

Playing together growing together: Parent's perspectives on the benefits of family recreation in families that include children with a developmental disability

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Mactavish, J., & Schleien, S. (1998). Playing together growing together: Parents' perspectives on the benefits of family recreation in families that include children with a developmental disability. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 32(3), 207-230.

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Abstract:

This exploratory investigation, grounded in the naturalistic paradigm, employed survey (n = 65) and interview (n = 16) methods to examine the benefits of family recreation in families that include children with a developmental disability. Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted on the quantitative data, while a key theme and constant comparative method were used to analyze the qualitative data. Results of these analyses revealed that family recreation was perceived by parents as a positive means for promoting the overall quality of family life (i.e., unity, satisfaction, health) and for helping its members develop life-long skills (recreation, physical, social) and values. These benefits were considered to be of particular importance for the children with developmental disabilities and families viewed themselves as playing a critical role in ensuring their attainment. As such, family recreation was not only viewed as a beneficial catalyst for skill, interest and self development, but was potentially the most accepting and enduring social and recreation outlet for children with a developmental disability.

KEY WORDS: Families, Children with Developmental Disabilities, Recreation, Benefits

Article:

Introduction

Over the years, a considerable amount of research has focused on the benefits of recreation. Driven by shrinking financial resources, increasing demands for accountability, and the need to rationalize services, much of this research relied on "economic-efficiency" or monetary ways of assessing the benefits of recreation (Driver & Peterson, 1986). Consequently, comparatively little research has concentrated on the noneconomic benefits of recreation for individuals, families, and society as a whole (Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991). Advocating the need to address this imbalance in the literature, Driver and his colleagues (1991) argued that greater understanding of people's perceptions of recreation benefits was essential to enhancing knowledge and creating a basis for effective program planning, implementation, and evaluation.

Focusing on families, Orthner and Mancini (1991) also have advanced the importance of employing a benefits-based approach to the study of recreation. These authors noted that despite supporting evidence of the positive relationship between family recreation and a variety of family and individual outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, stability, cohesion, child development), the quality and quantity of research in this area has left many avenues unexplored.

Therapeutic recreation is one of the areas that has been affected by the limitations of previous research on the benefits of family recreation. Currently, most of the benefits research in therapeutic recreation has concentrated on the positive outcomes individuals with disabilities derive from involvement in community recreation and therapeutic recreation programs and services (Levitt, 1991; Schleien, Green, & Heyne, 1993; Schleien, Ray, & Green, 1997). As such, little is known about the benefits of family recreation in families that include children with a developmental disability.

Purpose of the Study

As an initial step in addressing this need for greater understanding of recreation in families that include children with a developmental disability, a comprehensive exploratory investigation was undertaken to examine a variety of issues related to family recreation (e.g., patterns, forms, benefits, constraints). Drawn from this larger study, the present work focused on parents' perceptions of the benefits of family recreation in families that included children with a developmental disability.² Specifically of interest were two questions (a) what are the perceived benefits of family recreation for the family as a whole, and (b) what are the perceived benefits of family recreation for children with a developmental disability?

It should be noted that in concentrating on these questions, the intention was not to dismiss the potentially important influence of constraints on family recreation or the possibility that these interactions may have negative consequences (Mannell & Stynes, 1991; Orthner & Mancini, 1991). These issues also require examination, however, in the interest of manageability the present focus was delimited to addressing the benefits of family recreation.

Setting the Stage: Families, Children with Disabilities, and Shifting Service Models

Historically, people with disabilities were treated as a special class of human beings who were not entitled to the same rights and opportunities as other individuals in society (Hutchison & McGill, 1992; Taylor, Knoll, Lehr, & Walker, 1989). For children with disabilities, this devaluation often resulted in institutionalization, which typically deprived these children of meaningful family experiences (Landesman & Vietze, 1987). Over the past 25 years, the negative ramifications of differential treatment and devaluation in the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families has gained increasing recognition. One response to this recognition has been the emergence of the principle of normalization as a guiding cornerstone of movements aiming to further the rights of people with disabilities to experience, to the fullest degree possible, culturally normative conditions of life (Perrin & Nirje, 1985; Wolfensberger, 1972). Legislative responses also have followed, which, among other changes, has led to significant increases in the number of individuals living at home with their families (Landesman & Vietze, 1987; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990).

Concomitant with this shift toward community living has been an increasing demand for services that affirm the rights of children to reside with their families while providing the supports families may require in caring for their children at home (Bradley, Knoll, & Agosta, 1992; Kagan, Powell, Weissbourd, & Zigler, 1987; Singer & Powers, 1993). Spearheading this demand, the family support movement has advanced the need for greater knowledge about families, their support needs, and the adoption of family-centred approaches to service delivery (Bradley, Knoll, & Agosta, 1992). Family-centred models of service are driven by the recognition that: (a) all families have strengths and competencies; (b) family aspirations and interests determine what constitutes appropriate services and supports; (c) services and supports empower families to utilize their strengths, competencies, and natural support networks (formal and informal); and (d) professionals are "agents and instruments" who support families in ways that "maximally promote family decision making, capabilities, and competencies" (Dunst, Johanson, Trivette, Hamby, 1991, p. 118).

