

LEISURE SERVICES AND CHILDREN AT-RISK: AGAINST ALL ODDS

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ABSTRACT: Hidden from view of much of society are countless children whose lives are lived in quiet desperation. To those children, the concept of recreation and leisure is entirely foreign or a dream of unreachable proportions. The factors that put these children at risk from harm are many, varied, and complex, but it is generally accepted that poverty is a root cause. This paper examines some factors that put children at-risk - malnutrition, child labor, sexual exploitation, cognitive distortion, family, environmental threats, and violence. It also evaluates the leisure service delivery paradigm: community service, marketing and commercial, humanistic, benefits-based and social action approaches. It argues that the shift away from altruistic recreational services to a more commercial-based approach has caused damage so great that the recreation profession is justified in returning to a more humanistic approach to service delivery. The authors take a strong stand on behalf of children by making position statements on what leisure service programs should provide.

KEYWORDS: Youth-at risk, recreation services, service delivery paradigm

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Introduction

There is a certain irony to the image of children at pleasure as presented in contemporary leisure management and planning textbooks, when compared to the reality of the millions of children from throughout the world for whom leisure has no practical meaning. We have an uncomfortable, nagging awareness that behind the facade of the promotional material showing children playing on glistening playgrounds in well-groomed parks is another world, a world in which children don't swim in sparkling pools or scamper over clean, bright grass. In the underbelly of every society are children who have little opportunity to personally come to understand and appreciate leisure and recreation, for their concerns are immediate and governed by the biological imperatives required to survive. Children living in the shadow of society subsist in poverty, are targeted with violence, suffer hunger and disease, receive little education, and swing between anger and hopelessness. For these children, adulthood holds few promises. These are children at risk.

it diminishes a child's interest in learning to read. Similar complaints are made about computer and video games (Heath, Bresolin, & Rinaldi, 1989).

Poor Housing and Infrastructure

One of the most easily observed consequences of poverty is the nature of the homes in which people live, or perhaps the absence of permanent housing for many (as in the case of the homeless). Correspondingly, governments and developers are want to invest in the infrastructure of poor communities, thus exacerbating the housing plight of the poor.

Family

In situations of abject poverty, the breakdown of the family seems inevitable. The men of the family, and often the children, leave the community in search of work. Where couples stay together, both partners generally have to work, thus taking time away from the home and family. Survival becomes a theme which leads to feelings of frustration and anger, the deterioration of the marital bond, and divorce (Lewis, 1993). The adverse effects a dysfunctional family can have on a developing child have been well researched and documented. Family dysfunction has been linked to drug abuse, obesity, crime, and psychological disorders in children (Webster-Stratton, 1998).

Environmental Threats

The physical environment in which a child is reared often poses serious threats. This is largely due to the fact that the developing body is particularly vulnerable to environmental contaminants and toxicants (Mott, Fore, Curtis, Solomon, 1997). Children breathe a higher percentage of air per body weight than adults. Similarly, they consume proportionately larger quantities of food and water than adults. Their biological capacity to process harmful chemicals is generally less efficient than that of adults. The net result of the higher percentage of contaminants entering their systems, coupled with the immature body's inability to minimize the harm of such contaminants, puts children at greater risk from environmental factors than adults. In a recent analysis of environmental threats to children, five of the worst threats were identified (Mott et al., 1997). They included lead, air pollution, pesticides, environmental tobacco smoke, and water contamination.

Low levels of lead can decrease IQ, cause learning difficulties and behavioral problems. In congested locations or near industrial areas, children are at great risk from the air they breathe. Air pollution has been linked to chronic respiratory diseases in children and cancer later in adults. The proliferation of pesticides in the environment poses a serious threat to the health of children. Pesticides have been shown to cause birth defects in children and have been linked to cancers, including leukemia and brain tumors, in children. Second-hand cigarette smoke has been linked to lower respiratory infections in children, and is known to worsen asthma. Children are at risk from water contamination, particularly where water supplies are not protected, as contaminated water carries both harmful chemicals and disease producing organisms.

