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# BARRIERS TO FAMILY RECREATION PARTICIPATION: PROGRAM CONSIDERATIONS

BY

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## ABSTRACT

Recreation is an important element in family growth and development. Recreation agencies have largely ignored their responsibilities in this area in favor of satisfying the individual needs of participants in organized, structured programs.

If recreation agencies are to be effective in facilitating family leisure experiences, they must develop a comprehensive strategy that offers appropriate program design, creative facility development, rational policies and effective marketing strategies.

# BARRIERS TO FAMILY RECREATION PARTICIPATION: PROGRAM CONSIDERATIONS

## INTRODUCTION

It is acknowledged that leisure is an important element in promoting individual as well as family growth and development. Families who recognize this fact are better able to use leisure and recreation as a vehicle through which to improve communication and develop interpersonal relationships vital to both individual and family growth.

There are, however, many barriers which prevent families from participating in recreation activities together. Some of these barriers are related to internal family dynamics. Many families lack the skills and resources necessary to create their own leisure experiences or to take advantage of opportunities that are available. Other barriers are external to the family and the leisure service system is just now recognizing that it may well have been responsible for creating some of these barriers to family leisure participation. The knowledge and attitudes of practitioners, program and facility design, marketing strategies and leisure agency policies have all influenced the provision and use of family recreation activities.

Many barriers to family recreation simply would not exist or could easily be overcome if practitioners clearly understood the nature of the

contemporary family and designed programs better suited to meet its needs.

#### THE CHANGING NATURE OF FAMILY AND RECREATION SERVICES

Concerns about the disintegration of the traditional family unit have been raised in both scientific and popular literature. Over the past three decades, the structure of families has changed dramatically. In Canada, these changes were attributed to changing social values, economics and mobility. The 1981 Canadian census (10) revealed that the average family size had dropped from 3.9 persons in 1961 to 3.3 persons in 1981. Schlesinger (8) reported that "The Family of the 1980's was considerably different than that of the 1960's. The husband, wife and two children were no longer the dominant characterization of the Canadian household. Rather, single parent families, families without children, and two person families were becoming more prevalent." At the beginning of this decade, the nuclear family simply did not exist as the predominant form. Statistics Canada (10) reported that by 1981 two person families comprised 38% of all families.

In the United States, similar events were occurring. A 1978 report of the U.S. Bureau of Labor indicated that only 29% of all Americans were living in a 'nuclear family' and only 13% were in nuclear families with a single bread winner, as illustrated in Table 1.

These figures suggest that leisure service agencies of the 1980's could no longer develop family recreation programs solely for "mom, dad and the kids." New strategies were required to appropriately deal with the changing nature of the family. The issue must now be addressed by the recreation service system in relation to the implications for program new development.

#### BARRIERS TO FAMILY PARTICIPATION

As the structure of the family was undergoing change, so too was the nature of the leisure service delivery system. The origins of recreation were traditionally home and family centered. After World War II, however, the recreation and park movement was pushed along by a growing inability of most families to meet the recreation expectation's of family members. As a result, recreation became increasingly more institutionalized and the public relied more on organized programs to provide recreation experiences. As recreation agencies began to play a greater role in providing opportunities to participate, the collective needs and interests of family numbers were pushed aside in favor of satisfying individual needs. Programs which resulted were highly organized, and structured into age, gender and ability segregated activities. Clearly, this created barriers to family interaction and participation. Dr. V. Rakoff, a noted Canadian authority on the family, put it this way: "Increasing leisure time and the huge range of urban activities set up to attract us during this time are largely responsible

for the current breakdown of the family. They fragment us -".(1)

Many organized recreation programs and facilities that were developed during the 1960's and 1970's were not sensitive to family recreation needs. Parker (7) believed that "concepts on which most family programs are based today have been outdated by social and institutional change." Winslade (11) supported this notion noting "programs were not planned nor were facilities designed to accommodate the family of the 1980's."

Program design is only one of the barriers to family recreation participation. The location and scheduling of facilities often discourage rather than accommodate family participation. Some agencies have set policies which limit family participation in activities and traditional marketing programs often fail to interest or attract families to programs which are designed for their use.

#### OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS - PROGRAM CONSIDERATIONS

A precondition to changing the status of family recreation participation is an awareness and understanding of the nature and makeup of the contemporary family and a recognition of the value of family recreation participation. Once this is understood there are five important considerations to make when developing a strategy for family recreation programs.

##### 1. FAMILY PROGRAMS MUST BE DEVELOPED IN CONCERT WITH THE VARIOUS TYPES OF RECREATION PARTICIPATION PATTERNS OF FAMILY MEMBERS.