The Therapeutic Recreation Connection

Research in a number of other disciplines also has accompanied the trend toward caring for children with disabilities in their family homes. Within therapeutic recreation, the community living movement is perhaps best reflected in literature and research related to the integration of individuals with disabilities into community recreation and leisure services (Hutchison & McGill, 1992; Schleien, Green, & Heyne, 1993; Schleien, Heyne, Rynders, & McAvoy, 1990). Although concentrating primarily on the individual with a disability, the community integration literature also alluded to the importance of developing a broader understanding of families and their recreation. Specifically, several researchers in therapeutic recreation have argued that enhanced participation of children with disabilities in home, school, and community recreation settings is contingent on ensuring that programs are based on the identified interests, needs, and experiences of families (Hutchison & McGill, 1992; Mactavish, Schleien, & Tabourne, 1997; Schleien, Green, & Heyne, 1993; Schleien & Ray, 1997; Schleien, Rynders, Heyne, & Tabourne, 1995). In other words, family-centred

approaches to program development and delivery have been recognized as potentially necessary for initiating and sustaining the participation of children with disabilities in community recreation.

Previous Literature on the Benefits of Family Recreation

A substantial body of literature has focused on the benefits of family recreation, however, this research has not included families of children with disabilities (Holman & Epperson, 1984; Kelly, 1982; Orthner & Mancini, 1990, 1991; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1975). Given the absence of research in this area, the general (i.e., nondisability) family recreation research was reviewed to provide a basis for formulating initial insights into potential benefits of family recreation, and for comparing the findings of the present study.

Numerous studies have indicated that family recreation contributed, sometimes negatively but more often positively, to family relationships and overall satisfaction with the quality of family life (Hill, 1988; Holman, 1981; Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Orthner, 1975; Orthner & Mancini, 1980; Palisi, 1984; Stinnett, Sanders, DeFrain, & Parkhurst, 1982). Beyond these implications for the family as a whole, other studies have revealed the importance of family recreation in providing children with their first exposure to recreation. Through this exposure, family recreation has been characterized as the context in which children begin to acquire the skills (social, physical, and recreation) and develop the interests that influence their lifelong interest and involvement in recreation (Barnett, 1991; Horna, 1989; Hutchison & McGill, 1992).

Although pointing to the benefits of family recreation for the family as a whole, much of the knowledge in this area is based on inferences drawn from research on the shared recreation of husbands and wives. Most of this research has been concerned with the impact of family recreation on marital satisfaction, and by implication, family satisfaction (Orthner & Mancini, 1990). In this work, high frequencies of independent (individual) recreation were consistently reported as having negative effects on marital satisfaction (Holman & Epperson, 1984; Orthner & Mancini, 1991). While supporting this contention, Orthner and Mancini (1990) also noted that women more typically associated independent recreation activities with lower levels of marital satisfaction—particularly when these activities predominated.

Another consistent finding indicated that when husbands and wives engaged in recreation together (joint) they were significantly more satisfied with their marriages than those who did not. This finding remained consistent whether derived from time diary-type data (Orthner, 1975) or respondents' perceptions of shared or joint recreation (Holman, 1981; Holman & Jacquart, 1988). Additionally, cross-cultural investigations conducted in Australia (Bell, 1975; Fallding, 1961), England (Palisi, 1984), and Korea (Ahn, 1982) confirmed that joint spousal recreation positively contributed to marital and, by implication, family satisfaction.

In addition to independent and joint types of involvements, parallel recreation has been proposed to influence family satisfaction (Orthner, 1975). Parallel activities were described by Orthner as those that occurred in shared time and space, but did not include substantial amounts of interaction (e.g., watching television, movie going). Holman and Jacquart (1988), using the respondents' self-definitions of levels of interaction, found that parallel activities that did not facilitate interaction were negatively associated with marital satisfaction. In other words, these authors suggested that recreation in which little or no communication occurred, provided little benefit to families and, in fact, may prove deleterious to family relationships.

A second general category of leisure benefits research has concentrated on the relationship between leisure and family interaction. In these studies, family interaction was conceptualized to include communication and conflict. Although a link between recreation and marital or family interaction has been suggested by a number of researchers (Carisse, 1975; Orthner, 1975), no studies have explicitly examined this relationship (Holman & Epperson, 1984; Orthner & Mancini, 1990). Instead, research to date has been based on the assumption, as was the case in recreation and marital satisfaction research, that the affects of shared recreation on marital interaction would be reflected in family interaction. Within this research, improved marital communication was commonly reported as a positive outcome of family recreation (Orthner & Mancini, 1990). Orthner (1975) found that husband and wife communication was enhanced by shared activities, while the converse was true of

independent recreation. Similarly, a study conducted in Belgium revealed that the frequency of joint marital recreation was positively related to marital communication, particularly non-verbal expressions of caring (Presvelou, 1971).

Subsumed within the recreation and marital interaction research were studies concerned with the influence of recreation on relational conflict (Kaplan, 1975; Orthner, 1985; Orthner & Mancini, 1980). A national survey found conflicts over recreation involvements were among the top three sources of stress for one in three families in the United States (Strauss, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Orthner (1980), in a world-wide study of military families, found that conflicts over the use of recreation time and opportunities for shared experiences caused more family stress than child-rearing or finances.

Among newly married couples, Holman (1981) noted that shared recreation was positively related to verbal aggression. Interpreting these findings, Holman suggested that as couples participated in activities together their level of communication increased which, in turn, elevated the likelihood of arguments. Orthner and Mancini (1980) subsequently argued that recreation that facilitated marital communication, including the possibility of verbal disagreements, provided a healthy mechanism for reducing family stress and tension. Thus, while the research findings suggested that disagreements about shared recreation may have contributed to marital and family stress, they also played important roles in reducing these and other underlying sources of tension.

