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## FAMILY RECREATION AND THE SINGLE PARENT

BY

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### ABSTRACT

The traditional family of the 50's and 60's is a rare find in the 1980's. The 1980's has been plagued with an increase in the divorce rate and a decrease in the marriage rate, resulting in the increase of single parents, blended families, serial marriages and selective childlessness.

As we move into the 1990's recreation professionals and volunteer agencies need to focus more on the single parents in their offerings. Recreation for the single parent is a rarity therefore, a lot of low cost/no cost recreation goes unexplored because of the stigma attached to single parentness. Thus there is a need for recreation professionals to re-look at and re-think how recreational activities are offered through community-based centers and volunteer agencies.

### FAMILY RECREATION AND THE SINGLE PARENT

The traditional family of the 50's and 60's is a rare find in the 1980's. The family as we have come to know it has been changed drastically by the increase in the divorce rate and the decrease in the marriage rate (as we traditionally know it). With the changes in the traditional family structure and the acceptance of more diverse forms of family, recreation professionals need to re-look at and re-think how, when and where recreational activities are offered.

Before the discussion of how volunteer and general recreation programs can incorporate single parents into their programs, let's first look at the emerging family. Webster's New World Dictionary (10) defines family as 1) "all the people living in the same house; household"; 2a) "social unit consisting of parents and children that they rear"; b) "the children of the same parents"; one's husband (or wife) and children."

As we look at the more contemporary definitions of family it has been described as a "Rubik's cube of complexity".(7) Today's family can be broadened to include: single parents, both male and female, DINKs (double income, no kids), (6) househusbands, blended families, families

established by blood, marriage, adoption, fictive kin or other voluntary associations. These family changes reflect social, economic, scientific and technological changes, as well as shifts in how people view family life and what they expect from family relationships.(2) As the family structure continues more in these directions acceptance of these diverse lifestyles by recreation providers is important.

### Technological Family

Technological family is the family which has been changed due to the social and economic influences and by people not being willing to put up with empty, dissatisfying or inequalitarian marriages.(2) To this end an estimated 40 percent of the children born in this decade will spend at least part of their youth in homes with only one parent. Households headed by women have doubled in the last generation and increased by a third in the last decade. Also, a third of the women with children under age three work outside the home which represents approximately 40.5 million women.(4)

In spite of the number of women in the labor force a change which has been affected by technology is that women are delaying the birth of the first child. This appears to be an area where the birth rate is increasing.(2) Accordingly, from 1975-1978 there was a 37 percent rate of increase in the number of women from age thirty to thirty-four who had their first child. For women age thirty-five to thirty-nine the increase was 22 percent.(7) These statistics indicate truly that the family we have known has changed, therefore leaving the recreation providers with the challenge of servicing this diverse population. One can speculate that the audience which will participate in recreation offerings will consist not only of those who have followed the thinking of the profamily advocates but also of those that follow the more contemporary or liberal slant which has led to the more diverse family structures. Since there does not appear to be a real alternative to family, recreation offerings will have to accommodate this change in family structure as part of the planning process.

### Family Recreation and Voluntary Agencies

The more traditional offerings which are geared specifically toward "family" will need to change to adhere not only to the single parent (male and female) but to the custodial parent (one who has the child(ren) for specified periods of the year) to those who have postponed childbearing, to those who have adopted, to those who do represent the profamily posture. Notice should be paid to the fact that many of the adults who have delayed childbearing could possibly be using the child(ren) as an accessory (where they use the child as an excuse to purchase various services or participate in activities).

This change in family structure is going to have a great impact on what communities and organizations offer to their constituents. Close scrutiny will have to be given to the historically traditional

organizations such as the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts who maintain, in this era of change, that they can best carry out their mission as single sex organizations. Whereas Camp Fire Inc. had realized that part of their responsibility is to "all youth" therefore lending itself to participation on a larger scale by this changing family structure. However, the Scouts do realize that there is a need to meet the needs of today's youth via before-school and after-school programs to augment that which they receive at school and home. The YMCA understands the importance of offering programs for single parents as well. Their program, called "The Family Huddle" is flexible enough to allow both single parents and working parents to conveniently schedule family activities.(11) The general field of recreation, however, has not moved in this direction. After reviewing several articles which specifically addressed family recreation, the indication is that there is a paucity of programs and organizations whose focus has changed to meet the needs of the families of the 1990's.

As we become a more technologically advanced society with more time available for leisure and recreation-related activities, emphasis will need to be placed on providing some of the basic familial functions through many general recreation providers as well as voluntary agencies. In other words, they will be the surrogate, particularly to the youth of these diverse family structures and more specifically to the single-parent households.