Orthner (6) described three types of recreation participation patterns of family members. Individual pursuits which occur alone or with non-family members is one means of fulfilling leisure needs. This can include activities such as jogging and fishing or hobbies such as coin collecting or woodworking. Obviously, no family interaction occurs between family members during these activities. The second type is parallel activities such as T.V. viewing or attending a play or movie. These activities provide minimal opportunities for family members to interact. The third type is joint activities which maximize opportunities for family members to communicate and interact through participation in family outings, picnics or vacations together.

It should be recognized that each of the three family recreation participation patterns described by Orthner has merit and is necessary to maintain positive family relationships. The problem is that the public recreation sector has largely been preoccupied with the provision of individual recreation opportunities, often at the expense of parallel or joint activities better suited to integrated family recreation needs.

##### 2. PROGRAM PLANNERS MUST RECOGNIZE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY TYPE AND PARTICIPATION BARRIERS AND CONSIDER THE IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY RECREATION ACTIVITY.

It is recognized that there are several common family 'types' which exist, each with its unique set of leisure needs and expectations. Common among these are nuclear, dual career, single parent, childless, blended and experimental families.

There is a growing understanding of and appreciation for the barriers which prevent participation in recreation due to recent research into this question.(3, 9, 12) Many of the barriers which prevent individual participation are compounded when family participation is considered. Larson (5) describes five barriers to participation which exist for certain types of families. He describes accessibility, affordability, visibility, relevance and availability as barriers affecting family participation. The matrix in Table 2 illustrates the relationship and complexity involved in developing family programs. Clearly, no single program can successfully deal with all of the variables present. Each community or agency would view the matrix differently depending on local circumstances.

3. FAMILY RECREATION PROGRAMS MUST BE CARRIED OUT IN A CLIMATE AND ATMOSPHERE WHERE PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT AGES, GENDER AND LEVELS OF ABILITY CAN FEEL COMFORTABLE PARTICIPATING TOGETHER.

Experience has demonstrated that many parents lack the confidence and skills to initiate recreation activities with other family members. As a result, they rely heavily on recreation agencies to provide integrated family recreation opportunities. Unfortunately, in many cases recreation agencies, particularly in the public sector, provide little in the way of structured or unstructured age or gender integrated programs. Instead, they offer more traditional activities such as men's fitness, adult bridge or advanced ceramics where participants not fitting the "description" feel unwelcome or uncomfortable. Greater emphasis on intergenerational and integrated programs better suited for family participation is necessary.

Some agencies have had success with innovative family programs such as integrated family swim lessons, or parent "free swim" during childrens' swim lessons. Family fitness classes catering to all ages and ability levels are very successful as are other 'learn to' programs for all family members.

4. CONSIDER THAT ALL FAMILY MEMBERS NEED NOT PARTICIPATE TOGETHER IN EVERY PROGRAM.

Often the experience of traveling together to and from an event is a positive family leisure experience. Once at a facility, family members might choose from a variety of possible recreation alternatives, meeting at the completion of the program to share their experiences. This approach has implications for facility design and use policies which are discussed later.

5. FAMILIES WILL RESPOND TO PROGRAMS WHICH PROVIDE THE GREATEST ENJOYMENT AND ALLOW FOR A MAXIMUM OF INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION.

Integrated family activities such as family camping, cycling or

jogging, community festivals and block parties all serve this purpose. Perhaps the best example of this type of activity is the "Family Fitnic" program of the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association. This one day festival of fun, food, family, friends and fitness is staged annually in Canadian communities to demonstrate the value of participating 'together'. As part of 'Fitnic' many unique events of a physical, social, and cultural nature are staged. They include everything from greased pig contests to family skit nights. Recreation agencies can also facilitate family activities such as kite flying together, backyard camping or scavenger hunts. The recreation agencies' role in this type of program is to motivate families to plan their own leisure experiences and to provide support in the form of skill development clinics, equipment loan or facility use.

## FACILITY CONSIDERATIONS

The design, location and scheduling of recreation facilities often create barriers to family participation. In some communities, single purpose facilities (e.g. arena, pool, gymnasium) are decentralized and scattered throughout the community to give the appearance of equity in facility allocation. This practice may serve political motives but does little to serve the collective recreation needs of families who must go in several directions to participate in activities of their choice.

Design also plays an important part in encouraging family participation. There are many tot lots and childrens' playgrounds without parent observation areas or even a park bench where adults can comfortably oversee the activities of their children. Often, aquatic facilities are designed to accommodate every possible use in the community. Competitive groups require that the shallow end of the pool be at least three feet deep to accommodate tumble turns. This creates a barrier to small children and the disabled who cannot enter the pool unaided and must be supported at all times while they are in the water.

Recent trends in facility development are overcoming some of these problems: the advent of the integrated family recreation complex and the 'one stop' service center are encouraging developments.

The dynamic leisure pool concept which incorporates a number of activity components around an aquatic base are, particularly conducive to family recreation. Many of these facilities have zero depth or "bench front" access to the pool and enough variety exists in the facility to accommodate many interests for all ages and levels of ability. Some even have indoor wave making equipment, family change rooms, day care facilities or infant play pens located on the pool deck. As a result, people come to 'the pool' for a wide variety of reasons, stay longer and return more often.