Summary

In summary, the preceding discussion underscored several reasons for studying the perceived benefits of family recreation in families that include children with a developmental disability. Within recreation research in general there has been growing agreement that the development and delivery of recreation programs and services would be enhanced by a better understanding of the perceived benefits of recreation for individuals and families (Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991; Driver & Peterson, 1986; Orthner & Mancini, 1991). Concentrating more specifically on family interests and needs, the community living and family support movements have argued strongly that effectively caring for the needs of children with disabilities is contingent on providing family-centered services (Bradley, Knoll, & Agosta, 1992; Kagan, Powell, Weissbourd, & Zigler, 1987; Singer & Powers, 1993). Although some researchers in therapeutic recreation have addressed the importance of considering families in the development and delivery of recreation services, this literature typically has not been based on direct studies of family recreation (Hutchison & McGill, 1992; Schleien, Green, & Heyne, 1993; Schleien, Ray, & Green, 1997). The rationale for the present study, therefore, rested on the need for greater benefits-based research in the area of family recreation and, more specifically, was intended as an initial effort to extend understanding by exploring one aspect (i.e., benefits) of shared recreation within families that include children with a developmental disability.

Method

Research Design

Operating under the assumption that people's perceptions and experiences shape their worldview and, as such, produce multiple constructions of reality, the present study was grounded in the naturalistic paradigm and employed methods producing qualitative and quantitative data (Henderson, 1991; Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990). Generating knowledge in this way has been noted as particularly useful when the intention is to enhance understanding of phenomena within their naturally occurring contexts (Bullock, 1993; Henderson, 1991; Patton, 1990). Additionally, the naturalistic paradigm is flexible in that it allows emerging insights and information to be integrated into the design as the research evolves.

Another aspect of the research design that warrants consideration is the extent to which it is appropriate to use approaches traditionally thought of as quantitative methods (e.g., survey) within a study grounded in a naturalistic framework—as was done in the present research. Although not universally accepted, there is increasing support for the notion that qualitative and quantitative methods are not "mutually exclusive" research strategies (Bullock, 1993; Firestone, 1987; Henderson, 1991; Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990). In other words, both qualitative and quantitative data can be collected and reported in the same study. Doing so reflects a

methodological decision and, as such, is not necessarily indicative of the assumptions underlying the investigation (Merriam).

Despite this contention, considerable debate persists among philosophers of science about the extent to which positivist methods of data collection and analysis can be used in conjunction with qualitative methods. From a traditional, purist perspective, method and paradigm are inextricably linked (Smith & Heshusius, 1986). Others, however, have articulated a less rigid and more pragmatic stance that suggests an "instrumental relationship between paradigm and methods" (Firestone, 1987, p. 16). Departing from this perspective, Guba (1987) advocated a distinction between "method" and "paradigm," as follows: "One can use both quantitative and qualitative techniques in combination whether the paradigm of orientation is . . . naturalistic or traditional. However, no possibility exists that there can be an accommodation at the paradigm level" (p. 31). Concurring with Guba, Kidder and Fine (1987) stated: "There is nothing mysterious about combining quantitative and qualitative measures. This is, in fact, a form of triangulation that enhances the validity and reliability of one's study" (p. 72). Subscribing to similar views, others have simply ignored the philosophical tussle and proceeded to combine methods as dictated by the needs of the research (Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Clearly, there are competing perspectives regarding the appropriateness of utilizing methods that produce qualitative and quantitative data within a single study. A cursory examination of recent research in a variety of disciplines (e.g., education, sociology, leisure), however, suggests that the "traditional purest" stance of the incompatibility of qualitative and quantitative methods is being increasingly challenged by those who adhere to a more pragmatic approach. That is, there appears to be growing recognition of the value of a "paradigm of choices" approach, which "rejects methodological orthodoxy in favor of methodological appropriateness as the primary criterion for judging methodological quality" (Patton, 1990, p. 39). In other words, the measure of methodological appropriateness is not an issue of whether positivistic or naturalistic paradigmatic tenets are subscribed to, but whether the chosen methods are logical given the purpose and questions of interest (Henderson, 1991; Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Based on these arguments, mixed or multiple data collection approaches (producing both quantitative and qualitative data) were used in the present study. This was done on the basis that it: (a) was appropriate given the purpose of the research and the questions under consideration; (b) enhanced the internal validity of the study; and (c) provided a greater breadth and depth of information than otherwise would have been possible (Patton, 1990).

Approaches to Collecting Data and Identifying Participants (Families)

A survey and interviews were the principal sources of information in this study. Additionally, field notes kept in the form of reflective memos were used as a means of recording the researcher's thoughts as the study unfolded (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The survey, developed by the principal author, was intended to provide a breadth of information. This was accomplished by asking open and closed response format questions that addressed, among other issues, the benefits associated with family recreation (see Table 1 for sample questions). These questions were based on information derived from a review of previous literature on recreation in families that do not include children with disabilities and the researchers' experience with families that include children with a developmental disability.

A four stage process was instituted to assess the validity and reliability of the survey. A panel with expertise in a variety of areas (recreation, disability, educational psychology, families, survey construction) scrutinized the validity of the survey items. Reliability was determined using a test-retest method, whereby a small group of families ($n = 9$; non-study participants) completed the survey twice over a 3-week interval. The closed response items achieved an overall reliability coefficient of .92, while responses to the open-ended questions were coded and independently compared by two individuals who were in 100% agreement that the answers provided the second time the survey was completed were consistent with the first.

Using mailing lists provided by three service organizations (a school, an advocacy organization, and a parent support group), the survey was sent to a non-randomly selected group of families (N = 118) in a large urban center in the upper Mid-west.³ A threestep variation of Dillman's total design method (Dillman, 1978) was used to distribute the surveys. Sixty-five families completed and returned surveys that could be used (55% response rate).

