The Role of Recreation in Preventing Youth With
Behavioral and Cognitive Disabilities
From Coming Into Contact With the Juvenile Justice System
and Preventing Recidivism

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There are numerous cognitive, social, emotional, behavioral, and environmental factors that cause some youth with disabilities to come into contact with the juvenile justice system. The first question is “why is this so?”; the second is “what can be done to deter the pattern of criminal conduct?” This bulletin will explore the role of recreation as a preventive and treatment device that can assist youth in developing and maintaining a satisfying leisure lifestyle, with the intention of eliminating contact with the juvenile justice system.

Both youth with and without disabilities who do not have sufficient opportunity for healthy recreational involvement are at risk for delinquency and involvement in juvenile courts. These children miss out on more than the opportunity to recreate or play sports. They have fewer chances to gain important interpersonal skills, foster their own self-esteem, and learn concepts of teamwork and problem solving.

Educators and professionals in the field of recreation observe that youth with disabilities 1) drop out of school at higher rates than do their non-disabled peers, and 2) drop out of parks and recreation programs at higher rates (U.S. Department of Justice, 1997). Cognitive and emotional problems also can impede a youth’s ability to successfully participate in recreation programs. Because of their inadequate social skills, poor perceptual-motor coordination, slow mental processing, and high frustration levels, members of this population are not well suited to be on a team with “regular” kids. Comments such as, “kids with attention deficit disorders can’t play in this league” or “instead of playing with your neighbors, you should look for a team with people like you” (referring to a child with mild mental retardation), are more common than most people think. Comments like these have been and are still being made by coaches, teachers, recreation personnel, and business people who sponsor and coach sports leagues. They result in youth experiencing “exclusion” from recreation activities, especially youth who feel stigmatized because of their disability.
Exclusion may be viewed as any physical, emotional, or cultural barrier, real or perceived, that prevents full participation in an activity (Schleien, Ray, & Green, 1997). Exclusion also may occur because staff members are ignorant of the needs of youth with disabilities and cannot provide recreation experiences in ways that allow these youth to comprehend, internalize, and fully benefit from participation in the activity. For example, an older child with a learning disability may tend to stay away from reading because he or she has been teased at school. Consequently, the youth may shy away from posted notices or mailings that advertise events or activities. Thus, he or she may miss the opportunity to participate in healthy, constructive outlets.

Benefits of Recreation

For the young people in our country, free-time activity represents an opportunity to make decisions for themselves; to develop new or strengthen existing peer relationships; to measure their confidence and self-esteem; and to test the organization and resourcefulness of the community in which they live. Adolescents define themselves through their freely chosen recreation activities, which allow them to try new roles, explore feelings and friendships, and test their beliefs and capabilities in a relatively safe environment. In addition, researchers in the field of learning and educational psychology have discovered a variety of cognitive and behavioral outcomes for participating in recreation activities. These outcomes include: behavior change, skills learning, increased visual memory, information (factual) learning, concept learning, schemata learning, metacognitive learning and attitude change, and “value” learning. (Roggenbuck, Loomis, & Dagostino, 1991).

In a study of outdoor recreation for youth, Breitenstein and Ewert (1990) reported social benefits such as increased compassion and respect for others. Outdoor Adventure Experience, a wilderness-based recreation adventure, has produced a small number of studies citing positive effects on a variety of participants (e.g., juvenile delinquents, substance
abusers, groups with mixed abilities, adolescents with emotional disturbances, psychiatric patients, and persons with physical disabilities) when they are integrated with their peers without disabilities. These changes include improved self-concept, self-esteem, trust, group cooperation, skill development, and overall health, among others (Anderson, Schleien, McAvoy, Lais, & Seligmann, 1997). It is now widely accepted that integration in recreation settings benefits people with and without disabilities. Anderson et al. (1997), report…“for participants with disabilities, social activity and interpersonal relationships were most impacted. For participants without disabilities, employment, recreation and tolerance of stress were most impacted” (p. 229).

Recreation agencies, as stated in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 must serve persons with disabilities. However, some programs may have stipulations for participation, called eligibility criteria under the ADA. Eligibility criteria can be based on health and safety requirements, cost of service, knowledge of or experience in the program’s activity, equipment and material usage, transportation, and training guidelines. Unfortunately, some of those eligibility criteria might exclude youth with disabilities from leisure services.

The Role of Community Recreation Agencies

Recreation as a field of study began in the late 1900s, when concerned citizens recognized that there was a need and began to implement services for poor or otherwise disadvantaged populations. Over time, recreation service providers shifted their focus from this population and began to provide recreation opportunities equitably for all. This shift ultimately led to services being driven by market forces to a mostly middle-class clientele that was able and willing to pay for services. Only within the past decade have we seen substantial challenges to this revenue orientation due in part to some recreation professionals,
who have called for balance and a return to a more social service philosophy (e.g. Sessoms, 1992).

