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FAMILY RECREATION AND THEME PARKS

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ABSTRACT

Theme parks with its amazing infrastructure have been an ideal place for many families to take a day trip for celebration or have a family vacations. Established with an array of well-designed programs and tons of fun-driving attractions, a theme park could be a wonderful site for parents to allow their young kids to grow in many areas including but not limited to skill development, mental sharpening, aesthetic appreciation, social interaction, awareness of consciousness in ethics, and intellectual enrichment. This paper intends to highlight these elements collected from visiting theme parks that may lead more families to zoom into the potentials of recreation as educational vehicle in the context of theme parks beyond just having a fun.

Key Words: theme parks, family recreation, youth development

THEME PARKS AND THEIR POTENTIAL

Theme parks have been an ideal place for many families to spend birthdays, vacations, or take a day trip to. A large-scale territory coupled with attractions and entertainment attributes spread throughout, are what make up the park. The carnival rides, parades, live shows, exhibitions, food and lodging, gift shops, mascot characters, and more assemble visitors of all ages, with an incredible, unforgettable, and fun trip.

The history of amusement and theme parks can be traced back to the nineteenth century. With the substantial growth of carnivals and fairs in England, they were eventually brought into the United States (Sun & Uysal, 1994). But it was not until the opening of the Disneyland in the 1950s that theme parks and entertainment business ideas popularized around the whole world. Within the past few decades, the concept of Disney Parks and Resorts has widely spread across the borders of the United States to the whole world. Some countries and regions that have established the Disney parks and resorts include but are not limited to Japan, Hong Kong, China, Europe and more. Nowadays, in the US, there are more than 400 amusement and theme parks across the country. Each year, there were about 90 million people who visited theme parks in this country and about 60 million people in Europe visited theme parks (Babaev, Babaeva, & Ganshina, 2019). The amusement and theme park industry was reported to generate over 22 billion dollars in revenue within the US during the year of 2019. Clearly, theme parks have become a sizeable money-making business in the current leisure industry.

More important aspects of amusement and theme parks are their rich entertainment resources which have great potential for family recreation and youth development. A theme park in particular, with an array of well-designed programs and fun-driving attractions, could be a wonderful site for parents to allow their young kids to grow in many areas including but not limited to skill development, mental sharpening, aesthetic appreciation, social interaction, awareness of consciousness in ethics, and intellectual enrichment.

The purpose of this paper intends to highlight these elements collected from visiting theme parks that may lead more families to zoom into the potentials of recreation as educational vehicle in the context of theme parks beyond just having a fun. The critical issue is promoting opportunities for family to turn a vacation trip into an opportunity for healthy growth and development in children.

FAMILY RECREATION

Families are traditionally, and still, considered to be the fundamental units of society and are perhaps the oldest and most important of all human institutions. Family recreation, a form of leisure behaviors exhibited among family members, was studied and found that it may provide positive influences on many aspects of family functioning, such as satisfaction and family cohesiveness (Hawks, 1991; Holman & Epperson 1989; Zabriskie 2001).

Family recreation can be defined as family participation in leisure activities together and it plays a vital role in the development of the family health, function, and strength (Horning, 2005). Through engaging in a variety of leisure opportunities, family recreation may breed many positive social, educational, and mental outcomes for participants (Smith, 1997). Research revealed that family recreation could be an effective vehicle in regards to the provision of family values, enhancement of family bonds, and the promotion of healthy growth among the youth (Mactavish & Schleien, 2000; Smith, 1997).

Resurfaced research on family recreation has received a considerable amount of attention in the field of leisure studies over the past few decades. Some studies have documented the positive relationship between leisure participation and various family outcomes (Freeman & Zabriskie, 2003; Kelly, 1997; Shaw, 1992 & 2001; Smith, 1997; Zabriskie, 2001). The literature, in general, from the viewpoint of beneficial outcomes of family recreation, can be simply classified into three concentrated areas: promoting family health, prescribing therapeutic values, and providing opportunities for youth development. We can simply refer to these areas as the three “Ps.”

Promoting Family Health

Recreation plays an important role in a healthy family life. A large body of literature suggests the positive relationship between the involvement in family recreation which in turn establishes family strength and family cohesion (Holman & Epperson, 1984; Orthner & Mancini, 1991; Zabriskie, 2001; Zabriskie, & McCormick, 2001). Leisure is regarded as the single most important force in developing a cohesive and healthy relationship between family members in contemporary society (Couchman, 1982). Family members who have often played together reported higher levels of happiness, healthy functions, and unity because of the shared recreational activities provided and environment for open communication, interaction, and problem solving (Nelson et al, 1995). Family recreation may generate mutual benefits for both individuals and their family as a whole. It not only strengthens family bonds and encourages family cohesion, but it also consolidates family values and traditions. In particular, most evidence of strengthening family relationships through participating in family recreation were found from the involvement in various outdoor recreational activities (Hawks, 1991; Holman & Epperson, 1984; Hill, 1988).