In addition to collecting information about family recreation, the survey invited families to participate in a series of followup interviews. Of the 65 families who responded to the survey, 44 indicated an interest in being interviewed and from this pool, 16 families were ultimately selected using a sequential-purposive sampling technique (Patton, 1990). That is, the first eight families were selected using a criterion approach intended to ensure that the socio-demographic diversity of the overall group of families was reflected by those who were interviewed.⁴ Eight other families were subsequently selected using a theory-based purposive sampling technique. These families were selected on the basis that their survey responses indicated that they could potentially offer further insights related to findings that were emerging from the data (e.g., apparent differences in the importance of family recreation depending on the ages of the children).

The interviews were intended as a means of intensively exploring issues arising from the surveys while being flexible enough to accommodate emerging issues and lines of questioning. To fulfill these aims the interviews were done using an interview guide approach (Patton, 1990). In most cases (68%), the interviews involved multiple adult members of the same family, usually two parents, and were conducted within the family home.

Trustworthiness and Consistency

The question of trustworthiness-how well the results of a study match reality or the extent to which they capture what is really occurring (i.e., internal validity)-can be addressed using a number of strategies alone or in combination (e.g., triangulation, members checks, peer examination, pattern matching) (Merriam, 1988; Patton, 1990; Yin, 1989). Triangulation, perhaps the best known of these strategies, refers to the use of multiple sources of information, multiple data collection methods, and multiple investigators in collecting and/or analysing the resultant data (Patton, 1990). In the present investigation, triangulation of methods and data sources as well as triangulating analysts (peer and parent review) were used to enhance internal validity. The adult family members who participated in the interviews provided multiple sources of data, while the survey, family interviews, and the researcher's field notes reflect the multiple data collection strategies that were used. A second analyst with expertise in qualitative research independently coded portions of the data (i.e., all the open ended survey data, 8 interviews) to assess the reliability of the coding scheme (i.e., "triangulating analysts"). Furthermore, the families who were interviewed reviewed the themes to ensure that they accurately reflected their perspectives.

While a priority to establish the study results as trustworthy, there was less concern about whether the findings would be reliable over time and would generalize to other families that include children with disabilities. Instead, paralleling the tenets of naturalistic research, the emphasis was on ensuring that the results were consistent with the data and the reader was given sufficient information should s/he wish to extrapolate the findings to other situations and settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following the recommendations of Yin (1989), these aims were achieved in the present study by using triangulation and providing an accounting of the entire research process (audit trail).

Data Management and Analyses

Multiple strategies were required to manage and analyze the qualitative and quantitative data that were generated in this project. The closed-response format survey questions were analysed (descriptive statistics) using SPSS for the Macintosh. As noted by Patton (1990), the quantification of data in qualitative research is not considered unusual or unacceptable, however, use of the results in a manner that was not intended is a potential problem. In exploratory forms of research it is emphasized that the purpose of statistical analyses is to "get to know your data" in an effort to maximize what is learned (Hartwig & Dearing, 1979, p. 75). Drawing on these points, it should be noted that in keeping with the qualitative framework in which this study was grounded

and its exploratory aims, the statistical analyses were strictly intended as a means for learning as much as possible about the participating families and the perceived benefits of family recreation.

The open-response survey data, the family interviews, and the researcher's field notes were transcribed into separate computer files and hypersoft, which is a hypercard based computer application, was used to assist in managing the analyses of these data (Tesch, 1990). The transcripts were read and re-read to identify preliminary key phrases and themes (Yin, 1989). A systematic or constant comparative method also was instituted, which utilized the preliminary themes as a basis for comparing, contrasting, and integrating emerging insights about family recreation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process was adhered to until gaining convergent responses to the research questions of interest (Merriam, 1988).

Participating Families

Parents from 65 families including children with developmental disabilities shared their perspectives on patterns of their families' shared recreation. As can be seen in Table 2, the families were from diverse backgrounds (e.g., race/ethnicity, education, income). The "average" family, however, was of white/European ancestry, included two parents of the opposite sex who had at least some college education, held either full- or part-time employment outside the home, and earned less than \$45,000 per year.

Based on the number of children in each family, there was a considerable range in family size (i.e., one to eight children). Fifteen families (23%) included a child with a developmental disability and no other children. Six families (9%) had multiple children with developmental disabilities and no children without disabilities. Two of these families had two biological children; and four adoptive/foster families included three to seven children with developmental disabilities. Typically, however, the families ($n = 39$, 60%) included two or three children, one of whom had a developmental disability (mean family size = 2.44, $SD = 1.31$). Within these families, 17 of the oldest, 9 of the middle, and 13 of the youngest children had developmental disabilities.

Considering the children ($n = 150$) as a group, 74 had developmental disabilities (Mean age = 9.33, $SD = 3.99$) and 76 did not (Mean age = 9.08, $SD = 5.36$). The sex of the children without developmental disabilities was evenly split between boys ($n = 38$) and girls ($n = 38$). Of the children with developmental disabilities, 47 were boys ranging from age 2 to 19 (mean age = 9.47 years, $SD = 3.86$) and 27 were girls age 4 to 22 (mean age = 12.13 years, $SD = 4.97$). Five of these girls were siblings in one adoptive/foster family.

Relying on information provided by parents, the nature of the children's disabilities reflected six different categories of disability (see Table 3).⁵ Beyond using diagnostic labels, some families provided brief descriptions of their children's disabilities and others extended this by explaining the affect these had on their children's lives, including participation in family recreation. As would be expected, the children included in this study reflected a wide range of functional abilities. In general, however, parents of children with mental retardation, Down syndrome, and developmental disability noted that the presence of disability affected family recreation to the extent that it presented "factors that have to be worked around in order for everyone to take part-but for the most part it isn't a big deal" (a quote from an interview). Children with cerebral palsy and severe multiple disabilities, on the other hand, were described as having the most significant levels of disability; which presented substantial challenges in most facets of life, including the need for considerable modifications to shared recreation (e.g., physical challenges, limited verbal and expressive language skills, high support needs).