Violence

The World Health Organization (WHO; 1998) reports that violence “in all its forms has increased dramatically worldwide in recent decades” (p. 8). Kraus (1997) cites the American Medical Association’s conclusion that “domestic violence, child physical abuse, child sexual abuse were widespread.” (p. 154). Children often become victims of domestic violence. Even if children are not exposed to actual violence, they are often exposed to vicarious violence through the media and video and computer games. Exposure to real or simulated violence is often linked to later dysfunction in life. Josephson (1987) found that children watching violent video were more aggressive than those who viewed nonviolent video content, and Paplia and Olds (1986) demonstrated in a longitudinal study of young males that the best predictor of aggressive behavior in adulthood was the degree to which they watched video programs at the age of 8.

One factor not generally found in the lists of risk factors facing children might be the limited view that some social and recreation planners have had of children. Children have been generally thought of as a special interest group. They have not been viewed as a major component of society. Plans are formulated with adults in mind, standards are set based on adult variables, and programs established with attention given first to adult concerns. It might be fair to say that for some planners children are an invisible minority, with the least affluent possessing the greatest invisibility. This type of “institutional neglect” is not necessarily pathological but possibly a function of society’s tendency to trivialize the value of children. During their developmental periods, children seem to offer little but require much. However, children mature and ultimately become adults. Well-prepared and healthy adults are always viewed by society as an asset. When society fails to attend to the needs of children, it ultimately places the whole of society at-risk, not just its children.

With even the slightest reflective thinking, it becomes easy to find arguments for elevating a child’s place in society. One doesn’t have to rely on sentiment or emotion to justify caring for and protecting children. There are very good pragmatic reasons for developing policies and practices that support the welfare, growth, and development of a society’s children. Evidence has now emerged which demonstrates that failure to invest in early childhood can be extremely costly. These costs come in the form of increased health costs, law enforcement costs, social welfare programs, and a lower level of productivity within the population. On the other hand, when risks to children are minimized, there are many positive gains. Among these are a healthier and more productive population, less delinquency and crime, and a better educated society (Cohen, Chetley, 1994).

What responsibility does the recreation and leisure service profession have to children-at-risk? Insight into what constitutes a reasonable response can be obtained through a review of leisure service orientations characterizing the recreation and leisure service profession over more than five decades.

The Leisure Service Delivery Paradigm

Over the past fifty years, the leisure service delivery paradigm has been characterised by several approaches, including the community service and development, marketing and commercial, humanitarian and humanistic, benefits based, social action, and universal approaches.

In its early formulations, "recreation and park administration" was community service based. It was viewed as an important governmental function, one that had the potential for considerable good within a community. As early as 1948, Meyer and Brightbill succinctly summarised this approach:

"Recreation had no peer, with the possible exception of a desirable family environment, in strengthening and preserving the best in children and youth stabilising family and community living. It is the first line of opportunity in preventing social ills". (pp. 6-7).

This approach characterized recreation and leisure service delivery in the United States and Australia during the 1960s and 70s. Characteristic of this approach was the idea that human service was an essential function of government, and although various agencies and organizations might have specific human service functions, delivery was based on linkages between agencies to provide a broader range of services than any one agency could provide (Niepoth, 1983). It came to be known as the community development approach.

During the 1980s, there was a change in the prevailing philosophy of leisure service delivery. A declining tax base, inflation, and increased operational costs made it necessary for many leisure service agencies to make dramatic cutbacks. Along with these austerity measures came a more business-oriented approach to leisure service. Modeled after commercial recreation ventures, public agencies began to adopt a "marketing approach" to service delivery (Howard & Crompton, 1980; Crompton, 1987). Torkildsen (1992) summarized this change as follows: "Public sector marketing is a hybrid of approaches which evolved historically and are caught up with commercial approaches, primarily to limit subsidy or help the facilities pay for themselves" (p. 343).

This commercial orientation to recreation has several major benefits. It makes management more accountable, it encourages more efficient use of resources and personnel, and it encourages more public visibility through marketing and advertising. It is not without drawbacks, however, chief of which is its tendency to exclude from service the very people who need it most. Furthermore, there is also a legitimate concern that the values and traditional philosophy of the recreation profession will give way to a business philosophy in which profit is the motivation for service, and the bottom line the principal criterion for success.

