

Family leisure involvement may provide the first and most essential context for positive youth development in today's society.

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Positive youth development within a family leisure context: Youth perspectives of family outcomes

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STRUCTURED AND ORGANIZED PROGRAMS and activities provide valuable settings for youth development. However, the primary setting of the home should be considered the first, and perhaps the most essential, context for positive youth development. Within the home environment, the parents are often the most invested adults in the lives of youth. Parental involvement is one of the strongest protective factors an adolescent can have related to maximizing his or her potential.¹ Evidence supports that strong, positive parental influence contributes to preventing adolescent risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol use and promiscuity.² Positive interaction within the family clearly provides the context that has the potential to play the most significant role when considering experiences that can foster meaningful relationships, help develop skills and competencies, and influence all aspects of a youth's environment. When considering family life, Zabriskie and McCormick stated, "Besides family crisis, shared leisure may be one of the few experiences that bring family members together for any significant amount of time today."³

Scholars have long reported that family leisure involvement serves a purposive role that fosters specific individual and family outcomes. Shaw and Dawson reported that parents “consciously and deliberately” plan and facilitate family leisure activities in order to achieve particular short- and long-term goals: improving family relationships; enhancing family communication; promoting skills, health, fitness, and sportsmanship; teaching moral lessons; instilling values; and creating family unity and identity.⁴ Parents reported that family leisure was so integral to healthy family life that it was with a “sense of urgency” they planned to spend time with children participating in family activities. Mactavish and Schleien reported similar findings in that families viewed family leisure primarily as a means to promote overall quality of family life—for example, family unity, satisfaction, and physical and mental health—and for helping family members learn values and develop life skills, including social skills such as problem solving, compromising, and negotiation.⁵

Harrington also identified the intentional nature of family leisure in which parents organize activities in an effort to build and strengthen family relationships through togetherness and child socialization.⁶ She reported on the critical nature of family leisure as a context in which essential parenting, interaction, and bonding occur, particularly between fathers and their children. For example, she found that children’s sport does more than provide a vital environment in which fathers can share common interests and bond during common experiences; it also “provides concrete ways of supporting children in their activities and occasions for private and meaningful conversations.”⁷ In other words, it appears that parents, as invested adults, purposively or intentionally plan family leisure experiences to create and maintain meaningful relationships and provide supportive opportunities for their children to learn skills and develop behaviors that will both strengthen family life and contribute to their overall positive development. Such conclusions sound strikingly similar to the definition of positive youth development. It is quite possible that family leisure involvement may provide the first and

most essential context for positive youth development in society today.

Family systems framework

Similar to the broader ecological perspective used in the youth development literature, family systems theory suggests that each individual in the family influences the whole, while the whole family also influences each individual.⁸ In other words, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Zabriskie and McCormick summarized family systems theory by stating that it “holds that families are goal directed, self correcting, interconnected systems that both affect and are affected by their environment and by qualities within the family system itself.”⁹ Therefore, from a systems perspective, examination of family variables is likely to provide valuable insight into both family and individual outcomes. This logic suggests it may be useful to examine family leisure and related family outcomes particularly from the perspective of an adolescent family member. Such an approach provides valuable insight and direction when considering family leisure as a context for positive youth development.

Core and balance model of family leisure

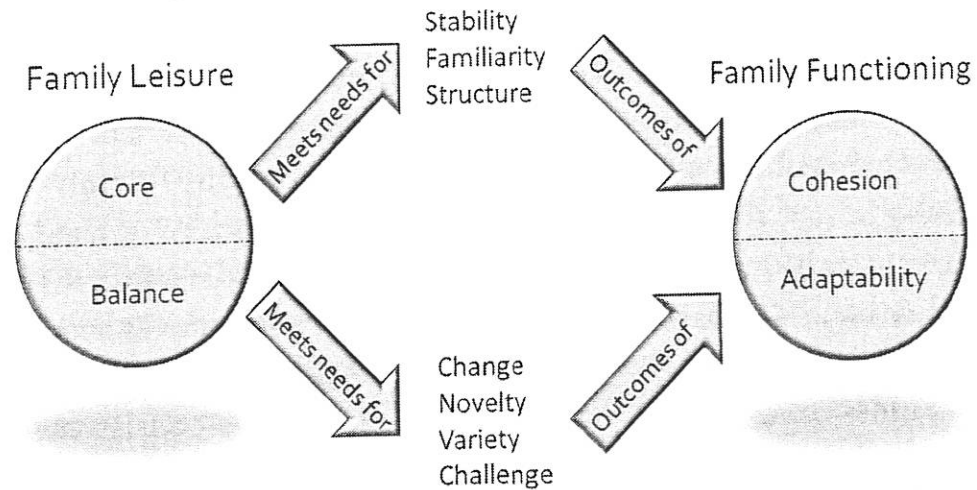
Researchers have reported significant relationships between family leisure involvement and positive family outcomes for over seven decades.¹⁰ One theoretical model that has been established as a useful framework to examine family leisure in recent years is the core and balance model of family leisure functioning.¹¹ The model, grounded in family systems theory, indicates that involvement in different patterns of family leisure contributes to family functioning in different ways. Iso-Ahola indicated that individuals have a tendency to look for stability and change, structure and variety, and familiarity and novelty in their leisure.¹² That is, they tend to