Results and Discussion

The two research questions pertaining to benefits of family recreation for the family as a whole and the children with a developmental disability were used as an organizing framework for presenting the results of this investigation. More specifically, findings derived from descriptive statistical analyses of the closed-response survey items and qualitative analyses of the open-ended survey questions and interviews were woven together to address the research questions of interest (65 surveys and 16 interviews).

Parents' Perceptions of the Benefits of Family Recreation for the Family as a Whole

To set the foundation for a discussion of the benefits of family recreation, the importance of these interactions was first considered. Based on the views of families (N = 65), family recreation appeared to be very important. During the interviews with parents of 16 families, this importance was described in many different ways, but family recreation was most commonly described (n = 12) as a way of re-establishing a sense of what is important in life.

Life as a family can be stressful; things can seem like drudgery after a while. So for both of us sharing fun activities with the kids and one another is probably the most important thing we can do as a family to balance things out.

So much of life is about getting along. Surviving. Family recreation to me is about remembering what's important in life. It's about the best way I know of honoring one another as people and as members of our family.

While reflecting the importance of shared recreation in general, the preceding theme masked variations that were apparent when parents spoke about the importance of family recreation for their children. Specifically, during the interviews it became clear that parents perceived the importance of family recreation to shift with the children's ages and the presence or absence of disability. Parents of children with and without a disability under age 10 (n = 7), typically viewed activities with the family as more important than other forms of recreation. By the time children without a disability had reached age 12, however, individual options began to assume greater importance than family recreation. Meanwhile, participating in family activities continued to be perceived as the most important recreation outlet for children with a disability. When parents (from eight families) explained their views on this it was as though they spoke with one voice, noting in the words of one father:

Let's face it . . . as much as they say things are changing and as much as I hope they are, family recreation is really the only option for our two with a disability. Well at least the option that we can really be sure about. As for the other ones-well it's just natural at their age to want to do their own thing. Recreation wise it's just so much easier for them . . . they can go off to the park or some kind of program and we don't have to worry all the time about them being okay.

In short, parents appeared to attribute the ongoing importance of family recreation to a lack of individual recreation options and concerns that those that were available would not provide positive experiences for their children with a disability. It should also be noted that these views were not necessarily based on direct (negative) experiences, but were often the by-products of discussions with other families and/or parents' assumptions about the quality of community recreation programs and services.

Building on the importance of family recreation, 14 potential benefits, derived from previous family recreation research, were presented in a 4-point scaled response survey question. These items addressed positive outcomes specific to the adults (satisfaction with marriage/partnership), children (learn recreation skills), and the entire family (improves family life). Generally parents perceived the listed benefits as being positive outcomes "some," if not "all of the time" (Cronbach alpha coefficient = .89, mean item score = 3.41 [total possible = 4.00], SD = .47). The most commonly cited items, as evident in Table 4, were those pertaining to the entire family (e.g., makes us closer as a family, gives us something fun to do) and the children (e.g., learn family values, learn recreation skills). In comparison, the least commonly cited benefits were those specific to adult members of the family (e.g., improves quality of marriage/partnership, improves satisfaction with marriage/partnership).

Although highly speculative at this point, at least two potentially interrelated explanations could account for family recreation being perceived as was more beneficial for the family as a whole and the children than it was for the adults. One possibility was that activities involving the children primarily revolved around them and, consequently, beneficial interactions between the parents were likely deferred to pursuits involving only the

adults. In other words, family recreation appeared to be geared toward positive outcomes for the children, while activities involving only the parents were considered their opportunities for "re-energizing and strengthening partnerships" (interview quote).

In addition to the list of potential benefits, families were asked in an open-ended survey question to note any other positive outcomes (i.e., "more important" than the ones listed in the scaled survey question) that they believed were gained from their shared recreation. Approximately 43% (n = 28) of the families responded and what emerged were mainly reiterations, emphasizing and explaining the outcomes that were most frequently noted in response to the scaled benefit items. Two previously unmentioned benefits, however, also arose from these data. Nineteen families stated that shared recreation was especially helpful in developing social skills such as learning to problem solve, to compromise, and to negotiate. Although most of these comments were directed toward the children, several made references like:

It teaches us, as adults, that we can't always think about what we want . . . it's a good way to improve our ability to problem-solve on our feet and to know when to compromise.

Another, "more important," benefit suggested that shared recreation played a key role in facilitating the mental and physical health of family members (n = 17). Typically, this was described in tandem with thoughts about establishing "habits" for the future:

Our recreation is almost always physical-basically because we enjoy it and it's healthy to exercise . . . it's good to develop this as a life-long practice.

Laughter and exercise

Both are good for our mental and physical health and hopefully our kids will take these keys to a good life with them.

Benefits of shared recreation, for the family as a whole, were also discussed during follow-up interviews with parents. Little was revealed during these discussions that had not already been uncovered by the survey data, which was interesting considering that families were not reminded of their earlier survey responses. Based on the consistency across the data, it would be appropriate to suggest that the families in the study primarily viewed shared recreation as a positive means for promoting the overall quality of family life (i.e., unity, satisfaction, health) and for helping its members develop lifelong skills (recreation, physical, social) and values.

