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Chapter 21

Leisure in Family Wellness

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What are some of your fondest childhood memories with your family? When asked this question, our thoughts typically race to a time when we gathered together with brothers and sisters around the campfire to hear Dad's new version of his favorite story after a long day of hiking, fishing, and roasting hotdogs. Or to the time when Mom joined the ultimate backyard water fight and drenched us all. Or to the summer vacation that we planned for months and although Dad's shortcut got us lost, it led us to the greatest family adventure ever! Or to the year of the super garden and the great family pumpkin sale. Or to the countless times we gathered in the family room for our regular game of Monopoly, Risk, Pictionary, Sorry, Pit, or Ultimate Uno. Whatever those great family memories are, most of us have them, and they typically revolve around some kind of family leisure. They are defining moments. They are the kinds of experiences that build relationships, develop skills, establish roles, start traditions, and lay a foundation for quality family life. Is that the only thing necessary for healthy families today? Of course not! But, family leisure is definitely one of the essential ingredients to today's recipe for successful families.

Scholars have consistently reported significant relationships between family leisure participation and positive family outcomes related to family wellness since as early as the 1930s. Hawks (1) concluded that six decades of family leisure research had consistently found that "family strength or cohesiveness is related to the family's use of leisure time" (p. 424). Holman and Epperson (2) reported that both families and professional helpers see joint leisure time as an important element in promoting marital and family quality. Shaw and Dawson (3) found that family leisure was often purposive in nature and that parents "consciously and deliberately" planned and facilitated family leisure activities to improve family relationships, enhance family communication, promote health and fitness, teach and instill values, and to create family unity and identity. Parents reported that family leisure was so integral to healthy family life that it was with a "sense of urgency" that they planned to spend time with children participating in family activities.

Although it seems quite clear that involvement in family leisure activities is important and perhaps even essential for healthy family life, it is definitely not a magic pill or panacea that will "fix" all family difficulty.

How then, does it work? Are there different kinds of family leisure activities and experiences that can strengthen different aspects of family life? Can parents intentionally plan and provide better family leisure experiences that will improve family wellness and the quality of our families today? Wouldn't it be great if we understood family leisure well enough to look at our families and know what kind of family leisure activity we should do in order to address a specific problem or weakness? Or better yet, wouldn't it be great to know how to effectively utilize family leisure to help promote family wellness and prevent the problems in the first place? Among the many contributions of researchers in recent years has been the development and testing of a theoretical model of family leisure that does just that. It's a simple practical model of family leisure that explains how different kinds of family leisure involvement contribute to different aspects of family wellness.

Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning

Leisure theorists have long suggested that individuals tend to meet essential needs for "both stability and change, structure and variety, and familiarity and novelty" through their leisure behavior (4, p. 98). Freeman & Zabriskie (5) explained that the interplay and balance between stability and change plays a much greater role when considering the needs of a family unit. They said "the balance of these needs is one of the underlying concepts of family systems theory that suggests that families seek a dynamic state of homeostasis" (p. 76). In other words, families must continually meet the need for stability in interactions, structure, and relationships, as well as the need for novelty in experience, input, and challenge, in order to develop and function effectively. Furthermore, as with individuals, families also tend to meet these needs through their leisure behavior.

The Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning indicates that there are two basic categories or patterns of family leisure, core and balance, which families utilize 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 21.1). Core family leisure is depicted by "common, everyday, low-cost, relatively accessible, often home-based activities that many families do frequently" (6, p. 283). This may include family activities such as playing board games together, making and eating dinner together, watching videos or television, playing Frisbee in the yard, shooting baskets in the driveway, gardening, or simply jumping in the pile of leaves when the raking is done. Such activities often require minimal planning and resources, and can be quite

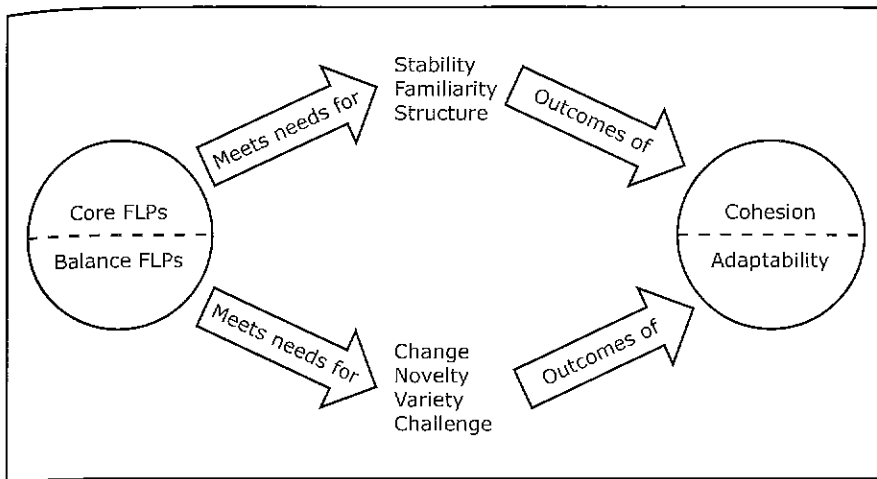


Figure 21.1 The Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning. FLP = Family Leisure Functioning.

