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FAMILY LEISURE: A COOPERATIVE EFFORT BETWEEN PARENTS, SPECIAL  
EDUCATORS, AND COMMUNITY THERAPEUTIC RECREATION SPECIALISTS

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ABSTRACT

Families are a forgotten resource. The purpose of this paper is to identify a process through which this forgotten resource can be revitalized to insure the development of capable and competent youth and the future of our society. This paper describes Family Leisure Programming and provides strategies through which parents can be trained as group leaders. It discusses the theoretical basis for this programming area and describes an evaluation procedure that can be utilized to determine the effectiveness of the program.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's society, families are a forgotten resource. This is due, in part, to the disintegration of the family system through divorce, mobility, and the economic need for two family incomes. The result of this trend is an increased dependence on institutions for the socialization of our children. James Coleman (6) identifies this dependence on institutions to be detrimental to the future of our society. He contends that it is through family interactions and intergenerational communication that youth acquire "social capital" or the norms, social networks and relationships with adults that is essential to development of attitudes, effort and conception of self. Coleman further states that it is these variables that impact student achievement.(6) It follows that efforts must be made to re-establish families as a resource to enhance the academic achievement of today's children and to insure that they are allowed ample opportunities to develop the social capital necessary to live full and productive lives.

It is the contention of this author that social capital can be developed through parental involvement programs within the school system and that family leisure activities are an effective modality through

which this task can be accomplished.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature strongly supports the need for parent involvement programs. Based on a review of the literature, Becher (3) contends that parent involvement can increase academic achievement and cognitive development, enhance relationships between parents, children and school personnel, increase understanding of the developmental process, enhance parents ability to reinforce educational skills in the home and help to gain support for school programs. Parents are most interested in being actively involved in the educational process and in policy planning. They are less likely to be receptive to social and fundraising programs. Ms. Becher also warns that programs of this nature may encounter resistance from teachers who feel that the organization of programs of this nature will add too much to their workload. They also may feel that their role may be threatened, and that parents may demonstrate undesirable characteristics or that they may not be responsible. Becher (3) identifies other considerations in the development of parent involvement programs. These are to insure that the purposes, goals, and activities are congruent. The roles and responsibilities of all participants must be clearly delineated and maximum involvement in problem solving and decision making needs to be encouraged.

Although these principles were not specifically written for programs servicing families with disabled members, the concepts are applicable. These families have the same needs as other families, only accentuated by the impact of the disability. People with disabling conditions are typically faced with an excess of free time due to the limitations placed on them by their condition. These individuals are in need of leisure education programs to help them identify community resources and adaptive devices, knowledge and skills to enable them to live full and complete lifestyles. Families can benefit from programs of this nature in that they can be helped to adapt to the disability of a family member with minimum impact on the family system.

Kirka (9) contends that parents with disabled children have a large role to play in the area of helping their children learn transitional skills, such as following directions, punctuality, social skills, communication and decision making which could make them more independent. It can not be assumed that the parents will innately have enough knowledge of these skills to impart them successfully to their children. Parent involvement programs provide a basis for parental understanding of disabling conditions and help them learn techniques through which they can help their child adapt to his/her disabling condition.

In a review of the literature on family leisure, Monroe (11) found that there is considerable documentation related to the effectiveness of family leisure involvement in developing the areas of self-concept, communication skills, behavior management or parenting skills. There is also documented evidence that families of handicapped individuals feel that there is a need for more programs that involve the whole family (10).

Families also benefit from involvement in activities that include other families which are facing the same life circumstances. The benefits of multi-family groups are numerous (11). First, it enables the family members to see that they are not the only ones faced with these problems and circumstances. Involvement in multi-family groups provide a strong support group that is conducive to problem solving and esteem building, particularly when they find that they can be of service to other families. An additional benefit is that "... families can learn about themselves through analogy by viewing both the verbal and nonverbal interactions between members of another family, people can identify with them, which lowers resistance and eases the pain of self-discovery". (12, p. 401)

The American Association for Leisure and Recreation (AALR) (1) is highly supportive of leisure education programs in the public schools. The organization holds that leisure education is a process that enables people to become aware of the roles of leisure and work in their lives and is a means to enhance self-concept, clarify societal roles and develop human competencies such as mobility, manual proficiency, language and social skills. AALR strongly encourages the development of a synergistic effort between the general public, schools and leisure professionals to develop, coordinate and disseminate information, techniques, materials and resources for leisure education programs in public schools.

#### SUMMARY

It can be surmised from the review of the literature that there is a need for the development of parent involvement programs for persons with disabling conditions. It has also been documented that recreational programs can have a significant impact in the goal areas usually addressed by parent involvement programs. It follows that a family leisure program can be an effective modality in meeting the needs of disabled individuals and their families.

#### FAMILY LEISURE PROGRAM

A family leisure program has recently been implemented in the city of Norfolk, Virginia. The purpose of this program is to train the parents of emotionally disturbed and learning disabled children in the strategies and techniques of Family Leisure Programming. It is designed: to increase parental understanding of their child's condition; to enhance family relationships through improved communication and cooperative skills; to develop parents' understanding of the importance of play and recreation in their children's lives; to teach parents how to utilize recreational activities to reinforce educational skills, and to help families identify and utilize community recreation resources. It is felt that through the accomplishment of these goals, families will be more able to adjust to the handicapping condition of a family member.

