

The role of a leisure-based programme in the relationship of divorced single parents and their children: A review

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Abstract

Divorce is one of the major causes of single-parent households. Among the understandable difficulties families face as a result of divorce, other difficulties such as the lack of time for family bonding and family leisure directly affect the wellbeing of both the parents and the children. The aim of this study was to evaluate the role of a leisure-based programme on the relationship between divorced single parents and their children. This study was completed by reviewing literature in the field of family leisure and relevant literature regarding the importance of the relationship between divorced single parents and their children. Books, journals, dissertations, theses and internet sources published between 1993 and 2011 were consulted, identified by means of the keywords, to give a theoretical exposition of this study. Research found that divorced single-parent families face financial difficulties and time constraints. Given that the household responsibilities are not shared and there is only one person earning an income, thus resulting in time or financial constraints to spend on leisure activities. Therefore, divorced single parents should endeavour to spend time with their children and find a balance between core and balance family leisure activities. Leisure programmes have the potential to develop relationships and improve family bonds.

Keywords: Recreation, leisure, family bonding, divorce, relationships.

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Introduction

Divorce can be seen as one of the major causes of single-parent households (Janzen & Harris, 1997). Among the obvious difficulties families face as a result of divorce, other difficulties such as the lack of time for family bonding and family leisure directly affect the wellbeing of both parents and children (Arnold, Zeljo & Doctoroff, 2008; Hornberger, Zabriskie & Freeman, 2010). Shaw and Dawson (2001) found that some parents do not participate in leisure activities for enjoyment, nor are they intrinsically motivated. Parents see leisure participation as a responsibility and duty while they are feeling frustrated by doing something they do not want to. Furthermore, the aim of participation is to teach values and lead healthy lifestyles rather than spending time together as a family (Shaw & Dawson, 2001). The above-mentioned difficulties vary and the effects of these

challenges on families can lead to poor family functioning and relationships (Hornberger et al., 2010).

Families form the foundation of society and the most important relationship in a family is that between the two parents; if this relationship is strong, the rest of the relationships in the family will fall into place (Fields & Casper, 2001; Hornberger et al., 2010). It is important for the parents to have a strong relationship with each other, since this is a child's first example of what a healthy relationship should be like (Leman, 2000). Therefore the relationship between parents could be seen as the foundation for the relationship between parent and child (Leman, 2000). The lack of relationships between parents and children may lead to lower levels of well-being (Booth & Amato, 1994; Amato, 2000; Leman, 2000; Kunz, 2001; Rinbäck, Hjern, Haglund & Rosén, 2003; Von Wielligh, 2003; Robinson, Butler, Scanlan, Douglas & Murch, 2004; Ahrons, 2007). According to Russel and Jamieson (2008), as well as Stumbo and Peterson (2009) leisure activity programmes should be made available to families to help develop an individual's well-being, life-satisfaction and quality of life.

Zabriskie and McCormick (2001) argued that leisure is a complex term to define and can mean different things to different people. It is therefore essential to understand the meaning of the word "leisure". Leisure can be defined as that time an individual has that is free from obligations and constraints at work or home, where the individual has the freedom of choice regarding how that time will be spent, which makes the experience intrinsically motivated (Edginton, Hudson, Dieser & Edginton, 2004; Mclean, Hurd & Rogers, 2008; Fawcett, Garton & Dandy, 2009). The leisure activities families participate in could be classified as the following nine programme areas: the arts (performing arts, visual arts and new arts); literary activities; self-improvement and education; sport, games and athletics; aquatics; outdoor recreation; wellness activities; hobbies; social recreation; volunteer services; and travel and tourism (Edginton et al., 2004).

The aim of this study was to critically review available literature from 1993 to 2011 in order to evaluate the role of a leisure-based programme in the relationship of divorced single parents and their children. It was also of interest in this study to identify the programme area in recreation which could be used to develop parent-child relationships.

Methods

In order to analyze the research problem, the following data bases were used: Eric, Academic Search Premier, Internet, Google Scholar, PsychInfo, SCIENCEdirect, Social Science Index, ProQuest and SPORT Discus. Books,

journals, dissertations, theses and Internet sources published between 1993 and 2011 were used to give a theoretical exposition of this study. The following keywords were used in the searches: recreation, leisure, family bonding, divorce, relationships and programme areas.

In the following section the literature regarding the relationships between divorced single parents and their children, divorce and leisure are discussed to provide the reader with the background information necessary to interpret the findings of the different research articles.

