

Leisure Education: A New Goal for An Old Idea Whose Time Has Come

*Educación para el Ocio: Ha llegado la hora de un
nuevo objetivo para una vieja idea*

*Educação lazer: Tempo para um novo alvo
para uma velha idéia*

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Abstract

Leisure education is an old idea that is being examined with renewed vigour in Canada. Practitioners and researchers from various disciplines (e.g., health, justice, education, recreation) are recognising anew that many people who could benefit from leisure or recreation opportunities in their communities are unable to do so because they lack leisure literacy. Leisure literacy refers to the knowledge, skills and confidence to engage in personally meaningful, health-enhancing leisure. Leisure education is a key means to enhance leisure literacy. The paper presents a model of leisure education developed by Dr. Brenda Robertson and argues for how and why leisure education is needed to address the mental health and well-being needs of persons who experience marginalisation in their communities. Recommendations for moving forward with leisure education as part of a national agenda for recreation in Canada are presented.

KEY WORDS: activity repertoire, intervening constraints, leisure behaviour, leisure education, leisure literacy

Resumen

La Educación para el Ocio nos sitúa ante una vieja idea, que está siendo examinada con renovado vigor en Canadá. Profesionales e investigadores de diversas disciplinas (por ejemplo, en el ámbito de la Salud, de la Justicia, de la Educación o de la Recreación) reconocen, cada vez más, que son muchas las personas que pueden beneficiarse del ocio y de las oportunidades de recreación en sus comunidades, aun cuando son bastantes las no pueden hacerlo porque carecen de alfabetización en ocio. Esto es, de los conocimientos, habilidades y confianza que se necesitan para darle un significado personal, que incida positivamente en su bienestar y calidad de vida. La Educación para el Ocio es un medio clave para mejorar la alfabetización en ocio. El texto

presenta un modelo de educación para el ocio desarrollado por la Dra. Brenda Robertson, argumentando cómo y por qué la Educación para el Ocio es necesaria para abordar la salud mental y el bienestar de las personas que sufren marginación en sus comunidades. Complementariamente se presentan algunas recomendaciones para avanzar esta Educación, como un componente fundamental de la agenda nacional para la recreación en Canadá.

PALABRAS CLAVE: repertorio de actividades, las limitaciones de la intervención, el comportamiento de ocio, educación para el ocio, la alfabetización en ocio

Resumo

Ensino e lazer é uma antiga noção de que está sendo examinada com renovado vigor no Canadá. Profissionais e pesquisadores de várias disciplinas (por exemplo, saúde, justiça, educação, lazer) são novamente Reconhecendo que muitas pessoas que poderiam se beneficiar de lazer ou recreação são oportunidades em suas comunidades não é possível fazê-lo porque lhes falta a alfabetização de lazer. Refere-se ao Conhecimento de alfabetização de lazer, habilidades e confiança para se envolver em pessoalmente significativos, lazer, saúde, reforço. Ensino e lazer é uma chave de lazer meio de aumentar a alfabetização. O artigo apresenta um modelo de ensino e lazer, desenvolvida pelo Dr. Brenda Rodrigues e defende como e por que o lazer é necessária para tratar de educação em saúde mental eo bem-estar a pessoas de Who Needs Em Suas comunidades marginalização experiência. Recomendações para avançar com a educação de lazer como parte de uma agenda nacional para a recreação no Canadá são apresentados.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: repertório atividade, restrições de intervir, lazer Comportamento, ensino e lazer, a alfabetização de lazer.

Introduction

We have just returned from attending a historic event in Canada—a National Recreation Summit—which brought together 200 professionals and academics from across Canada to create a national agenda for recreation in Canada. This agenda will “mark the beginning of a renewed, re-energized and collaborative framework for enhancing the impact of recreation and parks on community development and quality of life in this country.” Repositioning the recreation sector to recognize and address the needs of persons who experience health and social disparities aligns the recreation sector with social pedagogy.

