to leisure were identified, the benefits of physical activity were highlighted and common barriers which parents face were discussed.

In preparation for the first session, parents helped their child complete a time diary, recording the activities of one typical week day and weekend day. For the second session, parents engaged their children in discussion about the activities they were good at, wanted to improve in, and could be good at, if given the opportunity to try. The third session focused on parents' roles in supporting their children's participation. Before the session, parents completed an Activity Support Parent Questionnaire (Davison, Cutting, & Birch, 2003). For the fourth session, parents were asked to complete a Leisure Interest Inventory with their child (Robertson, 2007).

Barriers to participation were the focus of the final two sessions. Parents and children brainstormed strategies for overcoming these barriers.

Exit interviews provided parents with opportunities to reflect on their experience of the leisure education process. They shared what they had learned and the changes they had made or were planning to make to their own and their child's leisure behaviour.

Methodology

The value of qualitative evidence in assessing health-related interventions has been acknowledged only recently (Pope & Mays, 2006). As a result, there is limited descriptive or interpretative research considering the experiences of parents within the context of a childhood obesity intervention programme. More specifically, the authors found no information on experiences related to a leisure education process. This research was conducted within a qualitative paradigm informed by a phenomenological perspective (van Manen, 1990).

All parents entering the LMP were invited to participate in this research. To be research participants, parents needed to give permission for the information shared during the interview and during their one-on-one leisure education sessions to be used for research purposes. All parents who entered the programme agreed to be research participants. Between September 2007 and February 2010, 42 parents participated: 34 mothers and eight fathers.

Thirty-two parents (26 mothers; six fathers) formed the data set for analysis. These parents participated in at least four leisure education sessions, completed all of the exercises and participated in both the pre- and post-programme interviews. (Parents who attended less than four sessions did not cover all of the topics associated with the goals of the leisure education programme. Parents who attended four sessions or more, but who did not complete all of the core exercises of the leisure education programme, also did not cover all of the intended topics.)

Participants ranged in age from 28 to 49, with 20 identifying themselves as divorced and 12 as married or living in common law relationships. Socio-economic statuses covered a wide range. Five parents had postgraduate degrees, and were in professional jobs. Three required social assistance in order to meet their families' basic needs. Many of the parents struggled with weight issues themselves.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and case notes were typed. QSR International's NVivo 7 software, a qualitative data analysis software programme, was used to help organise and manage the interview and case note data. Themes were isolated using van Manen's (1990) sententious and selective approaches. To gain a global sense of the data, the author read the transcripts several times, immersing herself in the participants' descriptions of their experiences of the leisure education process. The fundamental meaning of the experience for the participants as emerging from the text as a whole was captured. Two key essences were observed across all participants: an increased awareness of their child's leisure and an awareness of parents' important role as facilitators of their child's leisure.

Next, selective thematic analysis was conducted to identify patterns or themes that contributed to the two key essences. Each transcript was reviewed for significant or revealing phrases that related to or illustrated the dimensions of the core themes (van Manen, 1990). The meanings of these dimensions were

considered and interpreted. Data excerpts provided support for the interpretations. Labels were given to these tentative themes. Within each transcript, themes were examined for linkages, and across participants, themes were examined for commonalities.

Findings

The exercises completed by parents and discussed during the one-on-one sessions were identified as having significant value to them. Parents' descriptions suggested their experiences were positive and focused mainly on what they learned from the leisure education process. In common, they reported increased awareness of their children's leisure and of their roles as facilitators of that leisure.

Increased awareness of child's leisure

Many parents realised that their knowledge of their child's leisure was limited and, in some cases, incorrect. Awareness about how time was spent and their child's leisure interests and experiences assisted parents in better understanding how they could support their child to increase their active leisure pursuits and decrease their sedentary behaviour.

