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CREATIVE STRATEGIES TO PROVIDE FAMILY AND INTERGENERATIONAL
LEISURE EXPERIENCES

BY

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ABSTRACT

Increased awareness of the need for providing family and intergenerational recreation experiences is growing. This awareness has occurred largely due to changes in the status of the family, and recognition that present programs are not suitable to serve the needs of families.

There are many barriers and constraints on leisure that affect the leisure participation of individuals and families. In order to overcome these constraints, creative strategies are necessary.

This paper reviews the constraints that prevent leisure participation and suggests some ways that recreation agencies can overcome them. The paper emphasizes the role of the public sector and examines strategies with respect to program development, facility provision, policies, attitudes and administration. The paper concludes with a challenge to the recreation profession.

CREATIVE STRATEGIES TO PROVIDE FAMILY AND INTERGENERATIONAL
LEISURE EXPERIENCES

INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been an increased awareness of the need for family and intergenerational recreation experiences. This awareness has been due, in part, to a recognition that existing recreation services did not serve the needs of families very well coupled, with a growing concern for the status of the family itself.

Ample evidence (7, 18, 19, 17, 11) of the changes in family status has led some experts to conclude that there is a crisis in family relations. In general their reports suggest that in Canada: single

parent families are on the increase; size of households are declining; one-third of all marriages now end in divorce; 60% of all married women are in the workforce; and fewer than 20% of all families are traditional nuclear (mom, dad and the kids) families. Similar conditions are known to exist in the United States.

While these dramatic changes in family structure and familial relationships have implications for recreation and leisure service agencies, the response by the agency to date not been adequate. Many agencies recognize the problem but too few have acted to provide an appropriate response. As an example, one major public recreation department in Western Canada began to recognize the problem and act on it when it was revealed that only 6.4% of all programs were planned with the family in mind while close to 40% were specifically planned for youth. Their figures also indicated that of the programs offered, 56% were of a physical team sport nature in comparison with just 14% culture and art programs. It is unlikely that this scenario represents an isolated case. It does indicate, though, that there is an unequal distribution of public recreation programs while current experience suggests that recreation programs do not serve the interests of families on an equitable basis.

If recreation and leisure is to continue as an important vehicle to assist families and individuals who are experiencing stress or may be at risk, then more must be done. The value of leisure as a tool to promote and enhance communication, interaction, tolerance and understanding which leads to family unity cannot be minimized.

There are many community based agencies with the resources to deal with this issue. If, however, services are to be provided on an integrated, comprehensive basis then the burden of responsibility falls to the public sector. As Goodale (6) states, "public recreation began for the purpose of making resources, thus opportunities, available in forms not otherwise provided and for people who would not otherwise have access." If the task is left solely to individuals to facilitate their own family recreation experiences or to voluntary and private agencies, the job will not get done.

This paper examines some of the constraints that lead to non-participation among families and identifies creative strategies to better serve their needs, with a particular emphasis on the public sector.

CONSTRAINTS ON LEISURE

In order to improve family recreation opportunities, it is essential that the specific recreation needs of different family types be understood as well as the reasons that now prevent families from participating in recreation.

A great deal has been written about social, economic, life cycle and psychological barriers to and constraints on leisure. A summary and review of past research by Jackson (10) identified many of the constraints often associated with non-participation. Of particular

interest to family leisure are constraints such as work commitments, family commitments, lack of awareness of opportunities, poor facilities, lack of money, lack and cost of transport, cost of equipment, lack of interest, lack of time, lack of partners, admission fees, crowding, accessibility and proximity to leisure services.

A study of family recreation behavior and attitudes in the City of Calgary (1) dealt with the barriers that prevented survey participants from participating more frequently in family recreation activities. The most frequent responses were too busy/not enough time (23%), too expensive/no money (17%), varying interests (11%), young children (9%), no interest (4%), and not aware of opportunities (4%).