Perhaps the main weakness of the marketing approach is that it is based on a logical positivistic philosophy that is clearly materialistic and linear in nature. Such a philosophy takes a narrow view of leisure, viewing it in quantitative terms. This perspective, borne out the Puritan work ethic,

subscribes to the notion that leisure is discretionary or excess time. From this perspective, the leisure service agency is primarily concerned with marketing activities and programs that have appeal to the paying public. Murphy (1980) warned about this approach to service delivery:

"Utilizing a discretionary time perspective as the only philosophical basis for leisure service programming is nearsighted. It serves only to keep people where they are; it perpetuates the myth of an industrial rhythm of life; it limits the development of human potential and reduces the prospects for a high standard of quality of life" (p. 198).

What Murphy was calling for was a humanistic approach to leisure service delivery. He argued that leisure services should be concerned not just with the provision of leisure activities, but with human and community development. His view of leisure services was expansive and holistic. For Murphy, leisure services had to include the remediation of factors that prevented individuals from meaningful involvement in the community, limited their capacity for self-expression, and hindered their opportunities for rich and varied leisure experiences.

The harsh economic realities of the 1980s in the Western world did little to promote Murphy's view of humanistic leisure service delivery. The marketing model seemed to predominate in the thinking of most planners. With the 1990s came the realization that the business approach to public recreation was eroding the place of the recreation professional. Godbey warned that unless leisure services included a humanistic component, it would soon "cease to exist" (qtd. in Kraus, 1997, p. 389).

In Australia, reforms in the name of economic rationalism have failed to increase choices for most people or fulfill the utilitarian principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number. They have failed to redistribute income equally. Instead, there has been a significant redistribution of income upwards; that is, the richer have gotten richer (Pusey, 1991). The consequence of economic rationalism has been massive unemployment. Unemployment not only causes economic disadvantage for children, but children also experience the trauma their parents are going through (Langmore & Quiggin, 1994). The recreation of these children is adversely affected (Lobo & Watkins, 1995). Young unemployed males and females are restricted in their leisure as a result of material, psychological, and social deprivation (Lobo, 1997). Other disadvantaged segments of society face similar problems. Consequently, some leisure scholars have denounced the market approach. Roberts (1999) notes that the market experience has been a proven failure in the promise of a satisfying life. He suggests that we are driven more powerfully by more socially induced wants than by a more basic nature. Parker (1999) supports Roberts in saying that people who use their leisure capital creatively and pleasurably, by themselves or in the company of others, have better leisure experiences than those who turn to the market to consume leisure as a commodity.

In the United States, there is a blending of the old and the new. The human services approach is coming together with the marketing approach

to produce a more benefits-based delivery system. Although not full-circle, this return to a more humanitarian perspective has produced in some leisure service agencies, a promising blend of the best elements from the marketing orientation with the social commitment of the early community development model. But when it comes to the needs of the invisible minority—the children who exist somewhere on the fringes of society—or to the needs of children who are neglected by overburdened parents, or to children who are at-risk from drugs, crime, or violence, this new hybrid model of leisure management may not be enough. Perhaps another dimension needs to be added to the mix: social action.

The main attribute of social action is advocacy, and this essentially means championing a cause or group. Edginton, Hanson, Edginton and Hudson (1998) describe the social action strategy: "It presumes that there is a disadvantaged population, great injustice, and a need to force the system, institutions, organizations, and agencies to change the ways they are distributing resources, hence services" (p. 39).

Edginton and colleagues (1998) believe that a leisure service agency can serve as an agent for social change in several ways. Advocacy can be identified by several roles (Edginton & Compton, 1975). Initiator, planner, and organizer roles identify the problem, serve as a catalyst, and outline a plan of action. The investigator role calls for organizing facts and information in support of the group or cause. Help in resolving disputes between the disadvantaged and others can be achieved through the negotiator role. The lobbyist represents the needs of the disadvantaged by influencing decision-makers to make decisions favorable to the disadvantaged group. Counselor and resource specialists can match individuals and groups with resources and help facilitate desired changes. The educator role assists with awareness of the plight of the disadvantaged and educating the disadvantaged to utilize resources that help them help themselves. Evaluation steps can be used to determine the degree of change that has occurred and, if necessary, new strategies that might be introduced to further once introduced intended changes.