Awareness about how time is spent

At their initial interviews, parents discussed what their children were interested in and how their child's leisure time was spent. One of the first activities undertaken by parents as part of the leisure education process was to complete a time diary with their child for a typical week day and a typical weekend day. Many parents, both in the session that followed that exercise and in the exit interview, reflected on how eye-opening it was to actually record how time was spent. In comparing estimates at the initial interview with the time diary records, most parents had underestimated screen time by between one and three hours. "During the week it would be about an hour each day and on the weekend, it would be more – probably 4 hours" (Initial interview, Mother, Family (F) 25).[1] The time diary completed by this mother revealed that her daughter watched 2.5 hours of television (TV) on the week day and 6.5 hours on the weekend day. When asked if she believed the two days were "typical," the mother said that she believed they were. At the exit interview, she reflected on the time diary as one of the most valuable exercises:

> The time chart we did for those two days caught me off guard. I knew we had to cut back on weekend TV time, that was a goal coming in here, but I thought we were good during the week. We really are at an hour a day during the week now [laughs].

Parents also underestimated how much available time there was for incorporating physically active leisure into both their child's life and their own:

> *Researcher: At the beginning, you were concerned that there was no time for physical activity. Where are you at with that now?*
>
> Oh, there's time [laughs]. Like you pointed out when I brought in the diary, we have pockets of 30 minutes before supper and after supper and lots of hour-long pockets on the weekend. I had this idea that half an hour wasn't enough to, you know . . . it wasn't

> enough so it didn't count. But he [son] can kick the soccer ball in the backyard while I make dinner or he and his sister can play tag. We can go for a walk in the neighbourhood for 20 minutes. (Mother, F38)

In a few cases, the time diary helped parents shift their perceptions about lack of time. When time was no longer perceived as a barrier, an important step forward was taken. Parents were then able to work on overcoming other barriers to active leisure such as lack of motivation or not knowing what to do for active leisure:

> We went from "we don't have time to be active" to "what can we do for 30 or 40 minutes or even 15 minutes" and it adds up. Finding time isn't the real problem like we thought, it's figuring out what to do with that time. (Father, F42)

Awareness of interests

At the initial interview, parents discussed their child's leisure interests. Often a concern was that children's interests were few and narrow in scope (e.g. all screen-related). However, when they had an opportunity to ascertain interest in a more structured way through the Leisure Interest Inventory, many parents indicated that they had been surprised by the activities that were of interest to their children:

> Those exercises were really wow moments for me because if I had to fill that out on his [her son's] behalf I would have answered differently, so that opened up some dialogue for us because I was able to say, "Wow, I really didn't know that you liked skipping rope." (Mother, F44)

Some parents were not aware that their children had been exposed to certain activities: "I didn't even know he knew what *tae kwon do* was. He said they had a demo at school and I didn't know that and I didn't know he was interested in trying it" (Mother, F31).

Parents also learned about the degree to which some activities were of interest compared to others. For example, one parent thought her son loved all sports but he actually rated artistic activities (e.g. drawing, painting, going to festivals, photography) as of higher interest. Tennis was the only sport in which he indicated high interest, and was one in which he had never received formal instruction or much opportunity to participate. His mother concluded:

> Obviously, I was not in tune with him at all, you know? I wasn't asking questions. I was making these assumptions and he's the type of kid that won't really complain or say, "I'd rather do this." (Mother, F32)

There were some activities parents had not thought to make known to their child or had not asked the child about whether they were keen to participate in them. For example, one mother (F40) was surprised to find her daughter, who loved reading and would read books for four or more hours a day, was interested in skateboarding. Another mother (F48) had not considered curling: "We talked about winter sports and she has a friend who is in curling and she said maybe we could go watch once to see what it was like."

Awareness of experiences

The "What Am I Good At?" and Leisure Interest Inventory that parents completed with their children, prompted discussion about their children's leisure

experiences. In some cases, parents were not aware of their child's negative experiences in a particular activity. One parent reflected on the value of the "What Am I Good At?" exercise:

> We never talked much about leisure – her interests or what she might like to try or even what she thinks she can't do. I was surprised to see so many things she wants to improve at. When we talked about that, there was a level of frustration there that I never knew about. I ask more questions now and that's where a lot of learning has happened. Like with the skating, she likes it, but going with school is not fun because she's not very good compared to her classmates. (Mother, F15)

Many parents had not previously considered the factors associated with an activity that had contributed to a positive experience for their child. Participating with a sibling or friend, having a leader who did not tolerate bullying, having a coach who was encouraging or focused on individual improvement, having fun, meeting new friends, and improving skill level were factors that, parents learned, made for a positive experience. Some parents discussed how they were putting this awareness into action:

> For March break camp, I looked for programmes with leaders who don't tolerate bullying because of what he said about his favourite activity is soccer not because he likes soccer; it's because the coach encourages him and won't let kids be mean. (Mother, F39)

> We took her for that session at the rock climbing wall and, you know, there was that initial resistance until we said she could bring a friend. And, like I said to you, she said she had fun and said she'd like to go again. (Father, F53)

The "barrier" exercise undertaken by parents seemed to highlight resistance to and prompt discussions about family leisure. Parents learned ways to increase their child's enjoyment of an active family leisure activity:

> We talked about how when we go for a walk at O'Dell Park, if we take little rest breaks, she enjoys it a lot more – it's a good experience. When I thought about it, I realised that she was right – she doesn't complain if we stop every 10 or 15 minutes for a little rest. (Father, F28)

Enhanced understanding of their role as facilitators

A number of parents entered the LMP unclear of their role as facilitators of their child's leisure or with a limited view of what that role involved. The leisure education process helped parents develop a better understanding of the various roles they could play in helping their child to be more active or engage in less sedentary behaviour. Generally, the leisure education process helped parents realise they needed to pay more attention to both their own and their child's leisure. In particular, three "understandings" emerged as being most salient for parents.

Understanding that children's leisure needs to be guided

While many parents had registered their children in activities, few had considered their responsibility in supporting children in unorganised, unstructured leisure time. Having parents complete the time diary as well as focusing on the tasks they engaged in to support their child seemed to bring awareness. "I understand now . . . like how is he supposed to know that he shouldn't watch TV from the minute he gets home until

bed? If we don't help him figure out what to do, how is he supposed to know?" (Father, F46).

Some parents realised that simply suggesting alternative ways to spend time while at home was enough to alter some of the negative leisure behaviour patterns that had developed:

> It seems that all I need to do is say, "Shut off the TV and let's walk over to the playground." She doesn't argue or anything. (Mother, F26)

> Today he came home and asked if he could play a video game, and I was like, "I thought you wanted to make a picture for Annette because it is your last night with her tonight." He was like "Oh yeah" ... so then all afternoon he coloured. (Mother, F35)

Understanding the value of discussing leisure

With the exception of the exercise on parental support, each of the leisure education exercises provided parents with a framework for discussing specific leisure-related issues with their child. Parents' experiences with those conversations (e.g. what they learned, enjoyment in talking about leisure with their child) helped them to view discussions about leisure as important in their role as parents:

> You hear "get your kids more active" but no one tells you how to do that for *your* kid. Those exercises – it forced us to talk and helped me know my kid better. It's my job to figure that out ... can't figure it out unless we talk about it. (Mother, F37)

One parent explained that she had come across information on how to talk to her child about drugs, alcohol, bullying, and sex, but had never seen information on how to talk to her child about her free time or leisure experiences. She (F23) wondered: "How would I know it was important? It was so valuable to have those conversations, but I didn't get information that it was important or how to do it until now."

Understanding that example is important

In the case of parents who had not entered the programme with an understanding that they were role models for leisure, this was an important discovery. As one father (F18) explained: "One of the most important things we learned was that we have to be a role model for these changes to take place – we have to practice before we can preach it."

Parents who were overweight or obese themselves and struggling to increase their own levels of physical activity, seemed to develop an understanding that there was a powerful link between their own behaviour and their child's:

> When we talked about things and she says, "Why do I have to do it and you don't?" ... I mean, it hits you, right? I'm overweight too and she's looking at me and ... it's confusing. I have to be the role model. It's hard to admit that because it means I have to make changes to my free time in order to help her. (Mother, F26)

Other parents shared this mother's sentiments: that being a role model was an aspect that would be most challenging because it required them to address their own priorities related to time and also to identify and overcome their own barriers to being active, such as lack of motivation or lack of energy.