At a recent conference Dennis Howard (9) reported similar findings. He indicated that a review of barriers to Canadian participation in sport and physical recreation activities indicated the greatest obstacle was lack of time due to work commitments.

While these responses reflect some of the constraints which prevent participation, it is equally important to know what motivates people to participate in recreation activities as a family and what benefits they seek from the experience. The Calgary study (1) indicated that the primary reasons for participation in recreation activities with family were to have fun, to spend time with family, to learn new skills to be creative, to maintain fitness level and to socialize. Once it is known what benefits people seek from the experience and what constrains them from participation it is possible to plan programs which are more appropriate for families.

It is true that many of the constraints identified and benefits sought are situational. As marital status, income, employment, location, proximity and environmental circumstances change so do the constraints on leisure and the ability of individuals and families to deal with them.

Some constraints on leisure can be overcome by individual initiative. For many individuals and families, however, the solutions are outside of their present resources and abilities. In these cases, an institutional as well as an individual response may be necessary if solutions are to be found.

It is evident, however, that institutions and leisure time itself are part of the problem and lead to the creation of constraints on leisure. This can occur in public institutions, due to the bureaucratic nature of the organization, the public policies they create and failure to recognize the constraints on leisure and the benefits that people seek from participation. As Rakoff (2) states, "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 ...".

Experience has shown that often public recreation programs are offered on an age, gender and ability specific basis resulting in segregated programs not suitable to integrated family participation. Often, facilities are not planned to serve the specific interests of families, public policies relating to rates, use and scheduling are

restrictive and marketing is rarely targeted toward families.

Following are some creative strategies which can help to facilitate meaningful leisure experiences for families.

CREATIVE STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME CONSTRAINTS ON LEISURE

Program Strategies

There are an abundance of program ideas, program models and resources (4, 13, 14, 15, 20) available to assist in the development of family recreation programs. What is often lacking, however, is an adequate understanding of and adherence to the principles and planning process on which successful family recreation programs are based.

Strategic Program Planning

Program planners must be sensitive to the many factors which affect recreation participation. Among these factors are: demographics, economic and social status, family type, program type, program level and scheduling. They must be able to understand, interpret and use this information to develop appropriate programs based on family needs and expectation. To do this effectively, planning is the key.

Traditional planning models (3) follow a process of goal setting, needs assessment, program development, evaluation and modification. The first step in the strategic planning process is an internal organizational assessment and an external environmental scan. This information identifies opportunities and sources of strength from which to build, and weaknesses that must be overcome. Objectives are then formulated from which specific strategies and detailed plans are developed. Next, human, physical and financial resources are applied to the strategies, priorities are set and programs introduced.

Critical in this process is an understanding of the community. This knowledge can be gained through an assessment of public needs and preferences and the development of a profile of the demographic and social characteristics of the community.

It is equally important to recognize that strategic planning must be coupled with strategic management. An important step in strategic management is evaluation in order to ensure compliance to plans and modification to programs where necessary. Evaluation should be done on a regularly scheduled basis throughout the year. During annual budget preparation, resource implications are reviewed and evaluated in detail and priority strategies are set out for the year.

Family Recreation Program Principles

Perhaps the first requirement in planning for family recreation is to recognize that the definition of family today is broadly interpreted to include nuclear, extended, single parent, childless and experimental families. The dynamics of these familial arrangements require that every effort be made to minimize the age, gender and ability differences which exist within families in developing programs.

Another important factor in planning family recreation programs is recognition of and sensitivity to the principles on which these programs are based. Harper (7) identified five principles or considerations to keep in mind when developing family recreation programs:

1. Family programs must relate to the various types of recreational participation patterns of family members

2. Program planners must recognize the relationship between family type and participation barriers

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

4. Consider that all family members need not participate together in every program

5. Families will respond to programs which provide the greatest enjoyment and allow for a maximum of interaction and communication

Choices with respect to recreation participation are generally based on needs satisfaction and expected benefit.