meet needs for both stability and change through their leisure behavior. Freeman and Zabriskie explained that this interplay and balance between stability and change plays a much greater role when considering the needs of a family as a whole.¹³ They clarified that the balance of these needs is an underlying concept of family systems theory indicating that families continually seek a dynamic state of homeostasis. In other words, families must meet both the need for stability in interactions, structure, and relationships and the need for novelty in experience, input, and challenge in order to function and develop effectively.¹⁴

The core and balance model identifies two basic categories or patterns of family leisure, core and balance, that families use to meet needs for both stability and change, and ultimately facilitate outcomes of family cohesion and adaptability which are primary components of family functioning (see Figure 2.1). Core family leisure includes "common, everyday, low-cost, relatively accessible, often home-based activities that many families do frequently."¹⁵ This may include family activities such as playing board games together, making and eating dinner together, watching movies or television together in the home, playing in the yard, gardening together, shooting hoops in the driveway, or simply jumping in the pile of leaves once the raking is done. Such activities often require minimal planning and resources; are quite spontaneous or informal; provide a safe, consistent, and typically positive context in which family relationships tend to be enriched; and increase feelings of family closeness.

Balance family leisure is "depicted by activities that are generally less common, less frequent, more out of the ordinary, and usually not home-based thus providing novel experiences."¹⁶ This may include family activities such as vacations, camping, fishing, special events, and trips to sporting events or theme parks. Such activities often require more investment of resources such as planning, time, effort, or money, and are therefore less spontaneous and more formalized. They tend to be more out of the ordinary and "include elements of unpredictability or novelty, which require family members to negotiate and adapt to new input and

Figure 2.1. Core and balance model of family leisure functioning



experiences that stand apart from everyday life.”¹⁷ They expose family members to unfamiliar stimuli from the environment and new challenges within a leisure context requiring them to learn, adapt, develop, and progress as a family unit.

Overall, the model suggests that core family leisure primarily meets family needs for familiarity and stability and tends to facilitate feelings of closeness, personal relatedness, family identity, bonding, and cohesion. Balance family leisure primarily meets family needs for novelty and change by providing the input necessary for families to be challenged, to develop, to adapt, and to progress as a working unit, and it helps foster the adaptive skills necessary to navigate the challenges of family life in today’s society. Family systems theory holds that these two constructs, family cohesion and family adaptability, are necessary and are the primary components of healthy family functioning and wellness.¹⁸ Similarly, findings related to the core and balance model suggest that involvement in both categories of family leisure is essential and that families who regularly participate in core and balance types of family leisure report higher levels of family functioning than those who participate in high or low amounts of either category.¹⁹ Families who primarily participate in one category without the other are likely to experience disarray, frustration, and dysfunction.

Over the past decade, the core and balance model has provided a useful theoretical framework for examining family leisure among diverse family samples. Findings have provided considerable insight into the relationship of family leisure and family cohesion, family adaptability, and overall family functioning. Scholars have also reported consistent findings regarding the contribution of family leisure to a variety of related constructs, including family communication, family leisure satisfaction, and satisfaction with family life,²⁰ and have done so from different perspectives within the family of parents, young adults, and adolescents.