A leisure service approach which embodies humanitarian practices, the philosophy of community development, the marketing approach, and social action strategies has been described as the universal approach (Olson, 1998). Implicit in this strategy is the recognition that the needs of children are diverse, that leisure systems operate differently, and that the leisure planner should not be limited by approach or philosophy. Thus the universal approach must be flexible, pragmatic and innovative. It draws on any source that will serve to enrich the lives of children. The overview of the leisure service delivery paradigm enables us to make position statements on leisure for children at-risk.

Taking a Position on Behalf of Children

Regardless of the approach taken, there are several goals regarding children at-risk that leisure service delivery providers should strive to

achieve. These goals are designed to minimize the risks to our children and contribute to the amelioration of those conditions that produce such risks. The ten statements that follow, like the risk factors presented earlier, are presented as a means of encouraging dialogue, resolving conflicts, and eventually taking action.

- Inasmuch as the dangers to our children are real and pervasive, and inasmuch as the recreation and leisure profession is committed to contributing to well-being, welfare, and growth of the world's children, every public recreation agency shall operate with the accords of The Convention of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the United Nations on November 20, 1989 (UNICEF, 1990), and shall ratify the convention in spirit and in practice. The convention states that governments will ensure that each child enjoys full rights without discrimination; the child's best interests shall be a primary consideration whether undertaken by public or private social institutions; every child has an inherent right to life, and governments shall ensure to the fullest extent possible a child's right to survival and development (including right to an education, to recreation, and to leisure); children have a right to expression and to be heard.

- Inasmuch as poverty remains a critical problem for a large segment of the world's population, and inasmuch the effects of poverty are exacerbated in the young, a fundamental goal of recreation and leisure services is to contribute to the amelioration and elimination of those factors believed to contribute to and promote poverty. This calls for both a social action strategy and community development approach. Ultimately social changes must occur which serve to distribute wealth more equitably, as well as individual changes which generate competence in the poorer members of society. Children must be protected from exploitative labor practices. Consequently, leisure delivery programs should include components which empower individuals and groups to develop the skills and organization to improve economic status. These can include training programs, adult education, the provision of day-care centers for children of the working poor, and coordination of public and private agencies interested in the elimination of poverty.

- Inasmuch as malnutrition is a pervasive and serious problem which not only impacts the poorest children directly but also impacts all of society indirectly; and inasmuch as malnutrition is not always a function of poverty but also of ignorance, leisure service programs should include attention to the dietary and nutritional welfare of children. Programs might include an educational component in which children and parents are taught good nutrition; the provision of nutritious snacks and meals in conjunction with leisure activities; the coordination of nutrition-related programs with related public agencies, charitable organizations, and the food industry.

- Inasmuch as the formative years are critical to the intellectual and social development of a child, it is imperative that leisure programming include elements which are designed to stimulate cognitive, emotional, and social growth. Similarly, inasmuch as there are elements in society that are detrimental to their cognitive, social, and emotional growth, the leisure

service profession must take a strong stand against such elements (Cullen, et al. 1998). Chief among these are media which minimize intellectual growth, glorify violence and gunplay, and discourage children from healthy play and productive learning. Outreach programs which bring intellectually stimulating programs into a child's environment may help serve this function. Similarly, introducing children to theater or other creative activities (such as art, music, dance) can serve to help the developing child. Educating the public about the developmental damage to children from exposure to television programs, computer games, and movies which promote harmful behaviors may help as well. Working with the schools to optimize after-school learning may also be helpful.

- Because children suffer the most from environmental pollution, and because such pollution is pervasive, it is important that leisure programming include elements that contribute to the protection of children from harmful toxicants and contaminants. Furthermore, since environmental pollution is often linked to the degradation of the natural environment, and since children can most benefit from open-space and natural play and recreation environments, recreation programming should strive to provide clean open-space areas for children and should work to reduce the level of pollution in the environment as a whole. Public awareness programs, recycling programs, and provision of environmentally safe play areas are all elements to be considered.