Discussion

Both research and popular press literature point to parents as bearing responsibility for the health of their children (Golan & Weizman, 2001; Shaw & Hilbrecht, 2008). The literature also indicates that parents face challenges in heeding recommendations related to the prevention and treatment of childhood obesity and calls for parent education (Sonneville, La Pelle, Taveras, Gillman, & Prosser, 2009). Through parents' described experiences, this study highlighted the need for and value of engaging families struggling with childhood obesity in leisure education. The guided leisure education process provided parents with the opportunity to explore, discover, and reflect on various, yet specific, aspects of their child's leisure behaviour. Parents described the process as opening the lines of communication with their child about leisure and physical activity. This helped them develop a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of their child's leisure. Developing awareness of their children's time use, interests, and experiences was perceived by parents as a positive, valuable, and important step toward being able to successfully implement recommendations related to increasing physical activity levels.

The findings contribute to existing research that suggests parents with children who are overweight or obese can benefit from education about physical activity and other lifestyle behaviours. Although all parents entering the LMP had children who were overweight or obese, and although they held similar goals of increasing activity levels and reducing sedentary behaviours, the barriers facing each child and his/her parents differed, as did the resources available to achieve these goals. A general, prescriptive approach to educating parents may not be sensitive to differences and therefore not as effective as an approach that helps families understand their unique circumstances. Also, the guidelines and recommendations related to physical activity and sedentary behaviour tend not to address the complexities associated with leisure behaviour. Leisure education involves helping individuals explore leisure behaviour within the context of their lives and families. Parents in this study were able to identify and then focus on those issues most significant and relevant to their child. More than information from experts, parents appeared to need ways to engage their children in discussions about leisure and physical activity in a productive manner. The importance of talking to children about their leisure and physical activity behaviours – their interests, experiences, challenges – has not been emphasised in previous researchers' recommendations to parents and yet was critical for parents in this study.

Existing leisure education literature has stressed the need for leisure education in the case of special groups, including youth, individuals with a wide range of disabilities, and older adults (e.g. Caldwell, 2005; Patterson, 2007). Little attention has been given, however, to the role of leisure education for those who create or support the leisure of others. Children are largely dependent on their parents to support their leisure and physically active pursuits (Thompson, Rehman, & Humbert, 2005). Parents' experiences of the leisure education process associated with the Paediatric Lifestyle Management Program (LMP) at the University of New Brunswick helped them to examine and develop a better understanding of their role in their child's leisure and gain clarification of the ways in which their own actions (e.g. guiding leisure time, offering to co-participate, modelling inactive lifestyles) could influence their child's leisure and physical activity choices and experiences. Parents perceived that this enhanced understanding had helped and would help them to implement

recommendations related to physical activity and sedentary behaviour. Although this study focused on children who were overweight or obese, parents of children with other leisure-related issues (e.g. experiencing boredom, low self-esteem, lacking a sense of belonging) could find similar leisure education processes meaningful.

Some parents admitted feeling resistant initially to the leisure education component of the intervention and others expressed surprise related to its value. These data point to the challenges associated with engaging parents in leisure education. Parents may not, on their own, recognise the need for or value of exploring leisure-related issues with their children or contemplating their role as leisure facilitators. Even if parents did recognise the need for more knowledge related to their own or their child's leisure, there was limited access to opportunities to explore, discover, and reflect on leisure with their child. Intervention programmes, such as the LMP, only provide opportunities for specific populations of individuals. Linking parent leisure education within the context of schools and/or community services (e.g. recreation or youth organisations), as suggested by Pesavento and Ashton (2011), may be the best strategy for providing more parents with opportunities to engage in leisure education processes. Given the important role parents play, engaging them in leisure education may also be important in supporting or reinforcing leisure education efforts targeted at children.

Finally, while this study sheds light on the value of leisure education for parents with children who are overweight or obese, additional research is needed on leisure education processes for individuals who facilitate leisure. For example, caregivers, recreation leaders, and coaches are in positions to create and shape the leisure opportunities and experiences of the individuals in their care or who are participants in their programmes. Capturing their experiences with leisure education, whether formal (e.g. as part of staff training and/or professional development) or informal (e.g. information they make seek out on their own) could further expand the understanding of the role of leisure education and of who stands to benefit from leisure education processes.

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Note

1. After each quote, an indication is made as to who was interviewed (e.g. mother or father) and the identifying number the family was given based on their entry into the programme (e.g. Family 28 is identified as F28).

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