spontaneous or informal. They provide a “consistent, safe and usually positive context in which family relationships can be enhanced and feelings of family closeness increased” (5, p. 77).

Balance family leisure, on the other hand 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” (6, p. 283). This may include family activities such as vacations, camping, fishing, special events, and trips to sporting events, theme parks, or the bowling alley. 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 experiences that stand apart from everyday life” (5, p. 77).

Overall, the model suggests that core family leisure involvement primarily facilitates feelings of closeness, personal relatedness, family identity, and bonding. Balance family leisure involvement on the other hand, provides the input necessary for families to be challenged, to develop, to adapt, to progress as a working unit, and 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 both necessary and are the primary components of healthy family functioning and wellness. Similarly, findings (5, 6) 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 both 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. Families who primarily participate in one category without the other are likely to experience disarray, frustration, and dysfunction. Let's consider the following examples.

No core. The Anderson family consists of Mom and Dad and their two teenagers, John who is 16, and Amy who is 14. Whether both parents have full-time jobs or not, all four have hectic lives and spend very little time together as a family. They often pass in the night or early in the mornings headed out in different directions for the day. They rarely eat dinner together and participate in very few, if any, core family leisure activities. After hearing rumors about her daughter from a concerned friend, Mom confronted Amy about drug use and other behavioral concerns. In the midst of the ensuing fight, Amy yelled that John does things that are much worse and that Mom should just stay out of her life. Of course, later that night Mom, heartbroken and distraught, begged her husband for answers and a plan to save their family before they lost both kids forever. After a long discussion, they decide that it's time to go on that long overdue family vacation to Disneyland that they've promised the kids for years, so they can get away from the stress of life and bond as a family. Surprised the next morning with the negative reaction and complaints about missing important things with friends, Mom and Dad become that much more determined to get their kids in the car and on the road trip to Disneyland so they could have some "fun" and fix their family. How do you think it went? Without the basic cohesive relationships and the related family skills that are developed during core types of family activities, the flexibility required by such a balance type of family activity is likely to "overwhelm the family system resulting in chaos including arguments, frustration, blaming, and guilt" (7, p. 56). In other words, without some foundation of core family leisure involvement, participation in balance family activities is not only less effective, but may actually be disruptive to the family and lead to more harm than good.

No balance. Let's consider the opposite. The Jenkins family has four kids and the oldest is just about to turn sixteen. They have a very structured and protected home life and have always participated exclusively in large amounts of core types of family activities. In fact, everything is done together and very little if any outside influence or people are allowed in. They have little social interaction with others, little experience in the community, and have never been on a family vacation or outing. What do you think would happen if their sixteen-year-old daughter became enamored with the eighteen-year-old boy next door and he took advantage of her? Or if Mom became very ill and was diagnosed with breast cancer? Would this family have the necessary skills and abilities to handle these unpredictable

situations and remain intact? It is likely that they would be ill prepared to effectively adjust or adapt to such circumstances, or many other out of the ordinary stresses and challenges that abound in today's society.

Both core and balance. Now let's consider a family that regularly participates in both core and balance types of family activities. The Johnson family also has four children ages 7, 9, 12, and 15. Although Mom and Dad both work full time, they consciously choose to do things together regularly as a family and plan and adjust their busy schedules accordingly. They have family dinner together most evenings where they talk about their day and what's up. This is typically followed by help with homework, shooting baskets in the driveway, or gathering together to laugh at their favorite show. Often they all go to watch the oldest daughter's play performance, the younger daughter's piano recital, or to cheer at the boys' basketball or soccer games. Occasionally they plan outings such as bowling, going to the local theme park or museum, or attending the fair when it's in town. Sunday afternoons are informally reserved to bake cookies and play games. The kids often bring their best friends who don't seem to mind getting caught up in the family battles of Pictionary, Monopoly, Catch Phrase, Sorry, Pit, or Ultimate Uno.