Thinkers from across Canada were asked to write commissioned papers that all Summit delegates were required to read; these papers laid out their thoughts about the future of recreation in the next two decades. Presenters were asked to share their “bird’s eye” view of what is needed to address the crises of chronic disease, poverty, and inactivity facing our nation. Workshop participants were asked to talk together about ways to address health disparities and social problems facing individuals, families, and communities. Thinking about ways to enhance citizen’s “leisure literacy” through leisure education was viewed as an essential part of this call to action.

Doug Brimacombe (2011, 8-10), one of the authors of the Summit commissioned papers, argued that for individuals to directly benefit (in terms of their health and well-being) from recreation and leisure opportunities they needed to be engaged and that engagement occurs when individuals are “leisure literate,” motivated, and confident. To fulfill this promise of recreation’s benefits Brimacombe suggested that a refocusing of public recreation and leisure service delivery systems is necessary, with a new or renewed focus on enhancing people’s knowledge, skills and confidence to be “healthy, interdependent, responsible citizens” who are “active, engaged,

and balanced". He argued that to derive these outcomes from their leisure or recreation experiences means that individuals "must be equipped for the journey. Of primary importance is leisure literacy. Leisure literacy refers to the knowledge and skills to understand and experience leisure". Leisure literacy can be gained through leisure education.

In this paper we provide a brief overview of leisure education in North America. We then share a model of leisure education developed by the second author. We draw on this model to frame our thinking about the potential contributions of leisure education to promoting mental health and resilience across the life course. We end with recommendations for next steps for incorporating leisure education in leisure service delivery systems that will reach people who most need and could most benefit from leisure education.

A Bird's Eye "North American" View of Leisure Education

It is impossible to represent the totality of leisure education in a few paragraphs. So this will be a brief and select review, with the aim of highlighting where we see the gaps (and therefore opportunities) for rethinking leisure education. For the most part, definitions and models of leisure education in North America have evolved primarily from within the *therapeutic recreation* field (although a Canadian exception is provided in the following section). The emphasis has been on working with individuals who have experienced barriers or constraints to leisure participation as a result of illness or disability.

Stumbo and Peterson's (2009) leisure education content model, for example, is part of the Leisure Ability Model, which is a model of practice for therapeutic recreation service providers. Leisure education content areas include: leisure awareness (e.g., awareness of benefits of leisure, interests), activity skills (traditional and non-traditional), social skills

(e.g., self-presentation) and leisure resources (e.g., local, national). Although the focus is on preparing people to be more independent in their leisure lifestyles, even today the primary settings in which therapeutic recreation (and therefore leisure education) is delivered are within clinical healthcare settings.

For the most part, people enter health-care institutions for treatment of their illness or disease; not to enhance their health (in a holistic sense). Not only are people less *ready* to think about what life will be like for them outside this hospital environment they are also in environments where application of this knowledge and skills to their everyday lives is limited. In fact, an early paper by Caldwell, Adolph and Gilbert (1989) warned of the "dangers" of leisure counselling for individuals in rehabilitation settings. They found that by raising people's expectations about leisure's benefits but not adequately preparing people for the environments in which they would be living after discharge, people were less satisfied with their leisure and more bored. Educating people for and within their everyday environments becomes key to ensuring the transferability of skills and knowledge.