Prescribing Therapeutic Values

The therapeutic values of partaking in family recreation can further be classified into two dimensions: Recreation as a form of inclusion for families that have children with disabilities (Mactavish & Schleien, 1998 & 2000; Mactavish & Schleien, & Tabourne, 1997; Scholl, McAvoy, & Smith, 1999) and as treatment for youth at-risk (Hill, Freeman, & Huff 2001; Wells, Widmer, & McCoy, 2004). Family recreation may serve as a purpose of inclusive opportunities to invite children with disabilities the proper conditions to participate in shared leisure experiences. Undertaking such leisure activities collectively helps for family unity, satisfaction, and the members' physical and mental health (Mactavish & Schleien, 1998). In addition, Mactavish and Schleien (2000) studied the relationship of frequency of those who partake in family recreation and their engagements in five general categorized leisure activities. These include passive, play, physical, social, and entertainment/special events. The patterns of activities depend upon family involvement and selected socio-demographic characteristics. They found that variations in frequency of participating in such activities were related to the nature of a child's disabilities, a parent's employment status, and the number of family members.

Family recreation may also be used as a treatment method for youth at-risk. Family recreation can reconcile the relationship between parents and children. Some recreational programs were successful in treating adolescents with behavioral and emotional problems by encouraging the interaction between parents and children (Bandoroff & Scherer, 1994). Interactive activities within families may serve as a mechanism for reducing family conflicts and lead to the decrease of at-risk behaviors in adolescents (Bandura, 1997). Wells, Widmer, and McCoy (2004) found that challenge-based outdoor recreation promoted collective efficacy in family participants and helped families with at-risk adolescents. The results of the study indicated a significant increase in reported scores on the collective efficacy among family recreation participants. They also noted that the increased scores helped family members gain important abilities to resolve conflicts.

Providing Opportunity for Youth Development

Family recreation may serve as a purposeful leisure (Shaw, 2001) and can be used as an important vehicle for child development (Kelly, 1996; Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Family recreation may facilitate educational opportunities for interactive learning between parents and children, which leads to children's skill development, health and fitness improvement, and behavioral advancement. Participating in family recreation, parents, through role modeling or role taking, may teach youth moral values, ethics, and deportments. Family recreation provides a positive environment that allows children to grow in all aspects, including social, physical, and recreational. In addition, skills learned in the recreation setting can be carried over into family life. Youth's early engagements in leisure activities will set in motion a life-long interest and involvement in recreation (Horna, 1989)

Many values of family recreation participation have been well-documented, the question that may further be discussed is in what setting it will be an ideal venue for conducting a family recreation event in order to achieve maximum benefits from its involvement. Some research revealed outdoor activities contain inherent challenges for individuals. These challenges can be found while camping, hiking, backpacking, and more, all of which offer opportunities for overwhelming mastery experiences that produce the feelings of efficacy and positive effects on family functions (Wells et al, 2004; Lee, Graefe, & Burns, 2006). Moreover, some other researchers even indicated home-based recreation, such as playing board games or gardening together, may also benefit the family as a whole (Smith, 1997). This paper argues that theme parks with their unique setups, clustered attractions, large scale operational entities, and a variety of interactive programs assuredly position themselves as an excellent place for children and their family members to partake in leisure activities together.

Theme Parks for Family Recreation



Whale Training Performance Show at the SeaWorld

Theme Parks for Family Cohesiveness

Most theme parks are situated either in an organic destination or in an induced self-contained destination. Theme parks commonly establish their own large sized territory to isolate the park from surrounding areas, either a city or district. For example, Disney World in Orlando took

about 27,400 acres of land in the southeast suburbs of the Orlando metropolitan area. Often the places where theme parks are located require visitors to drive certain distances from their home to access the park. For instance, Cedar Point located in Sandusky, Ohio or Six Flags Great Adventure located in Jackson, New Jersey are both within an hour of larger cities. When people are traveling away from home-based daily routines, taking a trip to a new place, or are likely in an unfamiliar environment, they tend to get closer toward each other in order to deal with new challenges and handle some uncertainties together: for instance, selecting specific attractions, scheduling daily activities, choosing what type of foods for lunch or dinner, etc. All of these needs offer opportunities for members to communicate with each other and express themselves collaboratively to build trust and work together as a team over the time spent in the theme park. The family members interact with each other in the venue filled with fun possibilities and entertainment, that kind of leisure-oriented atmosphere normally produces a visitor's delightful mood and pleasant emotion, which will help build positive relationships and strengthen bonds among family members.