Parents' Perceptions of the Benefits of Family Recreation for Children with a Developmental Disability

While family recreation appeared to offer important and positive outcomes for the entire family, also of interest were the benefits of family recreation for the children with developmental disabilities. Parents' responses to an open-ended survey question indicated that the benefits of shared recreation for these children were essentially the same as those derived by the family as a whole. What seemed to differ, however, was the intense emphasis most families placed on these interactions for helping their children with disabilities to: (a) connect with other family members (n = 45), (b) develop skills (n = 37), and (c) set foundations for the future (n = 30). Capturing the essence of these themes, parents of two young boys from different families wrote:

My child gets my undivided attention when we do activities together. Where else is he going to get that? A chance to learn things, and a chance to feel more connected (for him and the rest of the family). Also, I do things in the hope that what we've done together will carry over to other things he does later on in life.

Our son is behind in most skills, so one of the benefits to doing things as a family is he gets to work on these things in a fun way, while also having our unconditional acceptance and support. I'm not sure there are many other situations in his life where this kind of situation is possible. Maybe if he learns how to do some of these things now (in our family time) he'll have a better chance of making friends to do things with when he is on his own.

Obvious in the words of these parents were strong beliefs about the benefits of family recreation and the hope that skills learned in this context would be useful later on perhaps in individual activities in the community. While reflecting optimism about potential long-term benefits, these comments also acknowledged a less positive and all too frequent reality for many children with a developmental disability. That is, a number of parents who were interviewed (n = 10), especially those of older children, seemed resigned to the notion that despite their best efforts their children with disabilities were unlikely to develop lasting interpersonal relationships and meaningful recreation involvements outside the family unit. Characteristic of this perspective, the mother of a 19 year old commented:

When Sonia was younger we had big hopes, big plans. . . she'd move out, do things with other people her own age, make friends-have a life of her own. Now that she's entering adulthood our ideas, based on the things we've seen through the years, have changed. We still want all those things for Sonia, but we've also learned that the relationships she can count on are those she's made at home, with family. And when it comes to recreation-well, it's basically the same. What she really likes to do are the things she's learned and always done with us. As much as we have hopes, I'm realistic. I don't see things changing a lot, the family will always be first when it comes to relationships and recreation.

The interview data also revealed three other themes related to benefits of family recreation for children with a developmental disability. Expanding on two of the open-ended survey themes-developing skills and setting foundations for the future-the first theme characterized shared recreation as a beneficial means for collecting life experiences. Capturing the perspectives of the eight others families who contributed to this theme, two parents, from different families, noted:

We are exposing all of our children to a lot of different activities and situations. Hopefully this will help them and particularly Nathaniel (child with a disability) develop a sense of being part of a larger family and community. You don't learn these kinds of lessons by chance or luck. You learn by experiencing. The activities we do as a family . . . collecting experiences together, is a big part of our kids' learning. A fun kind of learning! I think opportunities to experience all kinds of different activities, people, situations or whatever is [sic]really beneficial . . . especially for our two kids with disabilities. I guess we think about family recreation more as a way of experiencing different things and instilling values to live by-than about developing any one skill. A single skill or a couple of skills won't take you very far in life, so we're concentrating on as many as possible by experiencing as much of life as possible.

Closely related to the idea of skill development, the second theme that arose from the interview data focused on distinguishing between developing skills and therapy. In talking about this issue, parents (from 10 families) were careful to note that while recognizing potential skill enhancement as one of the key benefits of family recreation, especially for their children with a disability, this was neither the only outcome nor the primary intention of these interactions:

It's easy to get the idea that we think about our family recreation as another therapy session for Anthony. Wrong. A lot of times it's exactly the opposite . . . it's a time for him to get away from the stress of always having to perform, to learn something, at least in a formal sorta [sic] school like way . . . plain and simple, it's more about having some fun!

Sam, as a 4-year old, has a life almost as scheduled as mine-and I'm a lawyer! Needless to say, he's exhausted by everything else that he's programmed into . . . so although we think that activities that help him work on basic skills are beneficial . . . just as important to us, and probably more important to him, is that he gets to escape back to the life of a 4-year old.

The third theme, discussed by 13 families but seldom noted in the open-ended survey responses, was the positive influence shared recreation had on the self perceptions (i.e., self-esteem, self-concept, confidence) of

the children with a developmental disability. Parents' comments on this topic ranged from one or two word responses to a detailed accounting of one child's experience on a summer holiday:

Self-esteem!! Builds self-confidence, self-concept and just about everything else that helps a kid feel good about themselves [sic].

Improved self-esteem is probably one of the most positive things we've watched come out of the activities we do with Matti. Like last summer we went on a 3-week family only camping trip up North. Matti had a great time! Every morning she'd be running around getting the stuff together for whatever we'd planned for the day fishing, hiking, whatever . . . The point is we both just couldn't believe how much she blossomed on that trip. If that's all that ever came of spending time together-feeling good about herself-we'd be more than happy.

In conclusion, children with developmental disabilities derived benefits similar to those gained by the entire family from family recreation-enhanced connections with family, and the development of life-long skills and values (see Table 5). The findings also suggested, however, that these benefits were considered to be of particular importance for the children with disabilities and that families viewed themselves as playing a critical role in ensuring their attainment. As such, family recreation was not only viewed as a beneficial catalyst for skill, interest and self development, but was potentially the most accepting and enduring social and recreation outlet for children with a developmental disability.

Discussion

Previous studies that did not include children with disabilities revealed family recreation as a valued and important focal point in the lives of many families (Orthner & Mancini, 1990). According to some of this research, simply spending time together taking part in enjoyable activities helped strengthen relationships and generally made for healthier and happier families (Stinnett, Sanders, DeFrain, & Parkhurst, 1982). In the present study, shared recreation was also a very important and beneficial component of family life. Similarly, previous reports about the significance of family recreation for children were substantiated in the current investigation (Horna, 1989). What seemed to differ, however, was the enduring and intensified importance parents' attributed to family recreation for their children with developmental disabilities.