Let's say that one evening Dad gathered the family together to decide on their next big family outing and after several ideas that they couldn't quite afford, they decided they were going to go camping. They quickly looked on the calendar and finally found a weekend five weeks away where nobody had major conflicts and began to make plans. While they continued to participate in their regular core types of activities over the next several weeks, it was clear that they were preparing and looking forward to the big camping trip. One evening Dad and the boys practiced casting their fishing rods into the splash pool in the back yard until it was too dark to see. Another evening the girls turned the family room into the great outdoors and built the best blanket tent ever made, so they wouldn't have to miss their favorite show. The boys got to fall asleep on the floor in their sleeping bags and the rest of the family got to watch the American Idol finale. Sunday afternoon game time was even postponed once because Mom and Dad were laughing themselves silly for what seemed like hours as they watched their daughters trying to teach their two over excited boys how to put up the family tent in the backyard.

Finally, the big day arrived and everybody helped load the family van. Even though Dad assured them that they could live off the land and the fish they would catch, Mom packed enough food and treats to feed them for a week. They made their way towards the mountains amidst several new songs with goofy words, the never-ending license plate game, and a myriad of "are we there yet's?" They finally made it, found the perfect campsite,

and got unloaded. After the tent was set up and everything was ready, Dad got them all lined up on the trail, fishing rods in hand, and they started the mile and a half hike up the mountain to the perfect fishing spot to catch dinner. Mom laughed at her determined husband as he blazed the way and the kids meandered back and forth between them picking flowers and swinging their rods at butterflies along the trail. Suddenly the wind began to blow, the clouds rolled in and lightning flashed with a loud crack of thunder right behind. A few sparse drops turned into a downpour in minutes and they were drenched!

What happens next? Do Mom and Dad start yelling or blaming each other or the kids for ruining the entire trip? Typically not, because it's "fun," it's recreation, and they've chosen to be there and looked forward to it for some time. In such a "leisure" context people tend to make external attributions (it's the weather, it's out of our control) and be much more proactive in how they adjust, adapt, or deal with unforeseen circumstances or stress because it's "leisure" or a "step away from real life", and part of the experience. So, let's say that after splashing in the mud for a few minutes they all ran back down the trail to the safety of their tent. Soon, all the wet clothes were off and they were huddled around the lantern in the tent listening to the rain. Mom told a story about when she was young and went camping with her dad and almost broke her leg. Dad told the same spooky stories he told two years ago, but the kids all pretended to be scared again anyway. Pretty soon the oldest daughter reached into her pack and pulled out the Uno cards. With resounding cheers, the game began and they laughed and played deep into the night. It's these types of outings that result from effectively acknowledging and adapting to differences in plans and expectations that often result in experiences families deem most memorable and better than originally planned. These are also the types of experiences that illustrate the interrelationship between or synergistic nature of both core and balance types of family leisure, as well as how families develop and refine appropriate adaptive skills in a leisure context. A family such as this is likely to have the skills, resiliency, and connectedness to be able to adjust, adapt, or even thrive when faced with the plethora of "real life" stresses and challenges that abound in today's society.

Related Research. Scholars have used the core and balance framework to examine family leisure functioning among a variety of different family samples including traditional families, adoptive families, single-parent families, families with a child who has a disability, families with a child in mental health treatment, and Mexican-American families. In general, when examining such families from multiple views including parent, young adult, young adolescent, and family perspectives, family leisure researchers have consistently supported the tenants of the model

and reported direct relationships with family cohesion, adaptability, and overall family functioning (8). Furthermore, both core and balance family leisure involvement have been related to a variety of other family constructs such as family communication, family leisure satisfaction, and satisfaction with family life or overall quality of family life. These are the kinds of characteristics that we expect to associate with family health, strength, resiliency, and wellness.

Family Wellness

Whereas the term "health" may be viewed as a passive state and includes the absence of disease, the term "wellness" is defined as an active process of adapting to life challenges and making choices that improve functioning in mind, body, and spirit. Halbert Dunn first defined individual wellness, even high-level wellness, as "an integrated method of functioning which is oriented toward maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable, within the environment he is functioning" (9, p. 9). This view of wellness is holistic in nature and requires a balance in functioning between each of the wellness dimensions. It requires the integration of social, mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical dimensions into one's life with no one dimension improved at the expense of another (10). Achieving a higher level of wellness would require that each of the five dimensions of wellness be balanced. Balancing the five dimensions may be illustrated as a symmetrical circle with each dimension representing equally shaped slices. An asymmetrical circle would mean one dimension is favored above another. For example, a marathon runner who spends an inordinate amount of time training for an event in order to achieve an optimal level of functioning physically may neglect spending time with his family (social dimension). Greenberg (11) suggests that the smoothest ride down the road of life comes when the dimensions are balanced and the wheel of wellness is symmetrical.

