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FAMILY INTEGRATION, NOT SEGREGATION: PROJECT S.P.A.R.C.A. FOR L.I.F.E.
(SPECIAL PLAY AND RECREATION CENTER FOR LEISURE IN FAMILY EXPERIENCE)

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ABSTRACT

Integration, not segregation is an important element to prescriptively helping families with disabling condition. Principles and procedures utilized in a program are outlined in an effort to illustrate the positive outcomes of better integration. Cooperation among leisure service providers is the key element to the success of these types of programs.

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INTRODUCTION

When a family member has a disabling condition, it affects all family members, their lives together and their family leisure pursuits. The disability can make it difficult to get in and out of buildings, social contacts may be adversely affected, planning may be more complex. The disabling condition tends to segregate both the individual from family members and the family unit from others during leisure time. Yet, recreation activities have the power to draw family members together to enhance their feelings about each other. Families in which there is a member with a disability are as needy of healthy leisure time as any other family, in spite of complicating barriers.

Those beliefs were the basis for PROJECT S.P.A.R.C. for L.I.F.E.--Special Play and Recreation Center for Leisure in Family Experience. This grant project, funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Education during 1984-1985 served 17 families in which there were individuals with severe disability. The project, housed at Mankato State University, Mankato, Minnesota, served a three-county area of Southern Minnesota.

PROJECT PURPOSE

The purpose of this project was to maximize satisfying recreation participation within family units in which at least one member had a severe handicap creating barriers to functioning in recreative activity. Clients receiving vocational rehabilitation services and special education services were the recipients of project efforts.

Through a series of steps, called project components, families were given opportunity to process information, activities, events and social contacts to diminish their barriers to leisure/recreation satisfaction and, more specifically, minimize the efforts of barriers caused by disability. Figure one indicates the six project components. (See figure one)

COMPONENT I: IDENTIFICATION AND RECRUITMENT OF FAMILIES

The full-time Project Coordinator took immediate responsibility for contacting community agencies to "spread the word" about Project S.P.A.R.C. for L.I.F.E. He prepared introductory materials for professionals and lay persons, called and visited agency personnel at YMCA's, a regional vocational rehabilitation office, a rehabilitation center, community services, churches/ministers, superintendents in the three school districts involved, special education supervisors, and special education teachers.

As a result of these contacts and consultations, project staff determined that, because of confidentiality requirements, it would be best to have agency personnel, such as vocational rehabilitation counselors and special education teachers, refer families to the project. The procedure established was: 1) teachers and counselors identified clients and their families who could benefit from the project and also could commit to project duration--one year; 2) teachers and counselors called specific families to see if they would be willing to receive a phone call and a visit from the Project Coordinator to determine family interest; 3) teachers and counselors notified the Project Coordinator about which families agreed to be called and visited; 4) the Project Coordinator contacted referred families by phone to set up home visit time. A letter followed to confirm the visit, and 5) the Project Coordinator visited individual families to inform them about the project goals and plans.

Thirty-six families were referred to the project. After home visits and assessments, the project began with 17 families committed to one year of project activities, a total of 68 people. There were 27 parents (five single parent families) and 41 children. Of the children, eight were multiply disabled, 14 had mental handicaps, seven had Cerebral Palsy, seven had other disabling conditions; seven were in wheelchairs. All disabling conditions added barriers to family leisure pursuits.

REINFORCING COMMITMENT

In order to reinforce commitment to the project, several techniques were used. A certificate for SPARC FOR LIFE FAMILIES was signed by project staff and all members of the families. Buttons with the project logo were distributed to each person in the family. These were worn during project activities and served to identify oneself with the project. Project staff began a newsletter, SPARC NEWS, for distribution to project families as a means of building a steady stream of communication to support commitment to the project. These newsletters continued on a monthly basis throughout the project. Later, other items were used as means of supporting the concept of being "S.P.A.R.C. for L.I.F.E. Families." Refrigerator magnets with the project logo were distributed with project activity calendars to promote keeping the calendars handy on the refrigerator; T-shirts with the project logo were distributed to family members.