For families, program decisions are made more complex because of the added dynamic of satisfying many diverse needs. Orthner (16) described three types of recreation participation patterns of family members. He identified and defined individual pursuits where no communication or interaction occurs. This type of program could be described as leisure diversity where members of the family participate on their own to realize personal benefits of no interest to other family members. The second type is parallel activities, where family members participate together but minimal interaction occurs. The third area is joint activities where a high degree of interaction is achieved. This latter area might be described as a leisure partnership where all family members participate together and realize mutual benefits.

The one area not addressed by Orthner could be referred to as leisure compromise where one or more members of the family sacrifice or compromise their primary recreation interests for those of other family members. Some family members benefit from the experience more directly than others.

If constraints on leisure and barriers to participation are to be

minimized, then each of the principles, factors, benefits and motives outlined earlier must be considered when planning family recreation programs. One thing is clear, no single program can possibly satisfy the wide range of family recreation needs or overcome all of the constraints on leisure that exist.

FACILITY STRATEGIES - CREATING THE ENVIRONMENT

Many constraints which prevent family leisure participation can be attributed to the planning, design, location, policies and scheduling of facilities. Creating an interesting, challenging, diverse, warm, safe and high quality environment is one step necessary in removing these barriers and constraints. Until very recently, facilities have ignored the specific requirements of families while at the same time setting aside space for teens, seniors, day care and adults.

In Canada, an unpredictable climate has resulted in the development of "build environments" so that it is now possible to swim during the winter and skate during the summer. To a great extent, indoor facility development was pushed along by the interests of competitive and elite sport programs in an effort to extend their seasons. Most facilities, although initially designed to accommodate competitive programs, also provide space for general community recreation programs.

The standards used to develop competitive facilities are often not conducive to family and intergenerational recreation. In pools, a minimum of three feet six inch shallow end depth, required to execute tumble turns by competitive swimmers, makes it impossible for children and infants to swim or play in the pool unaided. The tendency to develop single purpose facilities and decentralize their location around the community makes it difficult for people with different interests (swimming, skating, court sports) to travel to recreation programs together. Many wading pools, tot lots, hockey rinks, tennis courts, gymnasiums and athletic parks are dull, single purpose, unimaginative and restrictive. They serve the interests of a small number of users but do little to provide for integrated, intergenerational recreation activities better suited to families.

New trends in integrated facility development provide "one stop" service centers and allow people to choose from alternatives, have access to a variety of leisure experiences, promote spin off uses and result in significant economies of scale.

It is possible, through creative planning and design, to accommodate the needs of competitive sport and recreation users alike. Leisure pools and free-form ice arenas can be designed to accommodate competitive use. Gymnasiums can be designed for multi-purpose use, tennis courts can be used for skate boarding and skating, tot lots can be parent observation areas and water features and outdoor pools can have bar-b-que pits and picnic tables. The key is creativity and imagination. This not only applies to new construction. An inviting integrated leisure environment can be created by modifying or retrofitting existing facilities as well.

Leisure Pools

Indoor and outdoor leisure pools, which provide a wide variety of recreation facilities centered around an aquatic base, are one example of creative, imaginative and integrated facilities. These facilities often have components which include weight rooms, games areas, sauna, whirlpool, sun lamps, deck chairs and sun deck areas. The water features often include a zero depth beach front entrance, wave making equipment, water slides, water falls and rope swings. It is possible to incorporate regulation 25 meter racing lanes into the design to accommodate competitive training.

Free-Form Ice Arenas

Some of the creative thinking that resulted in leisure pools is being applied to other facilities as well. In Burnaby, British Columbia the concept of a free-form ice arena is being developed. This facility combines the traditional rectangular hockey rink with a free-form area that can be separated by use of movable hockey boards. It provides a more dynamic, interesting and challenging experience much better suited to integrated, intergenerational recreation participation.

