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Recreational Therapy Evidence Based Practice:
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Student Research

How Family Leisure Influences Family Functionality in Single-Parent Families

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Search Terms: Single parent families OR lone parents OR nontraditional families AND leisure OR recreation AND function OR quality of life OR health

Years: 2000–2014

Databases: ArtSource, EBSCO, Education Source, ERIC, Psych ARTICLES, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycInfo

Number of Articles Reviewed: 6 (additional 5 articles were used to support the background information)

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Summary of Research Findings

This literature review focused on the relationship between family leisure and family functionality, specifically considering implications for single-parent families. Individuals serving as a single parent for their family may experience more stressors than those who coparent their family, including poor finances, reduced social support, and higher rates of depression (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, & Racine, 2003). Given these adverse conditions, single-parent families may experience a heavier burden in maintaining healthy family functioning and stability when compared to dual-parent families (Moore & Vandivere, 2000). These hardships may also put children in the single-parent family at greater risk for aggressive behavior. For example, children residing in a mother-only home during early childhood have an increased likelihood of developing behavioral problems, particularly externalizing behaviors (Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003). Fomby and Cherlin (2007) also reported a positive relationship between delinquent behaviors during pre-teen/teenage years and the number of family structure changes a child has experienced.

When defining family functionality, it is important to consider three main components: family cohesion, family adaptability, and communication (Olson, 2000). Family cohesion is defined as an emotional bond between members of the family, while family adaptability is characterized by the frequency of change in different areas such as roles, leadership, and rules. Both of these are influenced by the third component, communication, in that, increases or decreases in communication are related to corresponding changes in family cohesion and family adaptability. Family functionality is im-

portant because the overall health and well-being of the family members is associated with the structure of the family. Poor family functionality and instability in the family due to divorce, break-ups, and even new partnerships, may negatively impact a child's behavior and cognitive development (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007).

Previous literature has suggested that family time activities can contribute to family functionality (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). To further understand how family leisure may affect family functionality in single-parent families, six articles were selected for this literature review. Of these six articles, five adopted the core and balance model of family leisure functioning (Hornberger, Zabriskie, & Freeman, 2010; Poff, Zabriskie, & Townsend, 2010; Smith, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2009; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, 2003). The core and balance model suggests that family leisure is positively associated with family functionality. Typically, core family leisure involves activities that are implemented inside of the home and are relatively inexpensive or free of cost, such as cooking together, playing board games, or watching television or movies. It is hypothesized that core family leisure can provide the family with a sense of closeness, security, and consistency; resulting in increased family cohesion (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). On the other hand, balance family leisure includes activities that require planning and are less frequent, such as family vacations or trips, which may entail more financial investment. Balance leisure activities require the family members to make changes and use their problem solving skills while providing the family with a memorable experience, resulting in increased family adaptability (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001).

Findings in the literature consistently indicate a direct, positive relationship between family leisure involvement and family functionality (Poff et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2009). For example, Hornberger et al. (2010) surveyed both children and parents about their views on family leisure and family functionality and found that family leisure had a positive effect on family cohesion and family adaptability. In addition, Offer (2013) reported a negative association between family leisure involvement and stress in children. Offer (2013) also noted that when only the mother is present during leisure time, the child still shows increased engagement and positive affect. In addition, communication in the family unit is emphasized repeatedly. Smith et al. (2009) specifically highlighted the role of communication within the core and balance model from a youth perspective and identified communication as a mediator between family leisure and family functionality. In other words, communication has to be present for family leisure to have an impact on family functionality.

Finally, when explicitly exploring single-parent families, several interesting findings have been reported. There was a significant difference in reported balance leisure activities in single-parent homes when compared to dual-parent homes (Hornberger et al., 2010). In other words, single-parent families participated in fewer activities that required scheduling and role-change, and/or provided a 'one of a kind' experience. Hornberger et al. (2010) also found that parents in single-parent families reported less family cohesion, and Zabriskie & McCormick (2001) identified balance leisure patterns as a strong predictor of family adaptability in single-parent families.