COMPONENT II: ASSESSMENT

As proposed, evaluation of the entire project was begun with a pre-test and also administered as a mid and post test. Since no instrument could be found which applied to leisure barriers and which could be given to all family members, project staff, under the guidance of MSU's Office of Institutional Research personnel, developed a useable testing instrument. Items on the questionnaire were adapted from related literature on families and on leisure barriers. Phrasing was adjusted to be suitable to all aged family members.

Common barriers to leisure time were formulated into questions related to leisure awareness, time management, planning and decision making, accessibility, transportation, money management, leisure skills, social skills, leisure attitudes, and resource awareness.

When the Project Coordinator visited families and after they indicated their commitment to the project, all capable family members were given the "questionnaire." Those too young or impaired to read, but able to understand the questions, took the test with assistance from the Coordinator or from assisting staff who were trained in the consistency required for validity. Obviously, some family members were not able to answer the questions due to disability or development.

COMPONENT III: LEISURE EDUCATION

Leisure education procedures were adapted to the entire family to directly impact the barriers to leisure time experienced by family members. The winter months were utilized for many gatherings of the families in both small and large groups. These meetings were given the

title "Funshops" to relate to workshops, yet imply the recreative nature of both content and experience.

Small-Group Funshops

Four specific units of "study" were established for the small funshops and activities were designed to involve families in growth experiences:

- UNIT 1: Leisure and Time Management;
- UNIT 2: Leisure Barriers and Planning;
- UNIT 3: Resource Awareness; and
- UNIT 4: Planning and Decision Making

Activities commonly used in leisure education processes were adapted for use in family discussions to include family members of all ages. Each family spent time grappling with their own leisure barriers. (See Figures 2 and 3 for examples of adapted activities.)

Plans for the following components, Skill Development and Participation were set during this leisure education phase of the project. Families identified the particular skills they wanted to learn--both as individual families and as a group of families. As they gained awareness of their interests and needs, they gave input to project staff as to the summer activities they wanted. Since planning and decision making were dominant barriers among families, project staff strived to give them responsibilities in this area.

ACTIVITY OF THE MONTH

As an ongoing skill development technique, project staff prepared activity kits for families each month which came to be known as the "activity of the month". The intent was to give family members activity ideas and supplies which could involve all family members at home. These proved to be very useful and several ideas spread beyond project families. The Spring kite idea, called "flying garbage bags" (made from plastic bags) spread throughout the Mankato school system during May. Precisely the outcome desired! Figure 4 details the kite idea.

LARGE-GROUP FUNSHOPS

Four large-group funshops were planned with activities geared toward getting acquainted, building family group cohesiveness, teaching group activities, and discussing common leisure problems. Time to socialize was planned into these sessions to build a network of cohesiveness among families as a support system for their leisure pursuits. Entertainment and play time were also provided to encourage the "good times" and role

model positive experiences.

A unique gathering of families and community recreation providers took place during one of the large funshops. While children enjoyed play activities together, parents met with community recreation providers to discuss common concerns, frustrations, and possible solutions regarding special programming in community settings. A panel consisting of three community recreation supervisors, the program director from the YMCA, and two parents shared comments which spurred questions and discussion that served to build bridges from families to recreation personnel able to make changes in their services to match families' needs.

COMPONENTS IV AND V: SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION

During participation in Component III, Leisure Education, families were assisted in identifying kinds of leisure activities of interest, including those they would like to learn and those they would like to enjoy within project activities. An audio-visual interest inventory instrument entitled LEISURESCOPE assisted project staff in identifying participants' general leisure interest areas. Based upon interest areas, specific activities were identified and planned for forthcoming months.