Although constrained by the paucity of research that has considered family recreation in families that include children with disabilities, several additional links between the present study and past investigations emerged. Most of the previous research examined the impact of recreation on adult family members and the positive influence of these interactions on marital satisfaction and, by implication, overall satisfaction with family life (Orthner & Mancini, 1990). Central to attaining these outcomes appeared to be the degree of interaction, specifically verbal communication, that occurred during joint recreation experiences (Orthner, 1975). That is, parents who engaged in activities that promoted verbal exchanges were found to be more satisfied with their partnerships than those who did not (Holman, 1981; Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Orthner, 1975).

The amount of verbal communication that transpired while the families in the present study engaged in shared recreation was not explicitly examined. The extent to which these involvements enhanced communication between various members of the family, however, was considered. Although it was not a tangible theme, an undercurrent in much of the data suggested that previous preoccupations with "verbal communication" as the best indicator of beneficial interactions may be misguided as the families seemed to have more holistic views of communication and how it was impacted by their shared recreation experiences. Illustrating this view and the perspectives of many of the study participants, one parent noted:

Family recreation is an effective way of communicating, not just with words, but showing our kids that they are loved and important . . . words are really a small part of it . . . it takes the whole package-words and actions. Regardless of how "communication" was defined, the results from the current investigation suggested that shared recreation was less beneficial in promoting communication between the parents than it was between parents and their children. Interestingly, similar results were uncovered with respect to improvements in satisfaction with and quality of marriages/partnerships. In other words, the benefits of shared recreation were perceived to have greater influence on satisfaction and quality of family life in general. Further supporting this

contention, parents reported these interactions to be most beneficial in elevating family unity—a sense of connection and belonging between and among individuals within the family.

The notion that shared recreation may have more positive implications for the family as a whole than it does for the parents does not have direct parallels in previous research. Orthner (1975), however, alluded to the possibility in a footnote in one of his studies on leisure and marital interactions:

The extent to which the spouse is given exclusive attention. . . changes over the marital career, especially as other significant persons enter into relationships . . . As parental roles and responsibilities increase, for many couples the children become as significant as the marital partners. Communication may center around them rather than the adults . . . this is a hypothesis worthy of careful consideration (p. 109).

Complementing Orthner's hypothesis, findings from the current investigation suggested that benefits pertinent to parents were less frequently reported as a function of the child-centered focus of most family recreation interactions. It seemed that beneficial interactions, at least for enhancing parental relationships, were deferred to adult-only patterns of activities (i.e., equivalent to joint recreation). Conversely, shared recreation involving young family members concentrated on promoting child development and general family outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, unity/cohesion).

Extending the discussion of shared recreation's influence on communication and its collateral family benefits, past research has suggested that with "increased communication comes increased relational conflict" (Kaplan, 1975, p. 163). In fact, several studies have found conflicts over recreation to be among the major sources of family stress (Orthner, 1980; Strauss, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). Countering these findings, Orthner and Mancini (1980) argued that while shared recreation often induced stress, it was also an important and healthy mechanism for reducing tension. In the current study, conflict or disagreement corresponding with shared recreation were not directly explored. Nevertheless, these notions were alluded to in parents' perceptions that family recreation "improves abilities to deal with family problems/stress" at least some, if not all, of the time (scaled benefit item).

In summary, the present research and past literature on the benefits of family recreation assumed divergent emphases (family-centered versus marital dyad) and, as such, the ability to weigh parallels and contrasts were limited. Results of the current study, however, supported and extended a previous suggestion that the benefits adults derive from shared recreation and the intentions of these interactions may be substantially altered by the arrival of children, independent of whether the child has a disability or not. Additionally, the present study reinforced the importance of examining the positive outcomes of family recreation from a variety of perspectives (Holman & Epperson, 1984; Orthner & Mancini, 1990). Specifically, adult views on the benefits of these interactions, at least for themselves, may mask the magnitude and range of positive implications for children and the entire family. In other words, concentrating on adult-only perceptions may under-estimate the positive value of shared recreation for the family as a whole.

Methodological Considerations and Avenues for Future Inquiry

Paralleling non-disability related studies of shared recreation, the findings derived from the present research provided an indication of the value and importance of family recreation within families that include children with a disability. Keeping in mind that the study was grounded in a naturalistic framework, it is important to be cautious in extrapolating the results of this study. The intention was not to generate knowledge that could be generalized to all families that include children with disabilities. Instead, the purpose of this investigation was to provide a basis for greater understanding by exploring the benefits of family recreation in a small group of families that included children with a developmental disability. As such, it is incumbent upon the readers of this research to carefully assess the findings and their potential application to other families, settings, and situations.

In addition to the cautions inherent in extrapolating the results of naturalistic and, for that matter, exploratory forms of research, the present investigation was the first in an area requiring greater attention in the future.

Toward that end, two limitations emerged during this study that should be addressed in subsequent inquiries. The first concern revolved around the range of family types that were included in this study. Previous research in the area of family recreation has been criticized for including a limited range of family types. Specifically, past research has almost exclusively focused on families composed of two married adults of the opposite sex, with one or more children (Orthner & Mancini, 1990). In the present study a range of different family types were included (e.g., single parent, adoptive, foster). The number of families representing each family type, however, was so small that it was not possible to explore whether family composition had any influence on the benefits of family recreation. In subsequent research, efforts should concentrate on including a range of family types that are sufficiently represented to ensure that meaningful comparisons can be made.