Results and Discussion

Relationships

Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2010) defined relationships as “a reciprocal, dynamic, interpersonal connection characterized by patterns of emotional exchange, communication, and behavioral interaction”. Children who have a good relationship with their parents seem to display happiness, are less likely to participate in activities of norm breaking, demonstrate better behaviour patterns, are closer to their parents, display sufficient ego functioning, receive more parental support, have more contact with their parents, have reduced chances of conflict and demonstrate better communication and social skills (Booth & Amato, 1994; Lee, 1997; Walker & Henning, 1997; Persson, Kerr & Sattin, 2004; Maisel & Gable, 2009). Amato and Sobolewski (2001) found that the opposite of the spectrum is also true, when the parent-child relationship is strained, these benefits could easily turn into difficulties. These difficulties will be increased when accompanied by parental divorce; divorce does not only have the potential of disintegrating the parent-child relationship, but it is also accompanied by parental conflict which causes sadness and insecurities; this could lead to a magnification of earlier levels of divorce trauma (Leman, 2000; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Rinbäck et al., 2003; Von Wielligh, 2003).

Divorce

Divorce is seen as an event where a married couple breaks their marriage in court (Von Wielligh, 2003) and, according to Amato (2000), divorce is becoming more common as a result of women becoming financially more stable and due to the social approval of divorce in society. One consequence of divorce is single-parent families (Janzen & Harris, 1997), which is defined as a family with a parent and a dependent child or children, where the other parent is absent, with no chances of return, and where there is no substitute (Jordaan, as stated by Snyman & Le Roux, 1993). Amato (2000) stated that single-parenthood could be associated with certain problems for both the parents and the children. However, other studies found that this may be the result of negative stereotyping and that

single-parent families are just as capable as dual-parent families to adjust to certain situations (Amato, 2000; Larson, Dworkin & Gillman, 2001; Angeningsih, 2005; Hornberger et al., 2010).

Children are capable of adapting to certain situations if they have a proper support system such as their parents, family members or teachers (Von Wielligh, 2003). Nevertheless, not all single-parent families are so fortunate as to adapt to their situations and a divorce (Angeningsih, 2005). Divorce is also frequently associated with financial difficulties, since the income of two parents is necessary to maintain the standard of living; divorce causes only one person to be earning an income (Leman, 2000; Anderson, 2003; Jensen & McKee, 2004; Arnold et al., 2008). Lamanna and Riedmann (2009) found that both men and women are prone to have a drop in income following a divorce, which may create financial concerns for the entire family. The financial difficulties the divorced single parents encounter can be seen as a barrier which limits family leisure participation (Hawkins, 1999; Hinch, Jackson, Hudson & Walker, 2005).

Family leisure

Kelly (as stated by Hornberger et al., 2010) and Agate, Zabriskie, Agate and Poff (2009) proposed the use of the core and balance model of family leisure functioning which identifies two main types of leisure most individuals and families participate in during their life. Core leisure activities refer to the daily activities families participate in at home and on a daily basis. It is also these activities which provide families with the opportunity to build relationships in a comfortable environment. These opportunities include activities such as eating together as a family, playing games or simply sitting in the same room while watching television (Agate et al., 2009; Hornberger et al., 2010). The balance family activities refer to activities families participate in less frequently that take place away from home and change throughout their lifespan (Agate et al., 2009). Families are less likely to participate in balance type of activities on a regular basis, since these activities take place away from home and depend on inputs such as time and money (Kelly, as stated by Hornberger et al., 2010).

Zabriskie and McCormick (2001) found that families spending time together may strengthen family cohesion and adaptability. More importantly they found that leisure programmers should not only provide balance types of activities but teach families the skills needed to participate in core types of activities on a daily bases. When families participate in leisure-related activities more frequently and regularly they develop the necessary skills to manage their own leisure time in order to enhance their quality of life, this assists them in overcoming the impact of the divorce in building character (Agate et al., 2009; Stumbo & Peterson, 2009; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010).

The main focus of this literature review was to evaluate the role of a leisure-based programme on the relationship between divorced single parents and their children. Furthermore, the researcher also endeavoured to identify the program areas which could be used to develop parent-child relationships. Forty articles were identified, which focused on the role of family leisure and the role it could play to enhance family functioning and satisfaction with family life. The researcher found that the main method of data collection used in the bulk of studies was questionnaires and online surveys (for example: Agate, Zabriskie & Eggett, 2007; Smith, Freeman & Zabriskie, 2009; Hornberger et al., 2010; Poff, Zabriskie & Townsend, 2010). These studies found that families associate leisure programmes with positive outcomes such as family bonding. Interestingly only five studies reported the effects of families participating in actual leisure intervention programmes, and this is presented in Table 1 (Kugath, 2007; Shaw & Dawson, 2001; Huff, Widmer & McCoy, 2003; Wells, Widmer & McCoy, 2004; Sullivan, Ward & Deutsch, 2010).