It became evident to project staff that learning the skills of an activity naturally blended with participating directly in the activity. Therefore, families and project staff, together, planned activities which families wanted to learn and enjoy. Summer activities included fishing, camping, sailing, horse-back riding, bowling, hayrides, hiking, biking, crafts, canoeing, dancing, roller skating, swimming. In all cases, project staff were on hand to assist and demonstrate modifications and adaptations. Often family members taught and showed each other how they managed participation.

The new ideas and actual participation gave families confidence that they could do more than they thought. A good example of that was roller skating. Several families had individual members who enjoyed roller skating, but due to the disabling condition in the family, they had not considered doing it together. But, when other families and staff took wheelchairs and strollers out on the rink to be pushed by a skating, nondisabled person, there was quick realization that everyone in the family could enjoy roller skating.

In the midst of the "good times" shared during activities, families formed friendship bonds that surpassed staff expectations. That network of cohesiveness is the basis for ongoing leisure-time support which families now have established among themselves.

COMPONENT VI: COMMUNITY REFERRAL

In the same way that activity instruction and activity participation merged as project components, community referral also blended into

participation. As families pursued project activities, staff consistently sought community sites for the activities. Mankato State University campus facilities were utilized less and community facilities used more as time went on. Families, therefore, blended naturally into the community facilities such as the roller skating rink, bowling alleys, hiking trails, parks, swimming pools, fishing lakes, camp sites. Activities were planned to take place at times when other community members used the facilities. Natural integration occurred and families found themselves in a position to realize they could, indeed, succeed and be accepted in the community facilities. Providers also found that project families easily could partake of their services. A natural line of communication opened between families and providers.

As the project drew to a close, staff sought out a large number of facilities to request discount coupons for project families. With the cooperation of fast food shops, craft stores, bowling alleys, skating rinks, movie theaters, video stores, etc., a coupon book was printed and given to project families as one of several gifts to "sparc" future family fun. Needless to say, families were pleasantly surprised to receive their discount books and immediately began making plans among each other as to how they would get together from time to time and use their coupons.

Project staff also compiled a leisure resource information file on "who, what, where, when, how much" regarding leisure/recreation pursuits in the area's three primary-service communities. This information was printed into book form and titled, FAMILY FUN TIMES AND PLACES. Each family received a copy of this book. It is one of their primary tools for locating community resource information. Enough copies of the book were printed to be distributed to other interested families and facilities in the local areas. It will serve to keep the philosophy of the project alive both with project families and needy groups beyond the scope of the project.

ONGOING THRUST

The discount coupon books and resources information book, FAMILY FUN TIMES AND PLACES, were meant to give the project families a "send off" from the official grant period into the next, less formalized, phase of the project. Project staff assembled a variety of other materials which gave the families a "packet" of items to support their leisure pursuits in the future. These included some simple arts and crafts materials, game books, calendar from the American Family Society which has daily messages related to family life and leisure, a card file of simple family fun activities, and a copy of video tape footage from project activities with narrative which summarized project philosophy and activity--to review, frequently, their project experience.

SUMMARY

Project S.P.A.R.C. for L.I.F.E. did, indeed, serve families in which there were severe disabling conditions to help families diminish leisure barriers resulting from severe disability. Although statistical data regarding project outcomes is not yet available, families have given evidence, through their comments, discussions and family to family relationships, that project goals have been met. They readily speak of the activities, the many new ideas they found and are using, the supportive relationships they experience among each other, and the good times they shared which in turn give them reason to believe they can take charge of their own good times both within their own families and beyond.

Of course, exact replication of these project services is not feasible among other family-serving agencies. However, many principles and procedures utilized within this project have implications for interfacing leisure/family services. The challenge continues--for leisure service providers and families to cooperate and manage family leisure integration, not segregation.

Note:

Figures 2,3, and 4 may be obtained upon request from the author.

Figure 1

DIAGRAM OF PROJECT COMPONENTS

