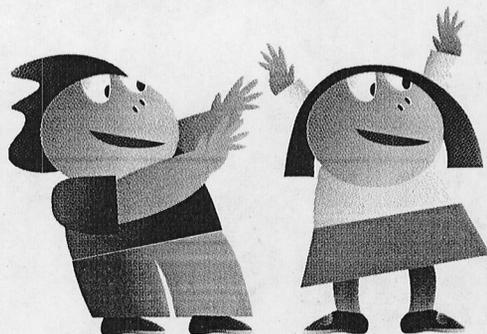


Family Recreation: How Can We Make a Difference?

By Ramon B. Zabriskie, Ph.D., CTRS



Most individuals, when asked to think of their fondest childhood memory, describe detailed accounts of various recreational adventures with family members. Leisure professionals are likely to agree that family involvement in recreation is an integral part of family development and that the "bene-

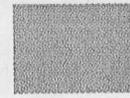
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Research Update is edited by Cheryl A. Estes, Ph.D., assistant professor in recreation and leisure studies at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina.

fits are endless." Examinations of family leisure have consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between involvement in family recreation and aspects of family strength (Hawkes, 1991; Holman & Epperson, 1989; Orthner & Mancini, 1991). It has been suggested that, in modern society, leisure is the single most important force developing cohesive, healthy relationships between husbands and wives and between parents and their children (Couchman, 1988, as cited in Canadian Parks/Recreation Association, 1997).

While discussing the family leisure relationship and its value for family togetherness, Orthner (1998) criticized parks and recreation professionals for not having committed sufficient time and resources to the issue over the decades. He challenged parks and recreation professionals to make it part of their mission to focus on the most

vital institution in society, and strengthen today's families. Many professionals responded by developing and providing new family-focused programs. However, they were developed with little empirical direction regarding types of programming, and with little thought or understanding about how such programs would influence what aspects of family life. Researchers also accepted Orthner's challenge and initiated new lines of inquiry into the phenomenon of family leisure. Current studies and new theoretical models provide greater understanding and vital direction for the development and provision of services that are likely to strengthen families. The purpose of this research update is to review the current state of family leisure research, introduce a model of family leisure functioning, and discuss implications for parks and recreation professionals.



Researchers have consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between joint family leisure and family strength, but the nature of the relationship has remained poorly understood.

Researchers have consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between joint family leisure and family strength, but the nature of the family leisure relationship has remained poorly understood. Research in this area has historically lacked an adequate theoretical framework which has limited findings "to the idiosyncrasies of the investigation at hand" (Orthner & Man-

cini, 1991, p. 299). This has also limited the ability to interpret findings into general applications for practitioners. Until recently, most researchers have studied married couples and have not examined families as a whole, nor have they measured family leisure involvement in a consistent or theoretically sound manner. This makes it difficult to identify why and how family leisure can lead to beneficial outcomes. Without such knowledge, leisure professionals have little specific direction as to how they can most effectively provide services to strengthen families.

Since Orthner's challenge, interest in family leisure has grown dramatically. New lines of family leisure research are being examined to address family variables and consider the diversity of today's families. Huff, Hill, and Freeman (2000) recently conducted a Del-

phi study to develop a national research agenda for family recreation. An international panel of experts, comprised of scholars and professionals, identified specific family leisure research needs. The top five needs included: a) developing healthy and successful families; b) increasing family cohesion; c) improving family functioning; d) defining family and family structure; and e) demands on family time. Specific research questions were identified and ranked for each topic area. This agenda is being utilized to help direct current family leisure research.

Another line of family research has examined the effects of family leisure on families that have a child with a disability. When examining inclusive outdoor family recreation experiences Scholl, McAvoy, and Smith (1999)

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An international panel of experts, comprised of scholars and professionals, identified specific family leisure research needs. This agenda is being utilized to help direct current family leisure research.

found that these families identified the following outcomes: a) increased confidence in their family as a unit; b) increased awareness of family skill level and support needs; and c) the value of meeting other families with similar challenges. Mactavish and Schleien (1998) found that these families viewed joint recreation and leisure as a means for promoting overall quali-

ty of family life (e.g. family unity, satisfaction, physical and mental health) and for helping family members develop other life skills including social skills such as problem solving, compromising, and negotiation. They also found that benefits of family recreation appeared to be most effective with the family as whole, much more than for couples alone and concluded that "concentrating on adult-only perceptions may under-estimate the positive value of shared recreation for the family as a whole" (p. 226).

