

## Fulfilling Leisure for Youth

### INTRODUCTION

Today's youth seem to devote much of their waking hours to activities that lead to little or no profound personal development. The goal among many young people, after the obligations of school or work are either met or ignored, seems to be having "fun." For these young people, the use of technology such as iPads, MP3 players, cell phones, video gaming facilities, and the like seems to be their version of youthful activities of the past, such as partying, watching television, going to the cinema, hanging out in bars, restaurants, or on street corners, lying on beaches, and so on<sup>1</sup>. Some youth even fail to find any fun, winding up instead being bored during their free time. Thus these young people sometimes seek excitement in delinquency or illicit drugs or both. In a study designed to test this hypothesis, Iso-Ahola and Crowley (1991) found that leisure time boredom is associated with drug abuse, although the causal relationship between these two variables has not been established.

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Stebbins (2007) has referred to these activities as casual leisure: an immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring at most minimal training, knowledge, or experience to enjoy it. The lack of training, knowledge, and experience prevents profound personal development through leisure involvements. Serious leisure is defined as the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting, and fulfilling that they launch themselves into an activity centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of special skills, knowledge, and experiences (Stebbins, 2007).

Adolescence, for many teenagers, is experienced by immersion in one or more youth culture, each of which offers a particular kind of casual leisure. Kleiber (1999) notes that adolescents embrace leisure but want their own control over it. Moreover "serious leisure activities remain far less common in adolescence . . . than more casual activities such as television watching and socializing" (p. 49). Casual leisure can be the stage for developing interpersonal relationships and exploring activities that may be taken up later more seriously, such as dabbling at tennis followed by tennis lessons and a commitment to increasingly skilled and regular play. But substantial personality development comes only with acquiring the skills, knowledge, and experience needed to satisfyingly enact a complex activity that is, especially for youth, pursued in free time. Serious leisure as a path to personal development leads to a sense of fulfilment, a valued personal and social identity, an enduring sense of purpose in life, and other substantial rewards (e.g., Arai & Pedlar, 1997; Major, 2001; Lee & Scott, 2006). Unfortunately, few young people have

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the average number of hours per day and weekend spent socializing and communicating, watching TV, and playing games and using computers for youth aged 15-19, see U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009), Table 11, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/atus.pdf>.

discovered the possibilities of serious leisure, most notably those in sport and the arts. Most teenagers engage in only casual leisure.

### RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

- Educate youth about casual and serious leisure and the different benefits of each.
- Encourage practitioners to determine which serious leisure involvements youth find most interesting, usually those they have both a taste and a talent for.
- Acquaint youth with the variety of serious leisure activities, emphasizing how to gain the needed skills, knowledge, and experience.
- Work with youth to identify two or three potential serious leisure activities that might stir their interest and passion.
- Work with individuals to establish one or more serious leisure involvements.

### DETAILS ON RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

*Educate youth about casual and serious leisure and the different benefits of each.*

The general public, youth included, are largely unaware of the differences between casual and serious leisure. Thus practitioners who work with youth must first educate them about the nature and value of these activities. In this role, practitioners are essentially leisure educators—teachers, counsellors, advisors, clergy, and social workers, among others—who understand the serious leisure perspective (Stebbins, 2007). The education they can provide regarding serious leisure should include discussions about the concept of serious leisure, its general rewards and costs, the possibilities for an in-depth leisure career through pursuit of serious leisure, and the variety of social and psychological advantages for people who pursue serious leisure involvements, including special identity, routine, lifestyle, organizational belonging, central life interest, and involvement in a social world.

*Encourage practitioners to determine which serious leisure involvements youth find most interesting, usually those they have both a taste and a talent for.*

No one has a taste for every possible activity, and having a taste for an activity does not mean the participant also has a talent for it. Thus practitioners should not try to foster an interest in ski-jumping in someone who is afraid of heights, or in art for individuals who have no artistic ability. A leisure motivation scale may help here, the most widely used being that of Beard and Ragheb (1983).

*Acquaint youth with the variety of serious leisure activities, emphasizing how to gain the needed skills, knowledge, and experience.*

Although sports are uppermost for many practitioners, note that serious leisure can also include many non-sport activities found in the arts, science, entertainment, and hobbies, and in volunteering. Furthermore, if practitioners are going to make informed recommendations and youth are going to make informed choices, a list of serious leisure activities is imperative. Stebbins (1998) lists more than 300 amateur, hobby, and career volunteer activities (Stebbins, 1998). Overs (1984) has prepared a catalogue intended to cover all types of leisure activities. A shorter, selective list of serious leisure activities for wayward youth is available in Stebbins (1999, pp. 6-7). In addition, consider presenting sampler activities that youth can try out in a non-threatening environment.

*Work with youth to identify two or three potential serious leisure activities that might stir their interest and passion.*

This step is designed to narrow the search for serious leisure activities that the participant can get started on. Here choices are made and decisions taken to pursue an activity.

*Work with individuals to establish one or more serious leisure involvements.*

Having decided on an activity, the practitioner's next step is to help youth discover how, where, and when to pursue it. Sources such as websites, books and magazines, telephone directories, and personal contacts can help interested serious leisure participants find clubs, lessons, events, and literature to launch their new passion. Creating opportunities for youth to be involved in these activities is also a way to encourage participation.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

French author and Nobel laureate in literature André Gide once observed that “there are admirable potentialities in every human being. Believe in your strength and your youth. Learn to repeat to yourself, ‘It all depends on me.’” In modern life those potentialities are most often realized through pursuing self-fulfilling, serious leisure activities. Self-fulfillment is both the act and the process of developing oneself to fullest capacity; more particularly, developing one’s gifts and character. Casual leisure can be an important way to relax, establish and maintain relationships, find a collective identity, and even create something. But gaining fulfillment and realizing potential in free time can only come through the steady and persistent acquisition of skills, knowledge, and related experience as achieved in serious leisure.

## AREAS WHERE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH IS NEEDED

The lack of an easily accessible, up-to-date list of serious leisure activities, preferably with a short description, should be addressed. In addition, practitioners should conduct follow-up research on the results achieved by applying this youth development initiative brief.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

Serious Leisure Perspective at [www.soci.ucalgary.ca/seriousleisure](http://www.soci.ucalgary.ca/seriousleisure). This website contains, among other features, a bibliography, general portrait of the Perspective, digital library, and a page on leisure education.

Overs’ *Guide to avocational activities* (1984). This is, so far as is known, the most thorough inventory of leisure activities, albeit now rather dated. Moreover it is out of print. Nevertheless the libraries of North American universities with leisure studies programs may have copies. Stebbins’ *After work: The search for an optimal leisure lifestyle* (1998) is more up-to-date, still in print (available through Amazon.Com and some university libraries), but limited to serious leisure activities.

Stebbins’ *Serious leisure: A perspective for our time* (2007: New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction. offers a detailed discussion of the serious leisure perspective. The book also summarizes the more recent research on the serious leisure perspective.

Dr. Peter Witt serves as Editor for the YDI Research Brief Series

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