Since children denied an effective primary education are at greater risk than their educated counterparts, and inasmuch as education is essential to effective leisure functioning in adult life as well as successful participation in the economic life of a community, it is important that recreation and leisure programming be coordinated closely with the local schools. Recreation programming can benefit from the shared use of public school facilities, and can include after-school programs designed to support the learning activities of the school curriculum as well as to provide recreational experiences for at-risk children. Such programs can focus on the creative and self-expressive applications of the concepts and skills being taught in the classroom.

- Inasmuch as children are more susceptible to disease and injury than adults, and inasmuch as poor children experience the greatest risk, leisure programming should include a component that addresses the health needs of children. This can include a coordinated effort with public health agencies to see that children learn basic hygiene and preventive behaviors. Inasmuch as sexually transmitted diseases are increasing among younger populations, sexual education programs need to be encouraged, with an emphasis on both birth control and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. Programming can include activities that promote good health. Sports and fitness programs can be particularly helpful here.

- Inasmuch as poverty often leads to the disintegration of the nuclear family, and inasmuch as family dysfunction has been shown to put children at-risk for a variety of harmful outcomes, it is important that recreation

services include programs to encourage family activity and promote family stability. Providing incentives for family recreation in the form of family discounts and programs specifically to promote family cohesion need to be considered. Programs might take the form of traditional recreational activities or be more developmentally oriented with a focus on family education, parental training, and family counseling.

- Children have a right to develop in a crime-free and safe environment. Inasmuch as the factors leading to delinquent behavior are linked to socio-economic factors (Workman & Prior, 1997), and because early intervention is essential if children are to be spared a delinquent lifestyle, it is important that recreation agencies work closely with other agencies to identify those children most at-risk and participate in interventions designed to prevent children from developing antisocial behaviors. Some studies indicate that early intervention is essential if positive outcomes are to be achieved (Ramey & Landesman-Ramey, 1998). Outreach programs are often used to redirect predelinquent youth toward more productive behaviors. Similarly, recreation agencies should work closely with law enforcement in delinquency prevention programs.

- Inasmuch as children are incapable of defending themselves against abuse from adults, that children are often victims of neglect or exploitation, and that these circumstances deny the child an opportunity to grow and develop normally, recreation programs must include a component that allows safe refuge for the endangered child, they must work closely with other agencies to see that the child at-risk from neglect, abuse, or exploitation is protected.

Shifting the Paradigm

The foregoing ten positions are meant to initiate thought, dialogue, and action in service to children. To accomplish these objectives, it may be necessary, in many agencies, for a paradigm shift to occur. In order for a shift of sufficient magnitude, four basic assumptions must be included in the philosophy and practice of leisure service delivery. These assumptions are:

- (1) In order to champion the needs of children, the leisure service provider must develop "common cause" relationships with other governmental agencies, environmental groups, related industry and business, and other social action organizations.

- (2) In providing leisure services, the leisure program must aim to enable individuals and groups in order that disadvantaged members of society can contribute to their own growth and development. This can be accomplished through skill acquisition, education, and access to increased opportunities of growth.

- (3) Leisure services, in order to be a champion and advocate for children at-risk, must serve as a catalyst and enabler in the community. By

identifying issues, problems, and solutions; by motivating other organizations and agencies sharing a common interest in children at-risk; and by helping maintain a community's commitment to its children, leisure services can make an important contribution to the overall quality of community life.

(4) Leisure services must practice effective management practices in order to win the respect and support of the community. Certainly, assessment, planning, coordination, public relations, leadership, and evaluation must all be done in an efficient and effective manner.

Being an advocate is not easy. It might be easier to allow children at-risk to remain invisible, but the strong humanistic background of professional recreation, rich in a tradition of service to the community and concern about the disadvantaged, will not allow us to look away easily. In fact, it will not allow us to look away at all if we are to champion the cause of the children of the world.

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