Important Facility Considerations

There are some additional facility considerations that might assist in facilitating family participation. The scope and scale of facilities should always be at a human scale so that they are perceived to be inviting rather than intimidating places to be. Small details such as family change rooms eliminates the problems associated with children of different sexes accompanying parents into sex segregated change facilities. Maintenance and cleanliness can greatly enhance the recreation experience and influence the frequency of return visits. Scheduling facility use to allow for unstructured access is an important element to consider in facility use. The Calgary study (1) indicated that 52% preferred drop in activity for family recreation.

It must be recognized that creating the environment or climate for participation is only one step in the process. It is equally important that the program, leadership, administration, policies and marketing strategies allow for and encourage family recreation participation.

Policies, Rules and Regulations

Robert Glossop once stated (5) that "there are in Canada very few policies designed explicitly to enhance the capacities of families to undertake their work and it is rare to find an assessment (family impact statement) of policies and trends that influence the ability of families to sustain themselves and to develop patterns of interreliance within the communities from which they draw their own strength."

It is important to carefully evaluate public policies not only on the basis of what they allow but also what they prevent and whom they affect. All too often policies that are established to assist one group have a negative effect on other groups.

Recreation program and facility policies generally relate to user fees, priority for use and safety factors. For many people any fee, however small, will present a barrier to participation either with respect to the choice and type of activity or the frequency and intensity of participation. Often, user priorities are first established on the basis of satisfying organized user requirements because of their ability to articulate and lobby for their requirements. Family recreation time is often the last to be scheduled and the first to be cancelled when other users need space.

Safety is an important element and policies are necessary to protect the interests of all users. However, care must be taken to ensure that policies are not developed for the convenience of the staff rather than the safety and enjoyment of the users. The way in which policies are enforced is just as important because a heavy handed approach can take all of the fun out of the recreation experience.

Administration, Mandate and Goals

The administration structure, interpretation of mandate and priority of organizational goals can often be additional constraints on leisure for families.

A study by Edginton and Neal cited in Michaelis and O'Connell (12) found that "enhancing the family unit" was ranked 74 out of 85 goal statements by California recreation directors. This suggests a very low priority within many organizations. One way to help overcome this situation is to appoint a staff person to be responsible in whole or in part, for family recreation. This strategy means that the needs of the family will be considered in the decision making process because there will be someone present who will serve as an advocate.

A recent trend in large municipal organizations in Canada is to create Community Service departments bringing together all departments

providing human services. This allows for the logical development of holistic services more sensitive to individual and family needs.

The recent emphasis on facilitation as opposed to direct service by public recreation agencies can have a negative effect on many users if this strategy is not carried out with a high degree of sensitivity. Failure to recognize the unique requirements of certain neighborhoods, communities and individuals could mean that the people who require service the most are denied access to it.

Marketing and Promotion

In developing public recreation programs factors such as the price of the service, time and location, target market and type of program are rarely planned done with the family in mind.

Marketing family recreation requires well thought out strategies that send the right message to consumers. Harper (8) outlines the model used for a national family recreation program, "Together is Better". This highly successful, Canada wide, marketing and awareness program was used as the basis for the development of local family recreation opportunities.

Some useful strategies to address this issue are to create programs that transcend traditional structure with respect to age, sex and ability level. Plan special events, festivals, and celebrations such as Mother's Day, Father's Day and Family Day. Encourage family participation by providing a reduced rate for families or an annual family pass. Target marketing approaches specifically to families and identify each program in information brochures with a symbol that indicates it is suitable for family participation.

A CHALLENGE

There are many factors and constraints on leisure which lead to non-participation in recreation by families. Some of the solutions to these constraints require individual initiative while some require an institutional response. There is a role for all community based leisure service organizations, but the burden of responsibility falls to the public sector if the solutions are to be comprehensive and equitable.

The challenge for the public recreation sector is to: recognize the problem; be willing to act; and move to minimize the constraints over which the system has control, thereby becoming part of the solution, not part of the problem.

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