Findings among samples of large families have consistently reported that participation in both core and balance family leisure is essential, and from parents' perspectives in particular, both core and balance family leisure involvement have been equally significant in predicting family cohesion, adaptability, and overall family functioning.²¹ Similar findings have also been reported when examining parent perspectives of other related variables. Zabriskie and McCormick found that for parents, both core and balance family leisure patterns contributed relatively equally to the explanation of satisfaction with family life.²² They concluded that parents are likely to take a broader or more holistic perspective regarding their family's overall needs and development and appeared to do the same in their family leisure involvement. Parents reported both core and balance patterns, which are related to perceptions of both family cohesion and adaptability, contributed equally to family satisfaction. Zabriskie and McCormick's findings, however, also supported previous studies that have consistently reported the nature of the family leisure and family wellness relationship to be quite different from youth perspectives.

Youth perspectives of family leisure outcomes

When considering family leisure from a youth perspective, the core and balance model again provides a useful framework. Consider asking typical eleven- to fifteen-year-olds about their family

leisure preferences or what types of family leisure activities they think are the most important for their family to participate in. Although one might think that typical adolescents would place much higher value on the new, exciting, more expensive, more challenging balance types of family activities such as vacations, camping, skiing, boating, and entertainment, studies have consistently found just the opposite. Responses from youth perspectives “have consistently reported core family leisure involvement to be a greater contributor to the explanation of family functioning than balance family leisure involvement in a variety of family samples.”²³ In other words, “when all other factors are taken into account, youth in most families consider core family leisure involvement to play a particularly valuable role in relation to their evaluation of family functioning.”²⁴ Freeman and Zabriskie found that from a youth perspective, core family leisure involvement was the only significant multivariate predictor of family functioning even though both core and balance had significant univariate relationships.²⁵ They concluded that families in their sample, particularly the youth, indicated that “regular involvement in common everyday, low-cost, relatively accessible, and often home-based activities with family members was the best predictor of aspects of family functioning such as emotional closeness, feelings of connectedness, mutual respect and a family system’s ability to be flexible in roles, rules, and relationships.” They also explained that although core family leisure appeared to play a particularly meaningful role related to family functioning, due to the interrelationship between core and balance family leisure, balance types of family activities should not be abandoned. While examining the role of family leisure in facilitating improved family communication from a youth perspective, Smith, Freeman, and Zabriskie²⁶ also found that core family leisure had a stronger relationship to family functioning than balance and supported Freeman and Zabriskie’s²⁷ claim that core family leisure involvement was “essential to higher family functioning and may make a more valuable contribution to family life.” They concluded that “core family leisure in particular offers parents an unobtrusive, enjoyable venue in

which family members can interact frequently for small periods of time in or around the home. Thus, under the guise of family fun, families can take small steps toward better communication and more functional interaction.”²⁸

Similar findings have also been reported when examining other related family variables. Zabriskie and McCormick found that core family leisure involvement was the only factor that had a significant positive correlation to the youth’s perception of family satisfaction from a multivariate level. They suggested the “fact that the core patterns stood out among the youth may be related to their need for consistency and stability in family activity patterns particularly during early adolescent development.” In examining the differences in parent and youth responses, they found parents were more satisfied with their family life when they were involved in family leisure that was new and challenging, thus addressing the family’s need for change and facilitating the teaching and learning of better adaptive skills and abilities. The youth, in contrast, appeared to have greater need for stability, consistency, and regularity in their preferences for family leisure. Therefore, they concluded, “While parents may have a greater need to teach new skills and prepare the family for the future with leisure, their children may simply desire to attain a stable sense of belongingness and closeness through family leisure.”²⁹

Other studies have found similar results when examining the quality of family leisure involvement. Agate, Zabriskie, Agate, and Poff reported that among their large national sample of families, “core family leisure satisfaction was the single greatest predictor of satisfaction with family life and explained up to twice as much variance as balance family leisure satisfaction” not only from a youth perspective, but from a parent and family perspective as well. They again recognized that satisfaction with balance family leisure involvement was still a significant factor and should not be discounted since involvement and satisfaction with both categories were likely to complement one another and be most beneficial for families, as the model suggests. The authors concluded that findings from their sample were “quite clear, however, particularly

from a youth perspective, that family involvement and satisfaction with frequent, simple, home-based activities such as reading together, eating dinners together, playing board games, playing catch in the yard, and attending family members' games and performances, is absolutely essential to satisfaction with family life."³⁰