Although Shaw (1999) found that parents conceptualize family recreation as "purposive leisure" that leads to family outcomes such as a) family communication and bonding; b) child development and learning; and c) health and fitness, she also noted that the focus on positive values and outcomes

may suggest that parents perceive family leisure as a responsibility that is associated with work, effort, and stress. Shaw (2000) argues that although "family leisure may have many beneficial aspects, the idealization of this form of leisure may be increasing the burden and sense of responsibility felt by parents" (p.56). In another study conducted by Shaw (2000), families described benefits such as fun, enjoyment, enhanced communication, and the chance to teach moral values. Most subjects, however, were also able to describe negative experiences including conflict, tiredness, excessive work, and stress. Shaw's line of research reminds us that family leisure is not simply a panacea that solves all family problems without effort, planning, and some understanding of how leisure can strengthen families.

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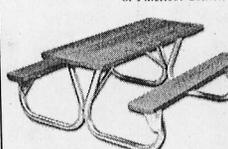
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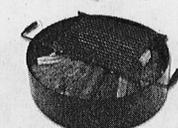
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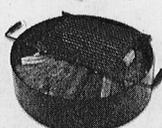
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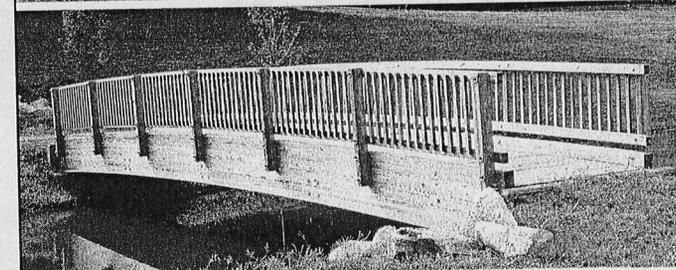
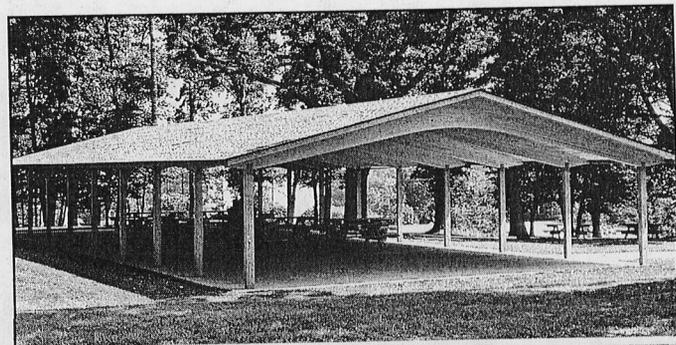
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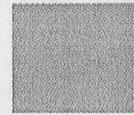
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Model of Family Leisure

Another recent line of research has identified and tested a model of family leisure functioning that begins to explain how different patterns of family leisure behavior may affect families in different ways. The Core & Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning (Zabriskie, 2000; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2000; Zabriskie & McCormick, 1999) is grounded in a family systems framework. It combines Kelly's (1999) notion of two general leisure patterns with Iso-Ahola's (1984) concept of the need for both stability and change, and does so in the context of family leisure.

Core family leisure patterns address a family's need for familiarity and stability by regularly providing predictable family experiences.

The model indicates that there are two basic categories or patterns of family leisure, core and balance. Families utilize these to meet needs of stability and change. Core family leisure patterns are depicted by common everyday, low-cost, relatively accessible, and often home-based activities that many families do frequently. This includes activities such as watching television and videos together, playing board games, activities together in the yard, shooting baskets in the drive way, gardening, or playing in the leaves once the pile has been raked together. Core family leisure patterns often require little planning or resources, are quite spontaneous or informal, and provide a consistent, safe, and usually positive context in which family members can foster relationships.

Balanced family leisure patterns are depicted through activities that are

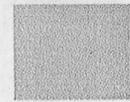
generally less common, less frequent, more out of the ordinary, and are usually not home based, thus providing novel experiences. This may include activities such as family vacations, most outdoor recreation such as fishing or boating, special events, and trips to a theme park, sporting event, or bowling alley. Balance family leisure patterns often require more investment of resources including time, effort, planning, 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 experiences that stand apart from everyday life.