Theme Parks Allow A Family To Escape Their Routine Lives To Visit A Fantasy World

Every theme park was carefully designed and planned for its physical appearance and interior design for a specific theme or an array of themes. These themes are filled with various entertainment attributes, characters in costumes, coupled with unique and colorful sculptures and architecture reflecting the stories and plots from popular cartoons or movies. Many of the park personnel dress up to welcome and entertain visitors, which help to create a strong sense of fantasy. For example, you may actually see many popular characters alive in the Toy Story Land in Walt Disney World. Woody, Buzz, Jessie and Slinky dog can be found walking around and greeting the visitors. Moreover, many of these theme parks are equipped with thrill rides and fairy tale story shows that could be helpful to deal with emotional distresses. Additionally, while floating in a wave pool with family members, riding on the choo-choo train with their kids, and lying down on a sandy beach sunbathing, visitors will enjoy relaxing moments with family members. Furthermore, a true feeling of taking a trip for vacation, a getaway from work and daily chores, the ability to loosen up from the daily normality surely invites a great feeling of leisure, calmness, and tranquility. Theme parks can be a remedy for a family to recovery from the distress of everyday life and feel a sense of relief. This corresponds with the early argument of family recreation research that suggested that family recreation provides therapeutic value for coping with emotional and behavioral problems.



Thrill rides in Cedar Point

Family Recreation In Theme Parks For Social Interaction And Communication Skills

With a large scale construction, Theme parks, along with the various types of attractions for fun and entertainment have great potential to satisfy every family member’s interest and what their need in their use of leisure is. Water rides, animal shows, wave pool, live music, movie-based tours, you name it, all of these fascinating and dynamic programs allow the entire family to interact with each other during their park visit. Horning (2005) indicated that family recreation allows family members to partake in leisure activities together which offer interactive opportunities to support and promote family health, functioning, and strength. Theme parks as a one-stop vacation are packed with multifaceted opportunities for the whole family to engage and interact alongside each other. Besides fun programs, most of the theme parks also accommodate visitors with outstanding hospitality services. Many which include food and lodging facilities, ice cream trucks, food trucks, gift shops, and eye-catching landscaping, just to name a few. Extensively, all of these establishments encourage involvement between adults and youth, whether it be interaction or communication, to produce unforgettable memories and positive feelings among the family members.

Table: Popular Establishments in a Theme Park

Entertainment:	Aquatic facilities:	Hospitality services:
Carnival Rides Games Roller coaster Museum Movie tour Fairy tale land Music programs	Lazy river Flow riders Wave pool Water coasters Water rides Water slide Bumper boats	Restaurant Food truck Night clubs Ice cream truck Picnic tables Lodging, hotels and resorts Meeting facilities

Choo-Choo train Bumper cars Festivals Parades Live shows Animal care shelter Photo booth	Swinging pool Marine animal center/rehab Whale performance Dolphin training pool Penguin Encounter	Gift shops Sport and recreational venues Fireworks Mascot characters Exotic botanical garden Fantasy inspired Architecture
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Family Recreation In Theme Parks For Education And Youth Development

Theme parks provide a pleasant and positive environment that allows children to grow with their parents in a holistic aspect, referring to social, physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being. By engaging in various forms of leisure games and programs in theme parks, a child learns to socialize with others, communicate and express feeling in an appropriate manner, and build self-consciousness in turn, all of which lead to creating a positive self-image. Theme parks are well-organized, managed, and monitored entertainment entities. They created their own community-like social and cultural temperament that allows every kid to learn and grow in a captivating and interesting way.

There is much more to offer in theme parks for youth development beyond just having fun together with family members. Walking around the sizable theme park will improve one’s fitness level and promote staying active as it is the main method of navigating the park. Spending time waiting in lines for thrill rides may help motivate children to follow directions and learn to respect others and regulations put in place. Interacting with super heroes such as Captain America or Spiderman, may cultivate a kid’s bravery and integrity. Observing the marine mammal rescue programs in SeaWorld, such as the Penguin Encounter or the Whale performance shows may nurture children to learn how to love and care for other creatures on this planet, not to mention sharpen their environmental sensitivity. Furthermore, children interacting may learn how to follow directions clearly, respect rules and regulations, initiate and socialize with others appropriately, and express themselves in a moral and respectful manner. Potential impacts of children involved in such organized leisure activities in theme parks may create a long-term impact on the future as a well-defined citizen, characterized with many elegant civil manners such as civility, courtesy, ethics, decency, and dignity.

SUMMARY

Research in leisure and tourism studies have revealed a powerful influence of participating in family recreation that would promote healthy growth in youths and build a close bond for the whole family (Orthner, 1998). Family recreation as an effective vehicle brings family together to induce cohesiveness, nurture youth development, increase ethical awareness, and to develop social interactive skills.

Theme parks, with their amazing entertainment infrastructure and rich leisure resources would provide opportunities for families to work together as a whole to build trust and rely on each other to learn and grow through interactive activities. Nevertheless, theme parks are indisputable and ideal venues for families to conduct family recreation and apprehend such values and benefits discussed throughout this paper. Still, however, very little research attention with such an integrative view has been given to these two entities. This paper puts in a preliminary effort to highlight some of the potential benefits of the family recreation in theme parks. Hopefully, future research will follow up with this interactive approach on these two entities to further broaden the horizon of family recreation participation and the relationship to the uses of theme park, in both positive and negative aspects.

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