The program is designed to be a cooperative effort between the Norfolk Public School-Parent Resource Center and the Norfolk Parks and Recreation Department's Therapeutic Recreation Program. This cooperative agreement entails training parents in how to organize their own family leisure groups with friends and/or neighbors. In the training element, the program goals are introduced and instruction is provided in how to structure family leisure opportunities to accomplish these goals.

This cooperative effort not only provides support systems for families, but also increases the resources available to them and aids in the expansion of services. It provides access to facilities where parents can meet to implement their programs and allows for professional guidance from the parent leaders, special educators and therapeutic recreation specialists. It increases the handicapped individuals level of independence and returns some of the responsibility of caregiving/provider back to the family unit.

The program is divided into two components; the Family Leisure Program and the Parental Training Program. These components will be described in detail in the following section of this paper.

## FAMILY LEISURE PROGRAM

### Program Description

This program is designed to run for six (6) weeks. Each program session is one and one half (1 1/2) hours long. The program can be expanded to continue indefinitely by choosing additional activities to reinforce the established goal areas. The group should meet in a comfortable setting that allows for participation in a wide range of leisure activities. There should be enough room for active sports and games, with adequate tables for discussions, pencil and paper activities, and arts and crafts, and there should be a minimum of distractions. Supplies needed for the group are dependent on the activities that the leaders choose to reinforce the goal areas. It is also important to note that the activities do not need to be limited to the facility. Because a goal of the program is to develop leisure skills, abilities and awareness, community outings should be scheduled to provide the families with the opportunity to experience community based leisure activities. This component of the program helps to familiarize the families with the leisure resources available to them and reinforces continued community participation after the program has terminated.

### Program Format

The program implementation consists of four (4) parts; sharing a positive statement about themselves, an activity with discussion, sharing a positive statement about a family member, and a parental discussion. Each of the program elements will be discussed individually.

Each session will begin with the family members sharing a positive statement about themselves with each other. A positive statement can include something that you like about yourself, something that you do well, or something that happened to you that made you feel good.

During the activity section, the leader discusses the purpose and goal of that particular session. For example, if the focus of an activity is to increase family communication, the leader will tell the group. The leader will then discuss the importance of communication in families, giving examples of how lack of communication can interfere with family cohesiveness. The leader can then ask whether or not any of the families have any particular problems with communication that they would like to focus on or share with the group. An activity that helps the family members to see the effects of positive or bad communications within the family unit is then introduced.

This is followed by a group discussion. The leader should ask each family to share with the group how the activity progressed and what problems the individual families may have encountered. The discussion should be directed so that other families can offer suggestions or share their own frustrations. The group leaders will then summarize the activity. It is at this time that the activity is applied to every day living. For example, the group leader may ask whether they have any of the same frustrations when giving directions in the home. The group can then discuss how communication effects their daily living and what types of alternatives they may have to these frustrations.

During the final part of the program, the children are sent out of the room for a supervised play session. The parents then have the opportunity to share ideas and feedback in areas that concern them. Topics could include such items as behavioral management, educational rights and responsibilities, their child's disability, and community resources.

### Leadership

The group should be staffed with a minimum of two leaders. These leaders should be aware of the family history and problems and should have skills and confidence in working with families. It is difficult to help family members come to grips with problems they may face without alienating them. Some suggestions that may be helpful to the leader are to role model appropriate interactions and to provide indirect guidance and examples to avoid threatening the family members. It is important not to embarrass family members in front of the group or to diminish parental authority in front of the children. It is often helpful to discuss particular problems with the family or affected individual privately, outside the group.

## PARENTAL TRAINING PROGRAM

This component focuses on teaching parent leaders the skills they will need to implement a Family Leisure Program. The training materials cover information of developmental needs, effects of disabling conditions, communication, behavior management (8), self-esteem (5), community resources for recreation and education, and the benefits and structure of support groups (4, pp. 239-255). Parent leaders will also be trained in utilizing the Functional Assessment of Family Needs.(2) This needs assessment will enable them to learn about the needs and interests of the group members. They can then choose activities for the group sessions which will aid in the fulfillment of the identified needs. Each of these topic areas are discussed during training sessions. Discussions focus on how to integrate these strategies into personal lives and then how to role model and instruct other parents in how to utilize them.

### Program Evaluation

The purpose of program evaluation is to increase the overall effectiveness of the program and to determine its impact on participants behavior. The Formative Program Evaluation Procedure (F.P.E.P.) proposed by Connolly (7) will be utilized to evaluate this program. To evaluate the programs effectiveness the F.P.E.P. compares the program description with information gathered on a post session report from to determine if the program was implemented as planned and to identify the effects of any unanticipated outcomes or events. The program would be revised and improved based on the findings of this procedure.

A Family Needs Survey will be administered to parents prior to program involvement and after the program has been completed. This data will help to determine whether the program was effective in meeting the needs designed by family members prior to program involvement.

Clients performance data will be collected on the participants ability to accomplish program goals. A checklist will be completed by parents, students, and group leaders before and after group sessions.

### CONCLUSION

Although the evaluation process on the Family Leisure Program has not been completed, formative data indicate that the family members feel that the program is valuable and helpful in enhancing family relationships and in establishing a support network. Complete evaluation data will be presented at the 1989 AAHPERD National Convention during the "Family Recreation: Programs, Leadership and Direction in Changing Society" conference.

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