The model suggests that core family leisure patterns address a family's need for familiarity and stability by regularly providing predictable family experiences that foster personal relatedness and feelings of family closeness. On the other hand, balance family leisure patterns address a family's need for novelty and change by providing new experiences that provide the input necessary for family systems to be challenged, to develop, and to progress as a working unit. According to family systems theories (Olson, 1986), the balance of these two constructs, family cohesion and family adaptability, is a key element for healthy functioning families.

Similarly, the Core and Balance Model suggests that families with relatively equal involvement in core and balance family leisure activities would theoretically function better than those with extreme high or low amounts in either category. Involvement in one without the other would lead to disarray. Consider, for example, a family that spends little time together and participates in very few, if any, core family leisure activities. Upon identifying family problems or dysfunction, a parent suggests that they all go on a family

trip together in order to bond and improve family relationships. However, without the base of cohesive relationships and related family skills that are developed in core interactions, the flexibility required by such a balance activity will likely overwhelm the family system resulting in chaos including arguments, frustration, blaming, and guilt. Without some foundation of core activity patterns, balance activities are not only less effective but may actually be disruptive to the family system. On the other hand, the family that participates exclusively in large amounts of core activities with little involvement in balance activities is likely to be ill prepared to effectively adjust or adapt to the out of the ordinary stresses and challenges that abound in today's society.

Several recent studies of family leisure have been based on the Core and Balance Model and have provided empirical support for its theoretical relationships. Findings have also helped in the development of the Family Leisure Activity Profile (FLAP), which is a self-report instrument that measures family leisure involvement and identifies core and balance family leisure patterns. Researchers have utilized the FLAP to examine a broad sample of families from a parent, youth, and family level perspective (Zabriskie, 2000). Findings from all three perspectives indicated that families with more joint leisure involvement had higher levels of family functioning than those with less family leisure involvement. Core family leisure patterns were found to be strong predictors of family cohesion and were also positively related to family adaptability. Balance family leisure patterns were not related to cohesion or adaptability in a linear fashion but appeared to have a greater influence on families that were either at the lower or higher end of the family functioning continuum.



Findings from such studies have significant implications for parks and recreation professionals. Besides adding further empirical support for the relationship between family leisure and family functioning which can be useful in program justification, findings also provide new direction for types of family leisure programs. Those that currently provide leisure programming for families often focus on balance types of activities that are out of the ordinary and challenging in an effort to promote growth. Although such programs are important and are often very successful, findings suggest that teaching families the skills to be involved in common, home-based, relatively accessible activities (core) together on a regular basis is also a necessary component in terms of family functioning. The Parker Brothers commercial that

features a cartoon boy that instituted a weekly family game night may indeed go well beyond selling a few board games. These types of regular core family leisure activities are consistently related to aspects of family functioning. Recreation professionals should promote regular family activity nights where simple games can be played and family traditions can be started.

Current recreation programs can easily be modified to provide opportunities for core family leisure involvement. For example, Bloomington Parks and Recreation Department in Bloomington, Indiana, modified their youth sports program to become much more than an athletic program for kids. Facilities such as basketball courts were either located or modified to provide ample seating for the families of all players. At the beginning of each game

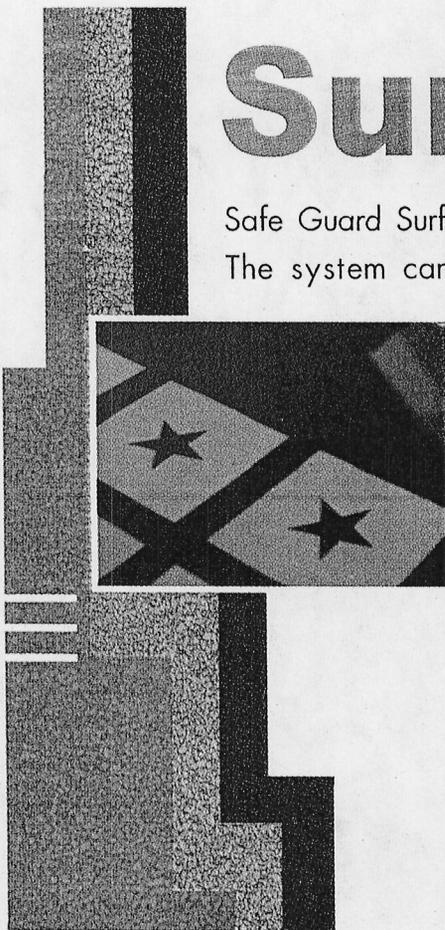
Volunteer sports coaches should be taught the value of a family focus and be provided with examples of how to promote core family leisure in the home.