In the 1990s, attention has been refocused on the need to develop services, including recreation services, to alleviate the factors that cause youth to become at risk. Recreation and parks departments throughout the country have responded to this issue because their personnel recognized a need to “return to the original understanding of the mission demonstrating the value of parks and recreation to the solution of social ills…” (Sessoms, 1992, p. 8). Schultz, Crompton, and Witt (1995), surveyed park and recreation agencies to evaluate this change of mission and found that of the agencies surveyed, 55% targeted some portion of their programs to include at-risk children and youth, most of whom lived in large cities. Of these agencies, 61% said that their agencies offered specially-designed programs for at-risk youth, and the remaining 38.7% agencies reported that this population was served in the overall program.

Recreation Programs Serving At-Risk Youth from 1995 to Present

In March of 1994, the 103rd Congress amended section 1003 of the Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery Act of 1978 with the following:

It is the purpose of this title to improve recreation facilities and expand recreation services to urban areas with a high incidence of crime and to help deter crime through the expansion of recreation opportunities for at-risk youth. It is the further purpose of this section to increase the security of urban parks and to promote collaboration between local agencies involved in parks and recreation, law enforcement, youth social services, and the juvenile justice system (p. 2).

This amendment strengthened the growing number of private-public collaborations that deal with social problems in local communities. The National Recreation and Parks Association’s (NPRA) 1994 report Beyond “Fun and Games”: Emerging Roles of Public Recreation
fostered positive perceptions of public recreation and its value. This report was designed to inform local, state, and national policy-makers about the importance of public recreation in a society whose youth are increasingly at risk. It discusses 19 programs that demonstrate a high degree of collaboration among public recreation and parks agencies, other public agencies, and both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations in the private sector (Tindall, 1995).

With only one exception, every state in the nation has participated in the Title V Community Prevention Grants Program sponsored by the Department of Justice and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) since its inception in 1994. Virtually all have requested and received at least one round of training in the principles of risk-and-protection-focused delinquency prevention, and communities throughout the nation have received subgrants to implement their prevention strategies (OJJDP, 1997).

In acknowledging the rising crime rate among juveniles, many state and local agencies also have taken the initiative to develop their own programs, through collaboration with the community and by recognizing that the success of prevention and intervention programs involves a multifaceted approach. Recreation Programs that Work for At-risk Youth: The Challenge of Shaping the Future, (Witt, and Compton, 1996), is a compilation of information about such community recreation programs throughout the United States and in parts of Canada, the United Kingdom, and South Africa.

Some research has noted that with more and more children at home alone after school, these “out-of-school hours” present serious risks for substance abuse, crime, violence, and sexual activity. This finding has compelled park and recreation professionals to create recreation programs for after-school hours. The purpose is to prevent children from getting into trouble and also to provide enriching activities that contribute to their development.
Inclusion of At-Risk Youth with Disabilities in Community Recreation Services

People with disabilities typically feel less of a sense of belonging to a group or community and have fewer friendships than do people without disabilities (Schleien et al., 1997). These individuals do not access community recreation programs as freely as nondisabled individuals. It is sometimes difficult to involve people with disabilities in certain leisure activities such as outdoor sports, especially competitive sports (LaMaster, Gall, Kinchin, & Siedentop, 1998). Therefore, these recreation activities present a challenge for recreation professionals attempting to provide a variety of activities for people with disabilities. Merely placing people with and without disabilities together in community recreation programs does not lead to successful, inclusive leisure experiences for those with disabilities. Creating successful inclusive programs requires examining and designing—or redesigning—the administrative, physical, and attitudinal components of leisure programs (Devine & Broach, 1998).

Schleien et al. (1997) note common barriers such as administrative, physical and attitudinal obstacles that prevent people with disabilities from being included in recreation programs. Administrative barriers include procedural and operational difficulties that pose obstacles in the areas of: financial constraints; policy restrictions, program limitations, and lack of qualified staff (Devine & Broach, 1998).

At-risk youth with learning and/or psychological disabilities face some challenges that often become program barriers. These include:

- inability to understand and follow a sequence of coaching instructions;
- difficulty adhering to rules due to misunderstanding of the consequences;
- inability to participate without instructional prompting; and
- poor awareness of playing space on a playing field.
Negative societal perceptions and attitudinal barriers have been identified as the greatest obstacles to inclusive recreation services (Shank, Coyle, Boyd, & Kinney, 1996). According to a survey conducted by the American Park and Recreation Society and the National Therapeutic Recreation Society, parks and recreation agencies reported negative attitudes from their staff and the public toward people with disabilities (Devine, McGovern, & Hermann, 1998).