In areas where the more traditional volunteer organizations are not readily able to adhere to the 1990's family then community-based organizations will need to fill the void. One such organization which is addressing this need is "Companions of Alameda County." This community program matches adult volunteers with youth who primarily come from single-parent, female-headed households. Through this program the adult volunteer plays the role of the surrogate, particularly in the area of recreation. The program encourages the volunteer to be: 1) a companion to the youth; this provides the youth with an opportunity to have another, and/or different adult experience, different from the one of parent, and 2) emphasis is placed on exposing the youth to low cost/no cost recreation activities at a reasonable distance so that these activities can be carried on as a family unit at a future time. The program itself sponsors events where both the adult companion and youth can interact with other matches in recreational activities. This program has a unique component in that it has a disabled program which does the same thing as the overall program. The unique feature is that the youth and adults involved in many cases are either physically challenged or have visual or hearing impairments. Regardless of the disability they are again encouraged to fully participate in all recreation activities. What further sets this program apart from others is that the parents have input into the match. Through this program the youth often times are able to experience another aspect of life which heretofore has been non-existent due to the family structure, economic status, transportation, or the primary parent being out of the home for extended hours because of employment opportunities.

This program, as with many community-based volunteer agencies, has suffered from the "fund-cutting ax," thus giving rise to a very moral question: should the carpets be rolled up and doors locked or do you

stand firm and believe that the role of a surrogate is acceptable and that a difference is being made, and that this difference will impact the future?

As we move into the 1990's many community-based volunteer agencies may have to move away from the traditional sports-related programs to more activities which foster companionships either between the primary parent or an adult volunteer. Additionally, programs will need to be more flexible to meet work schedules both during the week and on weekends. Providers of recreation will need to realize that those that are engaged in two jobs or two-income families will have less leisure and that which is available will come in different ways, meaning it will not come from 7-10 p.m., when many traditional programs are offered, or from 8-10 or 10-12 on Saturday mornings. Therefore, recreation providers will need periodically to do demographic surveys of the communities to meet the needs of the changing structures. Location of services will also warrant consideration due to limits in public or personal transportation. Cost of participation is a point of great consideration as well. With the increase in diverse family structures and the fact that many single parents may be economically disadvantaged and are leading a "hand-to-mouth" existence, cost for participation may be prohibitive.

As a look is given to recreation offerings social and educational skills will need to be incorporated into programs. This type of programming will necessitate synergetic efforts on the part of many facilities and organizations. Turf can no longer be an issue when it comes to providing services to this growing population of divergent lifestyles. The need to draw all community agencies together in a partnership will be a must. This will not only affect the volunteer agencies but will impact the private sector as well as the local government. Since it appears that the broadening of the traditional family is inevitable then a need is being evidenced that a change is necessary in how voluntary agencies provide services. It's time for some agency and/or organizational introspection.

## Conclusions, Recommendations and Reflections

### Conclusions

Statistics indicate that by 1990 twenty-nine percent of the households will be female-headed resulting in the necessity to find new companions to have social leisure and, leisure will be toward developing community and intimacy. As work involvement increases, time given to family companionship is more likely to drop. Recreation activities which do occur will be more independently focused thus reducing the time available for family-oriented activities.(8) Therefore, voluntary agencies will need to fill the void and welcome the surrogate opportunities. Programs like Companions will provide the intimacy and the partnership and synergetic programming will provide community.

The family institution is still an important unit in society, especially with respect to leisure. The majority of children will obtain

from the family a general lifestyle, a major part of which will determine leisure participation.(3) However, with the changing family structure, outside agencies will have to supplement the development of this general lifestyle. In the development of this lifestyle the notion of partnerships between family, community, school, voluntary agencies will be important.

## Recommendations

Voluntary agencies will need to:

- \* Offer before-school and after-school programs.
- \* Offer twilight programs--programs which are offered early enough in the evening when family members can spend quality time together which will move us away from the "couch potato" syndrome which is disguised quite often as quality time.
- \* Investigate Friday evening offerings.
- \* Instead of early Saturday morning programs, these offerings may need to be shifted more toward mid-morning to early-afternoon and, what about Sunday?
- \* Offer programs which will accommodate the variety of ages, ethnic and economic backgrounds and strata.
- \* Be flexible in offerings that revolve around the workdays of the constituents.
- \* Keep in mind locations of offerings and accessibility by public transportation; the decision to participate will be determined by access.
- \* Willingly accept the role of surrogate for recreation, social and educational skill development, not only for the youth but the adults as well.

## Reflections

As literature was reviewed for this writing I was quite surprised to find that many of the recreation offerings are still family oriented in the traditional sense. The family structure has been very dynamic over the last few years, however, the providers have remained constant. It's time we collectively (voluntary, public, commercial, private, government and industry) accepted the responsibility that organizations will need to help the family carry out its function.

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