coaches and players are each introduced over the loudspeakers to the roaring family fans. The inexpensive popcorn and other treats sold to children from manned concession stands and the music played during time outs and warm-ups both add to the exciting family atmosphere. Half-time festivities include drawings from family members in the bleachers to come down and shoot baskets for valuable prizes donated by community businesses. Halftime

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shows are also put on by the players' siblings (as young as 3 years old) that are part of the cheerleading or pep squads. These weekly activities become part of a family's core leisure repertoire in which families count on regularly scheduled time together cheering, dancing, eating, and supporting other family members. After the family recognition banquet at the end of the season, family members simply move this weekly event to a different venue and a different sport in which parks and recreation professionals have made similar preparations to focus on families.

Other simple modifications can be made to improve family programming as well. Educating providers as to the nature and purpose of programs can be invaluable. Volunteer sports coaches should be taught the value of a family focus and be provided with examples of how to promote core family leisure in the home. For example, coaches can hand out homework slips that require kids to participate in 15 minute increments of shooting hoops in the driveway or playing catch in the yard with a parent or sibling. Leisure providers can also utilize instruments such as the Family Leisure Activity Profile (FLAP) to assess family needs which would provide direction for family programs.

Overall, the increased attention towards families by leisure researchers appears to have provided continued support and new understanding as to the effects of recreation on the quality of family life. Parks and recreation professionals are urged to utilize new findings and models to help direct their efforts in family recreation programming. Together, researchers and practitioners in the field can effectively rise to Orthner's (1998) challenge and make families a priority in the mission of our profession. With increased understanding of the family leisure relationship, leisure professionals will not only effectively utilize recreation to

strengthen today's families, but they will have a profound impact on the most vital institution in our society.

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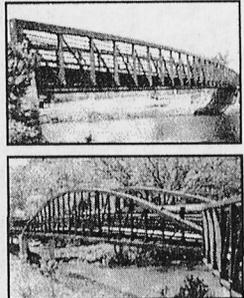


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RESEARCH INTO ACTION: FOCUS ON FAMILIES

Introduction

Parks and recreation professionals have been challenged to play a significant role in strengthening today's families. New lines of family leisure research continue to provide empirical support for the positive relationship between family leisure involvement and stronger families.

Model

The Core & Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning suggests that there are two basic categories of family leisure: core and balance. Family systems utilize both to meet needs of stability and change. Core family leisure patterns are depicted by common everyday, low-cost, relatively accessible, and often home-based activities that many families do frequently. On the other hand, balance family leisure patterns are depicted through activities that are generally less common, less frequent, more out of the ordinary, and are usually not home based, thus providing novel

experiences. Studies indicate that families with relatively equal involvement in core and balance family leisure activities function better than those with extreme high or low involvement in one category or the other. Core patterns in particular are consistent predictors of aspects of family functioning such as interpersonal relatedness and family cohesion.

Most current family programs focus on providing balance types of family activities. Practitioners should increase the provision of core family activities. To improve family programming providers can:

- Provide regular family game nights where basic skills can be taught and family traditions can be started.
- Modify existing programs such as youth sports to address family needs so that it becomes an opportunity for weekly family activity.

- Educate staff and volunteers as to the family focus of all programming.

- Encourage volunteer coaches to use "homework" slips to promote regular activities with family members in the home. Such slips require kids to shoot baskets with a parent or play catch with a sibling for a designated amount of time, and can be returned to the coach with a parents signature for recognition. Not only does the child practice their skills, but more importantly they begin and maintain regular core recreation activities with their families.

- Utilize questionnaires such as the FLAP to identify family strengths and needs, then provide family programs accordingly.

The provision of balance types of family activities can also be enhanced by considering the following:

- Add a day or two of family programming to popular summer

camp programs including family sailing, swimming and snorkeling, or hiking.

- Affordability and transportation are often barriers for novel family experiences. Parks and recreation providers can help address such issues by coordinating family group rates and transportation for activities ranging from the local bowling alley and theme park to ski vacations and cruises.

- Essential equipment can also be checked out for family canoeing, hiking, camping trips, and fishing trips.

For all family programming be sure to effectively train staff how to recognize and meet family needs and to understand the diversity of today's families. Advertising and promotion should target all types of families. By utilizing new family leisure research findings and recommendations, recreation and park professionals will have an even greater impact on the most vital institution in our society, the family.