**Therapeutic Recreation and its Role in Serving At-Risk Youth**

Therapeutic recreation, also referred to as recreation therapy, is practiced in hospital, residential, and community settings. Recreation professionals use treatment, education, and general recreation services to help people challenged by illness, disability, or other deficiencies to develop and use their leisure in constructive ways to enhance their health, independence, self-determination, and well-being. Treatment interventions and recreation activities induce cognitive and/or emotional reactions that help people enhance their self-awareness, clarify their personal values and beliefs, identify and effectively communicate their feelings, and develop confidence and self-control.

Effective delinquency-prevention programs for youth with disabilities are, as one would expect, less expensive than the cost of institutionalization (Satterfield, Satterfield, & Schell, 1985). To foster resiliency in these youth, Brooks (1994) suggested a curriculum that would encourage youth to actively contribute to activities, as well as enhance their decision-making skills, provide positive feedback, focus on the development of self-discipline, and teach them how to deal with mistakes and failure. This curriculum fits well with the goals of most recreation programs.

Providing targeted, skill-based treatment programs to non-chronic adolescents with learning disabilities can reduce recidivism (Brier, 1994). Recreation therapy also can help explore why some youths choose to use drugs or alcohol (Brademas, 1994). Leisure
education instruction stresses valuing leisure as an important developmental theme (Mobily, 1992) and demonstrates how much potential impact the leisure-time choices youth make may have on their overall health. Discussion during therapy also should stress the influence of the young person’s friends as well as how he or she might overcome potential barriers such as transportation difficulties, economic disadvantages, or stereotypes. When their non-disabled peers are included in these programs, the result may be an increase in the positive attitudes of the non-disabled toward youth with disabilities (Collins, Hall, & Branson, 1997).

Recreation within juvenile correctional facilities appears to be used primarily for diversion and cathartic reasons. Therapeutic recreation professionals have the skills and training to use simple recreation activities in more complex, curative ways for this population. Recreation therapists are trained, for example, to assess an individual’s needs, to determine the type of activity that will best remedy the deficit, and to recommend and assist in creating recreational activity suitable to that person’s interests and based on their strengths. For those within the juvenile justice system, therapeutic recreation is used to help youth focus on emotions, decision-making processes, communication, and the development of self-esteem. For incarcerated youth who will soon be paroled or released into the community, leisure attitudes and skills should be viewed as a mandatory part of transition planning for disabled and non-disabled youth.

Conclusion

The purpose of this bulletin has been to explore recreation programs in the community, and in educational and clinical settings that are serving youth with cognitive and other types of disabilities. By exploring these recreation programs, our intention has been to present goals and objectives that can help prevent at-risk youth from becoming involved with the juvenile justice system, or from recidivism.
Research from various sources (Driver, 1992; Siegenthaler, 1997) states that individuals profit physically, psychologically, emotionally, intellectually, and in some cases, spiritually from taking part in recreation activities. It is now widely accepted that integrating people with and without disabilities in recreation settings has benefits for both groups (Anderson et al., 1997; Modell, 1997; Modell & Imwold, 1998). In the past decade, numerous Federal, state, county, and community-based cooperative programs for at-risk youth have positively affected youths’ academic performance, social behavior, emotional adjustment, and skill development, and limited their contact with the juvenile justice system. Due to the lack of available information from these programs regarding participation of youth with cognitive and other disabilities, it is difficult to relate the success these programs have had with this population.

The fields of recreation, therapeutic recreation, and juvenile justice have greatly improved their collaborations by sharing practical information, providing programs, and assisting youth deemed at risk or who are reintegrating into the community. Even more strides can be made by adjusting recreation programs to meet the needs of at-risk youth with disabilities.

The following are some suggestions for programs that want to serve all youth who are considered at risk, including youth with learning and other disabilities.

- Promote collaborative programs to professionals or agencies not within your network, for example, religious leaders, local politicians, local business owners, psychologists, educational diagnosticians, counselors, clinical social workers, independent therapists (e.g., art, music, movement, and recreation), and private schools.
- Identify youth with learning and other disabilities through a screening process that employs instruments such as the Student Referral Information (Mangrum & Strichart, 1988), the Self-Evaluation Checklist and/or Cognitive Leisure Indicator (Peniston, 1998).
• Maintain accurate records on youth with disabilities who participate in programs, especially regarding the rate of success within a certain program and the behavioral changes of the youth involved.

• Use sensitivity-training programs that provide instruction in understanding the Americans with Disabilities Act as well as an overview of different kinds of disabilities. Have staff assess their perceptions of youth with disabilities, and provide training in communication and etiquette awareness, and the encouragement of persons with disabilities.

• Conduct training in the area of program design as well as evaluating program modifications and assessing individual participant accommodations.

The success of inclusive recreation and leisure activities for youth with disabilities requires that parents, educators, and community services providers embrace inclusion philosophy and its implementation by creating well-designed programs that are available to everyone. Making recreation programs available to the greatest number of youth possible would not only promote the well-being of all youth but would also help minimize the number of young people who become at risk for delinquency.

References