Creativity and imagination in the operation of facilities and development of programs is essential. Several arena operators in British Columbia, Canada are experimenting successfully with the notion of a "Leisure Arena" by applying leisure pool concepts to these facilities.

During public and family skating they push out a huge pile of snow and let the children play in the snow with toys when they get tired of skating. The adults are free to continue skating and watch their children at the same time. A disc jockey plays recorded music, hot chocolate is served at ice level, a fire pit has been added to the arena cell, prizes are awarded, skates are available for rent and a fun atmosphere is created. It certainly beats skating around in circles for an hour. Again people come more often, stay longer and enjoy a much more dynamic leisure experience. These principles can be applied to other types of facilities as well.

There are many lessons to be learned from the commercial recreation sector. Perhaps the best example of a 'one stop' service center is the West Edmonton Mall in Edmonton, Alberta. This privately owned commercial recreation center is the largest of its kind in the world with over 2,250,000 square feet of development estimated to be worth \$900 million dollars.(2) The mall includes over 400 shops, 10,000 square feet of video games, 12 theatres, aquariums with 200 varieties of tropical fish, an indoor hockey arena, fantasy land with 21 major rides, an indoor wave pool with sand bottom complete with water slides and an underwater sea world constructed at a cost of approximately 40 million dollars, and there is more.

Other events of note are that some YMCA's have become Family Y's and in some communities the YWCA has combined resources with the YMCA. Even Club Mediterranean has recently developed a family component to its program and facilities with great success.

#### POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Policies governing facilities and programs can create barriers to recreation for many families. Some examples of restrictive policies which influence family recreation are user rates and fees, user priorities and program time schedules.

The cost of recreation is a major factor when choosing activities. Many families must make choices between alternatives which affect the variety, intensity and frequency of their participation. Many communities have introduced family admissions and family membership to make programs more affordable while others have established family days or family times at reduced rates.

Often, family or general public use of facilities is the lowest priority and is scheduled after all other users have been dealt with. This accounts for family swim time at 5:00-6:00 p.m. on Sundays or the family skate between 8:00-9:30 p.m. on week nights. Public facility operators often forget to accommodate the needs of all the 'public' they serve and must make efforts to ensure better balance between the type of organized activities and programs available.

There are many cases where restrictive policies or rules discourage family fun and enjoyment of a leisure experience. A survey conducted by

the Province of British Columbia discovered that the prime motivation for family participation in recreation activities was to have fun.(11) Clearly the objective of recreation for families is enjoyment and swimming (as an example) is only the medium. However, in many public pools, policies require that the participant either 'swim or get out.' The advent of leisure pools introduced the use of water slides, rope swings and beach balls, certainly a radical departure from "traditional" activities in public pools. It was not long ago that a major reason for non-participation in public pools was a requirement for male swimmers to wear bathing caps.

Even our parks are often regulated by restrictive policies. Several years ago Tom Thompson, Park Superintendent for the City of Toronto, became famous when he posted signs in public parks asking people to "Please walk on the Grass."

### MARKETING CONSIDERATION

Participation in recreation programs can be greatly influenced by marketing strategy. Godbey (3) reported that lack of awareness was found to be a prevalent condition among non-participants in public leisure services. This suggests that improved marketing approaches will result in increased participation.

In developing a marketing strategy aimed at family recreation a great deal of sensitivity is required. Many of the elements of an overall marketing strategy have been discussed earlier. The aspect of interpreting the message to the public is perhaps the most important. Recognizing that fewer than 30% of all 'families' are made up of mom, dad and the kids (nuclear) care must be taken not to exclude potential "family" participation due to visual images in advertising or by program definition and graphic interpretation. One example of a successful marketing program for family recreation is the Canadian Parks and Recreation Associations "Together is Better" program. This national marketing and awareness program uses a contemporary definition of family and present visual interpretations of family recreation that avoid value laden imagery. The marketing program is designed to encourage people to participate in activity 'together' regardless of their ability level, age or gender. It is program that anyone can identify with regardless of their 'family type'.

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TABLE 1

## FAMILY COMPOSITION IN U.S.A.

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FAMILY TYPE	% OF POP.
1. Single parent families	16%
2. Single, widowed, separated or divorced living without children	21%
3. Childless or post-child rearing couples	23%
4. Dual breadwinners (nuclear)	16%
5. Single Breadwinners (nuclear)	13%
6. Extended	6%
7. Experimental and Co-habiting	4%

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Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor 1978.

Table 2

Relationship Between Family Type and Recreation Participation Barriers

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	Issues/Barriers				
Family Type	Accessibility	Affordability	Visibility	Relevance	Availability
Nuclear					
Dual Career					
Single Parent					
Childless					
Blended					
Experimental					

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