Central to the multidimensional nature of wellness is the idea that even a family member who is ill may be well. From a health perspective, a family member who has been diagnosed with cancer using state of the art medical technology would be considered unhealthy. This family member, however, could achieve high-level wellness by integrating and maximizing the five dimensions such that strong social connections are maintained with friends and family, intellectual growth occurs through study, professional growth continues at work, feelings are expressed appropriately, appropriate physical fitness goals are achieved, and meaning or purpose in life is sought through religious belief or belief in laws of nature (10).

High-level wellness also applies to all types of social organizations, particularly the family, in the same way it applies to the individual (9).

Although family wellness may be viewed as a product of the wellness achieved by each individual member of the family, it also goes beyond a simple sum of parts and includes how each member's behavior interrelates with that of one another to contribute to the family's overall sense of identity, and their ability to develop, adjust, grow, and function together as a family unit. Prilleltensky and Nelson (12) expand this thinking to suggest that family wellness is a two-way street and a "state of affairs in which everyone's needs in the family are met" (p. 87). Family wellness is balancing the need to meet personal desires with meeting the needs of other members of the family. Whereas individual wellness may be described as more than the absence of disease, family wellness is described as "more than the absence of discord; it is the presence of supportive, affectionate and gratifying relationships that serve to promote the personal development of family members and the collective wellbeing of the family as a whole" (12, p. 87).

Family Resiliency and Protection

Individuals and families who have achieved high-level wellness tend to be resilient to challenges and trials in life. Prevention researchers seeking a new hope for prevention against the social morbidities that threaten children and families have recognized this fact and have attempted to better understand resilience and what makes a resilient individual/family. The term resilience refers to the way individuals/families adapt to extraordinary circumstances to achieve positive and unexpected outcomes in the face of adversity (13). It is "a class of phenomena characterized by patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant adversity or risk" (14, p. 75). While reducing risk factors that lead to these morbidities remains important, increasing protective factors within families and other systems that support the resilience of individuals ultimately contributes to family wellness and is important for prevention.

Protective factors are factors that buffer the effect of risk factors and reduce the likelihood of problem behavior. These protective factors, as defined by resiliency researchers, are important for healthy development and family wellness and include opportunities for caring relationships, high-expectation messages, as well as opportunities for participation or contribution to the family as a whole (15). These factors are not to be viewed as mutually exclusive, but should each be considered as dynamic and synergistically working together. For example, families that foster caring relationships without giving attention to creating high expectations or providing opportunities for meaningful participation ultimately foster dependence and codependence that can be quite harmful to family wellness

(15). Families must provide a common context through which protection and resiliency is practiced, developed, and fostered. Family leisure is one of the primary means, methods, and processes through which protection and resiliency can be realized for family members. "Besides family crisis, shared leisure may be one of the few experiences that brings family members together for any significant amount of time today" (6, p. 287). Well families, therefore, tend to use family leisure to strengthen relationships, improve functioning, promote protective factors, and foster resiliency, all of which contribute to family wellness.

Core and Balance Implications for Family Wellness

Family leisure is family wellness! When instituted using core and balance principles, family leisure has the potential to provide an empirically directed mechanism through which protective factors can be developed—thus contributing to a well and resilient family and buffering and protecting against life stresses. Resiliency and thus family wellness is exemplified as strengths, internal assets, or competencies among family members. These characteristics are not antecedents to resiliency but are considered positive outcomes and suggest that something is working correctly within the family system. These outcomes include social competence (i.e., communication, empathy, caring, and compassion), problem solving (i.e., planning, flexibility, critical thinking, and resourcefulness), autonomy (i.e., positive identify, initiative, self-efficacy, and self-awareness), and sense of purpose (i.e., goal direction, creativity, and faith) (14). The likelihood of achieving such outcomes within a family can be increased as parents intentionally plan and facilitate participation in both core and balance types of family activities.

Beyond providing specific direction on the types of family activities that parents should plan that foster family well-being, principles of core and balance family leisure also have significant implications for health and human service professionals that promote family wellness. Parks and recreation professionals should provide more services that cultivate family leisure skills and promote regular participation in core types of family activities along with the balance types of big events and celebrations. Community health educators working in prevention should incorporate principles of family leisure as an essential way to help develop protective factors and promote resiliency. Social service professionals working in the adoptive arena may consider assessing family leisure when screening for prospective parents and/or providing family leisure education prior to placement. Overall, family leisure must be recognized as essential to healthy families and the promotion of core

and balance family leisure involvement is likely to provide a valuable, practical, and cost-effective behavioral approach to prevent risk factors and to promote family wellness today.

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