Studies among different types of families are also consistent in their findings. In fact, among a sample of single-parent families, core family leisure involvement explained more variance in each aspect of family functioning than any other variable from not only the perspective of youth but from the parent and family perspective as well.³¹ Authors have suggested that perhaps the necessity of essential core family leisure was more apparent among families that face greater stress, constraint, and difficulty by nature of their family structure, such as those with a child with a disability or single-parent families. Hornberger, Zabriskie, and Freeman concluded, "The need for consistent time together participating in regular home-based core family activities . . . appears to be more crucial when considering family functioning in single-parent households." In their qualitative inquiry into family resiliency following divorce, Hutchinson, Afifi, and Krause came to similar conclusions when they found everyday core types of family activities such as eating dinner, playing games, and simply being in the same room watching TV or visiting were overwhelmingly described as the most important activities done together by both the youth and parents in the single-parent families they studied.³²

This finding regarding the involvement in and satisfaction with regular core types of family leisure and their relationship with positive family outcomes, particularly from a youth perspective, is so prevalent that it is difficult to find a family leisure study in the past decade that has not identified it. In fact, findings are also consistent among youth respondents in large, nationally reflective samples of families in other countries, including Australia ($N = 849$), New Zealand ($N = 371$), the United Kingdom ($N = 786$), and Canada ($N = 974$). Overall, the fact that youth clearly value regular, everyday, home-based, core types of family leisure involvement as it relates to positive family outcomes such as family functioning,

family communication, and satisfaction with family life has obvious implications when considering positive youth development within a family leisure context.

Implications for families and youth programs

Adolescent development practitioners have typically considered programmed activities and environments as its primary tools in developing youth. The family context has nearly been excluded from the youth development arena. Among some possible reasons for excluding this context may be that some perceive many parents are unable to provide the types of activities that are widely believed to contribute to adolescent development, families lack the time and resources necessary to devote toward building adolescents, or parents do not know what activities will contribute to adolescent development. This line of logic of excluding the family, however, is not congruent with the fundamental definitions and principles of adolescent development.

One of the key factors for adolescent development is the interaction of invested adults in a consistent environment over a significant period of time. Parents could arguably be considered the most invested adults that adolescents encounter in their lives. Parents typically have and continue to build meaningful relationships with their children. The family environment serves as a laboratory where adolescents learn and develop skills, abilities, and competencies. Furthermore, families function as a community in which all family members, including adolescents, contribute to its success or failure. Thus, the family environment must be included in the youth development equation, possibly as the most influential contributor.

Within the family environment, not all types of activities are viewed as equal contributors to adolescent development. Adolescents report that core activities have a greater impact on their family functioning, family satisfaction, and family leisure satisfaction. Adolescents who are involved in core activities with their families

are likely to be better prepared to develop into successful adults. This is contrary to what many parents would instinctively predict. Parents, similar to much of the adolescent development literature and practice, tend to participate in balance types of family activities with the vision that a few very significant experiences will have a meaningful and lasting impact on their youth. Furthermore, parents may envision adolescents as capable of drawing on the few meaningful balance experiences to create transformation within youth that will contribute to their development into healthy adults. Parents are not the only ones who hold these types of visions; many of the programs within adolescent development are also based on programming for the significant balance event that will have a meaningful impact on the development of an adolescent.

While balance events are important in adolescents' lives, according to family leisure research, core family leisure activities are also essential and may indeed be the most significant contributors to positive youth development. Therefore, we and others recommend that the common approaches to positive youth development such as outdoor adventure programs, after-school programs, community programs, and family camp programs consider the family and its possible influence on family life. They should also consider including core types of leisure programming. For example, community sports programmers can train volunteer coaches to encourage and require youth to practice regularly with family members. Rewards can be given as youth complete this homework assignment and thus foster regular home-based (core) family activities. Another example may be holding family game night where families come together as a unit and learn how to play board or card games. This could take place during the evening at a family camp or the community recreation center. During these structured activities, programmers can encourage families to continue the enjoyment of family game night as a regular home activity. Such examples are quite simple yet may have a profound impact in helping families to build core family leisure activities into part of their routines.

It is possible that families participating in such programs may be limited in basic essential skills for core family leisure such as simply playing a game together, necessitating the need for programmers to model and facilitate family core activities. Sometimes multiple programmed sessions may be required before families can participate in self-guided core activities in the home. By considering some family programming as well as how their programs can promote increased youth participation in core types of family leisure within the home, youth development programs are not only likely to become more successful but will have a significant impact on the first, and perhaps most essential, context for positive youth development: the family.

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