

The Influence of an Inclusive Outdoor Recreation Experience On Families that have a Child with a Disability

The purpose of this study was to identify the programming characteristics that support family outdoor recreation experiences when a child with a disability is a family member. Participants in this investigation were 24 Minnesota families who had one or more children with a disability who ranged in age from 5 to 27 and lived within the home. There was variation among participating families as to the type of disability (cerebral palsy, autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, etc) and to the constellation of family members (single parent, blended, or biological families). This study was part of a federally funded project (1998-2000) called Project FIT (Families Integrating Together) and facilitated by Wilderness Inquiry (WI), a non-profit outdoor adventure organization located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The program included the following activities over an 8-month period: (a) 20 hours of outdoor skill training and trip planning conducted over 4 sessions; (b) a three- to five-day outdoor adventure; and (c) social networking activities between participating families.

The research questions were categorized into three themes: (1) what challenges do families face in finding recreational opportunities? (2) what benefits can outdoor experiences provide for such families? and, (3) what support systems are necessary for a family to participate in recreation together? The multiple data collection methods in this study included: (a) individual family interviews, (b) focus groups with multiple FIT families, (c) pre- and post participation surveys, and (d) researcher's field notes and memos. Data sources were adult family members and their children with and without disabilities.

Results

Challenges: The Project FIT families specifically discussed numerous factors that affected or limited their family's recreation and leisure experiences in most community settings.

- Ensuring the medical and supervision needs of their child.
- Supervising the social interactions between their children with disabilities and individuals outside their immediate family.
- Repeatedly explaining their son or daughter's disability and support needs.
- Lack of disability awareness by others wore on the family's enthusiasm and energy for community activities.
- Recreational activities that had once been successful became inappropriate when their child "aged out" of typical community sponsored recreation activities.
- Parents perceived few recreational professionals having a background in disability awareness to assist the family in attempting new recreational and social experiences.

Benefits: Parents stated that the Project FIT program was an appropriate experience and that all family members benefited from in a number of ways.

- Learning outdoor skills and assessing abilities prior to the multi-day camping trip.
- Getting away from the home routine enhanced family interactions.
- The Project FIT program made a noticeable difference in a sense of teamwork and cooperation.
- Enhanced sense of pride for having participated in an activity that families had originally thought not possible.
- A first-ever family camping experience for 64% of the program families, and for 25% of these families Project FIT offered a first-ever family vacation.
- An increase in satisfaction levels with family cohesion.
- Surveys indicated a difference between family types and the level of family satisfaction. Balanced families were more likely to have higher level of family satisfaction after program participation than family types that were extreme in their levels of family cohesion and family adaptability.
- Fewer participants identified their family's level of cohesion as disengaged after participating in the program.
- For all family members, positive change within the family that contributed to overall family satisfaction in the following areas: (a) the family's ability to try new things, (b) the amount of time the family spends together, and (c) the number of fun things the family does together.

- Parents' responses indicated a significant increase in family satisfaction in the following areas: (a) How often the family makes decisions together, (b) Who does what chores within the family, and (c) the freedom for parents to be alone.
- Decrease in the perception that the lack of energy, lack of common interest among family members; lack of recreation skill, and, lack of social skills inhibited family recreation.
- Long lasting relationships with other families rarely occurred for several reasons: (a) families having a very busy family schedule; (b) families in Project FIT program lived too far apart to develop an ongoing relationship; and, (c) most families had no expectation of making new connections with other families through the program, and this was not a high priority. At the same time, parents had the opportunity to interact with other adults during their family-based outdoor trip, and found this experience to be quite satisfying.

Necessary Supports: To identify the conditions that effect family connections to the community recreation resources, parents were asked what aspects of the Project FIT program had effectively supported their family's involvement.

- The source by which parents received information about the program
- Once parents decided to contact the agency for further information, the initial interaction with staff contributed to the parents' confidence to further pursue the possibility of participation.
- The logistical supports were central program components for all families' ability to participate.
- Program staff and other families were role-models for positive interactions.

Program Recommendations. The following program recommendations encompass not only the successful program characteristics when families were actually canoeing and camping together, but also recommended interactions between the program staff and the families before the actual outdoor adventure.

1. Advertising and marketing phases

- Provide program information to physical therapist, social workers, parent support groups.
- Include testimonials from past participating families.
- Provide information on the physical and behavioral disability training of program staff.

2. Pre-trip support

- Have contact person available with consistent messages in all information venues: brochures, website, telephone contacts.
- Provide one or more educational training session to teach basic outdoor skills, allow families to "test the waters," including the testing adaptive equipment at training sessions.
- Offer a choice of trips that vary in environmental challenges.

3. Family support during multi-day vacation

- Provide logistical support: Equipment, food, adaptive gear, activity plan, and personal care attendant when appropriate that afford parents enough time to meet family needs and spend time relaxing together.
- Design a balance of group and individual activities with flexible program structure including down time for kids and parents during the vacation.
- Include activities that emphasize teamwork amongst family members.
- Provide opportunities for socialization.
- Provide personal support to families. When appropriate, staff assisting parents when their children are acting out.
- Have staff establish clear and consistent rules for entire group related to safety and group tasks. This contributes to a sense of community and supports parents in their parenting role while on the trip.

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