Table 1: Description of previous leisure studies

Authors, date and title of publication	Number, of families and ages	Type of activities, programme area and findings:	Duration of programme
Kugath (1997) The effects of family participation in a outdoor adventure programme	24 families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiative games, rock-climbing and white river rafting • Outdoor recreation • Improved family cohesiveness and closeness 	8 hours
Shaw and Dawson (2001) Purposive leisure: examining parental discourses on family activities	31 Families	Unstructured programme: Home based games, hobbies, media activities, organized sport, informal outdoor activities and trips	7 Days
Huff, Widmer and McCoy (2003) The influence of challenging outdoor recreation on parent-adolescent communication	23 Families	This study included the use of 3 programmes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Survival trek: Hiking and camping with minimal food and equipment 2. Handcart trek: Pulled food and gear over 16 miles 3. Family camp: Stayed comfortable and participated in water relays, canoeing, challenge initiative games, orienteering, sunrise hikes, and astronomy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor Recreation • Working together, improved communication, trust and support, affection and kindness, reduction in family conflict, new perceptions and family cohesion 	4 Days 3 Nights
Wells, Widmer and McCoy (2004) Grubs and grasshoppers: challenge-based	23	This study included the use of 3 programmes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Survival trek: Strenuous hiking, shelter building, and primitive camping and cooking 2. Handcart trek: Pulling handcarts, 	4 Days

Authors, date and title of publication	Number, of families and ages	Type of activities, programme area and findings:	Duration of programme
recreation and the collective efficacy of families with at-risk youth.		cooking in Dutch ovens, and camping in the outdoors 3. Family camp: Family slept in cabanas on wooden bunks. Families participated in challenge- initiative games, leather work, astronomy, arrowhead chipping, canoe races, and orienteering. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoor recreation • Strengthen relationships, conflict resolution, feelings of accomplishments 	
Sullivan, Ward and Deutsch (2010)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yoga, hikes to the creek, outdoor and indoor games, arts and crafts, and typical family camp offerings (campfire, sing-along, music, a talent show). • Outdoor recreation • Overcoming obstacles, reconnect children to their parents, effective problem solving and communication, and improved family dynamics 	5 Days 4 Nights
Overcoming barriers family camp: a program for high-conflict divorced families where a child is resisting contact with a parent			

Four of the articles concluded that outdoor recreation programmes could have a positive effect on families. Kugath (1997) studied the effects of families participating in an outdoor recreation programme. 24 Families participated in outdoor activities such as initiative games, rock-climbing and white river rafting. The results of this study showed the link between leisure participation and family cohesiveness.

Outdoor recreation programmes may also be used as an instrument to enhance communication between parents and adolescents. Huff et al. (2003) examined the effect of outdoor activities on 23 families and found positive outcomes such as working together, improved communication, trust and support, affection and kindness, reduction in family conflict, new perceptions and family cohesion.

A challenge-based outdoor recreation programme completed by Wells et al. (2004) had 23 families participating in a three-phased wilderness programme. Activities ranged from strenuous hiking to cooking, camping and canoe races. These results indicated that wilderness programmes could be used to strengthen relationships, resolve conflict and provide families with feelings of accomplishment which could be transferred to other parts of everyday family life.

Sullivan et al. (2010) published an article in which they described the components of the, “Overcoming barriers family camp” which is used to treat separating and divorced families over a period of 5 days. Families would

participate in activities such as hikes to the creek, outdoor and indoor games, arts and crafts, and typical family camp offerings. These activities are designed to help families to overcome obstacles, reconnect children to their parents, enhance effective problem solving and improve family dynamics.

Shaw and Dawson (2001) did not find positive correlations between family bonding and leisure activities. This may be attributed to the fact that different programme areas were used in the study rather than focusing on only one area as the researchers of the other four articles did (Kugath, 2007; Huff et al., 2003; Wells et al., 2004; Sullivan et al., 2010). This may also be explained in the light of families participating in core leisure activities without the necessary skills which could be taught by means of participation in structured balance leisure activities.

Conclusion and recommendations

The literature review and analysis supports the following: First that leisure programmes have the potential to develop parent-child relationships and various other beneficial outcomes. Second, outdoor recreation programmes have been used in the past and have proven to be successful when structured according to the needs of the families. Third; even though leisure includes a wide variety of activities and programme areas, this study concluded that not all programme areas could be used when working with families, since some may not suit their needs. Certain shortcomings/limitations were, however, identified during the literature review. Studies included made use of different family structures and were not limited to divorced single-parent families. It should also be noted that this study was undertaken in the field of leisure and did not include literature of other disciplines such as social work and psychology. It is therefore recommended that studies be undertaken which include divorced single-parent families and the use of other programme areas in interventions to determine the values of the areas to healthy family relationships.

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