The second concern that should be examined in future research, involves the possible influence of social forces external to the family. As a way of lending focus to the current investigation, the family, or what social ecologists call the microsystem, was the primary unit of analysis (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Limiting the study in this way was a management decision and was not intent on dismissing or diminishing the potential influence of other systems (e.g., leisure, education) on families and their recreation. Consequently, research in the future should explore how external systems and social forces influence families and their recreation.

Beyond the directions for future research that are inherent in the limitations of the present study, the infancy of research in the area of family recreation in families that include children with disabilities leaves many avenues for ongoing inquiry. Of the many questions that could be asked, the following naturally flowed from this study:

1. What are the most popular and most frequent activities engaged in by families during their shared recreation? Do these activities vary according to family socio-demographic and/or child specific characteristics?
2. What constrains the ability of families to engage in family recreation? What factors constrain the involvement of children with disabilities in these interactions? What constraint negotiation strategies do families use to overcome impediments to family recreation?
3. Do individual family members have different perspectives on shared recreation (e.g., benefits, constraints) in families that include children with disabilities?

Implications for Service Delivery

Although exploratory and primarily concerned with enhancing understanding of the benefits of family recreation in families that include children with a developmental disability, this research also offers a number of practical implications. Complementing the literature on family support and the therapeutic recreation literature that advocates a family perspective, two of the most obvious implications of the present study include (a) the need to assess the quality and quantity of current family-centered recreation programs and, (b) to explore whether the need exists for increasing the number of opportunities available to families. Actively involving parents/families in this process is also essential. As was noted in the results, concerns about community recreation programs influenced parents' beliefs that family recreation was the most positive and meaningful recreation outlet for their children with disabilities. These opinions were not necessarily the result of direct experiences, but often were formulated on the basis of discussions with other parents and, at times, on assumptions that programs and services would not meet family and/or individual needs and interests. As such, recreation professionals who are committed to providing high quality programs and services must provide avenues for parents to communicate their interests and needs and to participate, more generally, in the planning and delivery of family and individual recreation options-particularly those that include children with disabilities.

Recognizing that families will have different levels of interest and ways of contributing, one or more of a variety of informal and formal strategies could be adopted that would enable service providers to include the perspectives of as many families as possible. For example, talking with participants in existing family programs-asking about their impressions of the program, the extent to which it is meeting their expectations,

and their interests in future program options would be a simple, informal means of including family interests and concerns in programming. Another informal strategy would be to provide a suggestion box where family members could contribute their ideas, opinions, and complaints anonymously. Enhancing family involvement in planning and implementing recreation programs and services also could be achieved in more formal ways by employing one or more of the following strategies: (a) hiring staff who are committed to including families and children with disabilities in community recreation services; (b) developing a needs assessment/questionnaire to generate ideas about programs and services that reflect family interests and needs; (b) hosting a focus group to explore and evaluate new initiatives and/or to discuss issues and concerns with existing programs (i.e., evaluation); and (c) creating an advisory board that includes parents/caregivers of children with disabilities as active members.

In conclusion, developing family recreation options and including parents as integral partners in this process will positively contribute to an agency's program offerings while promoting and supporting what families are already doing within their self-initiated recreation. Furthermore, including a family focus in the planning and delivery of recreation services may lead to increased participation by children with disabilities in individual recreation programs in the community. This is a logical extension, particularly if one considers existing and emerging knowledge about the important function that family recreation plays in family life and in establishing the foundation upon which children build their life-long interest and involvement in recreation.

1 This manuscript is based on the doctoral dissertation of the first author. This dissertation was completed as part of the author's work on the Therapeutic Recreation Leadership Training Grant (Grant Project No. H029D20002) at the University of Minnesota, which was funded by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. Funding and support for completing the dissertation also was received from the Jason David Schleien Memorial Scholarship Fund, Michael Dowling School, Arc (formerly the Association for Retarded Citizens) of Hennepin County, and the Extra Special Children and Parents Exchange of Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN.

2 Family recreation: Also referred to as 'shared recreation' was defined in the study as: "Any activity (or activities) that two or more members of the same household enjoyed participating in together. Participation in these activities could occur anywhere and could be spontaneous play activities and/or formally organized engagements." This definition was used to guide parents' thinking about family recreation without precluding the possibility of family-by-family variations in meaning.

Family: In an effort to reflect the diverse family experiences of many people with developmental disabilities, family was conceptualized in the present work as "a social group with whom one resides" (Landesman & Vietze, 1987, p. 61). Developmental Disability: Although no standardized assessment of disability was used in the study, the children all carried the diagnostic label "developmental disability;" which is defined as a severe and chronic disorder involving mental and/or physical impairment that originates before age 22. Such a disability is likely to persist indefinitely, and will cause substantial functional limitation in at least three of the following seven areas of major life activities: self-care, receptive and expressive language, learning, mobility, self-direction, capacity for independent living, economic self-sufficiency (Baroff, 1991, p. 2).

3 It should be noted that in addition to information routinely included in a cover letter (e.g., confidentiality), a request was made that multiple family members participate in completing the survey. To follow-up on this request, families were asked, via a survey question, who completed the survey. The results suggested that 68% of the surveys were completed by multiple family members, while 32% were completed by one individual (i.e., 26% by an adult female, 6% by an adult male).

4 A series of analyses revealed that the interview group did not differ in any substantive way from the overall group of participating families. It should also be noted that similar analyses between survey respondents who indicated a willingness to be interviewed and those who did not revealed no differences between these two groups.

5 Information about the nature of each child's disability was provided by their parents in response to the survey question: "Please describe the type(s) of disability your child(ren) has and any effect this has on their ability to participate in family recreation" (see Discussion section for additional comments on this issue).

6 In reporting the qualitative data the names of individuals have been changed to protect their anonymity.

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