Knowledge Translation Plan

The Core and Balance Model could be a useful tool in guiding recreation therapy (RT) practice when working with single-parent families. RT professionals should emphasize balance family leisure activities, which are those that happen outside of the home, requiring the family to plan, problem solve, and adjust roles, resulting in increased family adaptability (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). Additionally, core family leisure activities, which are those usually implemented inside of the home for little to no cost, provide the family with a sense of safety, stability, and attachment, resulting in increased family cohesion (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). Therefore, they are also important when working with this population. Since education and awareness of the influences balance and core leisure have on family functionality may be a positive incentive for engagement in these types of leisure for single-parent families, RT professionals should also consider including this information when providing leisure education to this population. RT professionals can also counsel families on how to overcome or negotiate leisure barriers to increase engagement because single parent families may have increased difficulty engaging in balance leisure (Hornberger et al., 2010).

Second, since communication has been identified as a key component in the core and balance model and also plays a vital role in impacting family adaptability and family cohesion, recreation therapists working to promote positive family functioning should also consider modifying interventions to emphasize communication when working with this population. It may be beneficial to develop specific programs that can foster communication through leisure involvement, as depicted in Figure 1.

One suggestion may be to actively involve the child in completing household tasks in an enjoyable way to increase core leisure activity involvement. To foster communication, the parent and child might follow a scenario providing both parent and child with a responsibility that will influence the outcome of the task. For example, if parent and child are jointly preparing dinner, they may consider following along with a cooking show, allowing the child to adopt a leadership or assistive role to the parent thereby contributing to the creation of a narrative.

To increase balance leisure activity involvement despite potential barriers, recreation therapists can suggest activities that require scheduling and prompt the family to leave the home. For example, a family can plan a picnic at a public park. This type of activity can also emphasize communication if prior to the scheduled picnic, the parent and

child collaborate on what they will need for their picnic and determine who will be responsible for packing various items; this will also allow the child to retain a role that is equal to the parent. Since finances may be limited in a single-parent family, recreation therapists can also provide assistance in identifying affordable community resources that reflect parent and child interests.

As always, when working with families, recreation therapists should be mindful of all family member perspectives, including parents and children. Along with providing leisure education opportunities that correlate with family interest, recreation therapists should also consider the age and developmental stage of the children and alter suggested modalities accordingly to ensure flow in core and balance leisure.

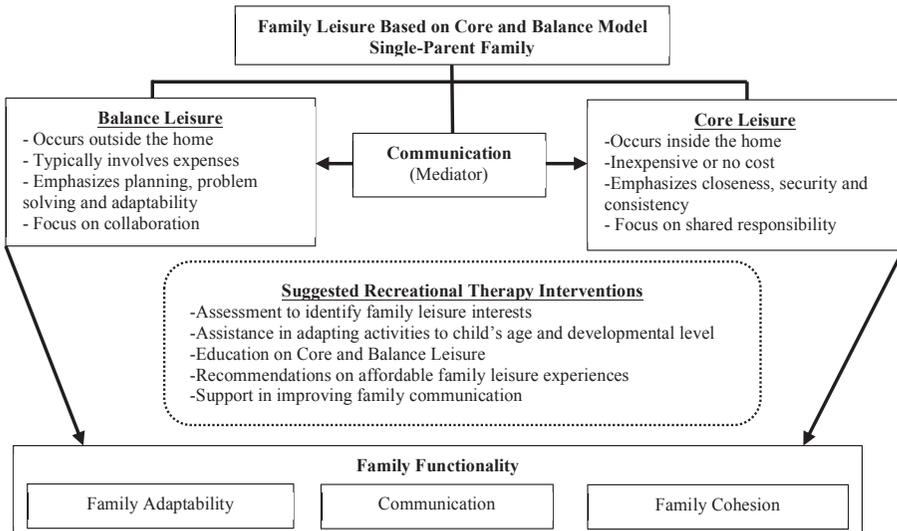


Figure 1. Intervention Recommendations for Improving Family Functionality in Single-Parent Families Using Core and Balance Model

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