

Does Family Leisure Exist?

INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen a decline in family members participating in leisure activities. What was once idealized as a healthy way for families learn and grow together is now characterized by constraints, fragmented interactions, and work or effort (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie, 2006; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004). As more families have two working parents, divorce rates increase, and the uses of distracting technology grows, parents report more difficulties in finding time to enjoy uninterrupted, quality interactions with their children (Coakley, 2006). When the complicated nature of family relationships, varying abilities, and competing interests (Larson, Gillman, and Richards, 1997) are factored in, no wonder more family members report spending leisure time alone or with peers.

While this description might paint a bleak picture of American family life, research shows that the right supports or programs may provide families, or a parent and a child, with meaningful and beneficial opportunities. When programming for family recreation or leisure, programmers should be aware of how today's families may experience their relationships and leisure.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

1. Parents know of the benefits of family leisure and often chose activities that are educational or teach family values (Shannon, 2006; Shannon and Shaw, 2008; Shaw, 2008; Shaw and Dawson, 2001).
2. For many mothers, family leisure often becomes an additional chore on top of full-time employment (Claxton and Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Miller and Brown, 2005; Wajcman, 2008). For single parents, family leisure can become additional work (Swinton, Freeman, Zabriskie, and Fields, 2008).
3. Out-of-school time (OST) providers should be aware that during the current recession, more fathers are caretakers or stay-at-home dads, thus increasing the fathers' role in planning and organizing family leisure (Coakley, 2006; Harrington, 2006; Hilbrecht, Shaw, Delamere, and Havitz, 2008; Such, 2006).
4. Family members often experience family leisure as fragmented or disjointed as they also care for other children or attend other distractions, such as technology (Arendell, 2001; Beck and Arnold, 2009; Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie, 2006; Southerton and Tomlinson, 2005).

DETAILS ON RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

Parents know of the benefits of family leisure and often chose activities that are educational or teach family values.

Many parents try to shape their children's leisure so it serves an educational or skills-

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training purpose. In one study, parents were perceived as controlling resources such as transportation and money to support structured activities, and children in turn placed more value on activities their parents valued (Shannon, 2006). In another study, mothers supported their daughters' participation in activities that taught a potential job skill. Mothers explained the value of such activities and the importance of creating a fulfilling life. However, by supporting and not participating, mothers communicated to their daughters that a mother's role was to be supportive, but not necessarily participatory in the activities (Shannon and Shaw, 2008).

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When women go to work, household or childcare expectations do not often decrease. This workload causes many women to view family leisure as less than fun or enjoyable (Claxton and Perry-Jenkins, 2008). Also due to children's needs or housework, working women often experience lower quality family leisure than do men (Wajcman, 2008). When busy mothers can find time for personal leisure, they usually justify it by how it benefits their family (Miller and Brown, 2005).

Among single parents, leisure time may be even more difficult to come by. One study found that as constraints increased, nonresident fathers' leisure with their children decreased, especially everyday home-based activities that are crucial to family cohesion (Swinton, Freeman, Zabriskie, and Fields, 2008).

OST programmers should be aware that during the current recession, more fathers are caretakers or stay-at-home dads, thus increasing fathers' role in planning and organizing family leisure and child care (Hilbrecht, Shaw, Delamere, and Havitz, 2008).

In the new fatherhood profile, fathers participate more in childrearing and household chores (Coakley, 2006), but view themselves as being with children in a more leisure-like way than do mothers (Such, 2006). For example, fathers often participate in family leisure through youth sports. While their children play, fathers help coach, practice, or watch, activities that can feel like leisure or a hobby. Fathers also report youth sport participation to be purposive or goal directed through their awareness of the benefits for their children (Harrington, 2006).

Family members often experience family leisure as fragmented or disjointed as they also care for other children or attend to other distractions, such as technology.

Many parents report multitasking, rushing through chores or activities, considering chores as leisure, or engaging in group leisure to fulfill their duty to family time (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie, 2006). But as parents schedule activities with multiple people or multitask during leisure, they increase their sense of time acceleration and the intensity of each moment, and thus may create more disengagement from daily activities (Southerton and Tomlinson, 2005). Children also report a sense of living at a hurried pace and report their time as intensified, full of adult intrusions and exposure to adult culture (Arendell, 2001). One study examined 10-minute increments of family life and found that family leisure was more often experienced as short, interrupted fragments, with children or technology breaking up leisure experiences (Beck and Arnold, 2009).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

While the term "family leisure" may conjure images of family members happily playing a board game together, this is hardly the case in many families today. Parents, while aware that leisure provides education and skill building, often take leisure to an extreme, engaging in what one author calls 'concerted cultivation,' or an intentional schedule of educational or physical activities (Lareau, 2003). While doing this, mothers can create so much work for themselves, their enjoyment of personal or family leisure may be diminished. For fathers, research indicates that men spend more time with their families but in a different way than women do. Finally, all family members seem to multitask, or add additional duties to their lives, thus filling every moment with activity. Consequently, the question arises: Does family leisure even exist?

Research indicates that, when trying to engage in family activities, some families encounter constraints such as time, access to resources, transportation, and money that prevent many families from participating in community recreation opportunities (Witt and Goodale, 1981). Or family members may have varying interests or skill levels that prevent them from agreeing on one activity. This is especially true in families with a wide age range among their children.

OST programmers must be aware of the changing dynamics of the lives of today's families and construct programs that meet their needs. Programs that are low- or no cost are very attractive to most families. Programs that offer childcare or provide activities for a range of skill levels are also of interest to parents. After school or other OST programs that ask parents to drop in for a brief activity are appealing for the short time commitment. Similarly, providing a meal or snack can entice parents to stay and join in an activity.

Programmers should also consider the changing roles of parents. More fathers may want to participate in activities with their children, or be willing to coach, volunteer, or help train. Mothers, who often work both at home and on the job, may enjoy recreational activities that give them time away from both. Women may enjoy activities for women or that engage them in a social, physical, or service project. Finally, with technology and schedules pulling family members in many directions, relatives may appreciate opportunities to focus on one another, or activities only for one parent and one child, or just the couple. Shared activities, free from distractions, provide a space for two people to enjoy one another and gain benefits such as improved communication and bonding.

AREAS WHERE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH IS NEEDED

Current research has questioned whether family leisure exists. Other researchers have found strong correlations between family leisure and family functioning (Zabriskie and Freeman, 2004; Zabriskie and McCormick, 2001, 2003). If leisure is important to family functioning, future research should examine what motivates families to recreate together, what social supports might best facilitate family engagement, or how to remove constraints to family leisure. Using this information, programmers will need to create opportunities that family members, with varying abilities and interests, can participate in together.

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