There have been well conceptualized models of leisure education in North America which focus more broadly on educating individuals of any age to be engaged members of their communities. Jean Mundy's (1998, 7) model of leisure education is consistent with a developmental approach to more broadly preparing people to assume self-responsibility for health, well-being and citizenship that Brimacombe advocated. According to Mundy "the goal of leisure education is to enable individuals to enhance the quality of their lives through leisure" (p. 7). She suggested leisure education is a total developmental process through which individuals develop an understanding of leisure, of self in relation to leisure, and of the relationships among leisure, their own lifestyle, and

society. Mundy's leisure education model includes components related to leisure awareness, self-awareness, decision-making, leisure skills and social interaction. However, to develop the skills and confidence to overcome challenges to remaining engaged in valued leisure or recreation pursuits that contribute to individual, family and community quality of life over the life course, additional areas of focus needed for leisure education are required, including helping people to: (a) identify needs, (b) problem-solve to overcome barriers to taking action, and (d) develop the confidence in their abilities to take action. Unfortunately, empirical evidence of application of Mundy's model is limited. We were able to find only one qualitative study of a leisure education program for women recovering from substance use which had used this model (Rancourt, 1991).

Almost 15 years ago Mundy (1998:2) noted that much of the focus of recreation service delivery in community settings has been on the provision of programs and facilities; education has been limited to teaching skills for activity participation (e.g., learn to swim or play tennis programs) and that there has been the assumption that by merely possessing these leisure skills and having access to opportunities people would be engaged in enriched leisure lifestyles. As a result, we have taught people "how to exercise for their health—but not how to attain leisure; to follow our plans and enrol in our scheduled programs—but not how to make their own leisure decisions and plans". Mundy cautioned that merely providing information about programs or about leisure's benefits in marketing campaigns is insufficient for developing people's leisure literacy. Although there has been renewed interest in and call for leisure education in school settings in the United States (described in more detail below), Mundy's points still hold true today in most North America recreation settings. Repositioning leisure education as a component of

service delivery in *communities*, where people live the majority of their lives, is needed.

Leisure Education for Leisure Literacy: Strengthening Capacities for Health, Well-being and Community Engagement

Leisure education is education for, about, and in leisure. It is an old idea for recreation and leisure service delivery in Canada that has a new (or renewed) goal of enhancing citizens' leisure-related knowledge, skills, confidence and awareness for enhanced engagement, health and well-being. For example, over two decades ago Doug Nichols (1990, 10) wrote an article for the professional magazine *Recreation Canada* titled: "Leisure education: A prescription for a healthier community." In this article he noted that, even then, leisure education has been around a long time under different guises, such as art education, physical education or outdoor education. While recognizing the interconnections with outdoor or physical education, Nichols advocated that leisure education would provide people with theoretical and practical understandings of the relationships between leisure, work, time and development across the life course, as well as understanding its relationships to other areas of intellectual and creative pursuits such as travel and the arts. Perhaps more importantly, a broader view of leisure education would help people recognize "leisure as an important construct in its own right, worthy of consideration as an integral component of individual and community lives". Nichols argued that leisure service delivery systems, which provide venues to promote leisure experiences as part of a healthy activity lifestyle, could be the contexts for enhancing the leisure literacy of individuals, families and communities:

Leisure education is seen as a fundamental tool which is used proactively to encourage full development of individual

potential. Leisure education would begin at the earliest possible opportunity (as do education, medical services, religious orientations and the like), so that participation in leisure experiences would be seen as a natural and integral portion of one's life. (Nichols, 1990, 11)

Although written over two decades ago, Nichols suggestions are as relevant today as they were then, especially given the escalating epidemic of chronic diseases due to physical inactivity and stress in Canada and other developed countries. A tremendous gap exists between the promise or benefits of recreation for people's health and well-being and the social problems facing individuals, families and communities today as a result of poverty, stress, and unhealthy lifestyles.

In the health promotion field there is significant attention to the idea of health literacy, and the challenges of helping people to have knowledge and skills to reduce lifestyle risk factors and better self-manage their health. The same need exists for enhancing people's literacy for and about leisure and recreation. Becoming leisure literate is more than about physical literacy (e.g., developing basic movement skills to be able to engage in physical activities). It is about building a broad repertoire of personal, expressive, social, cultural, and citizenship skills to enable individuals to address challenges they encounter in their everyday lives, to be self-determined in their own leisure, to enhance their physical and mental health and well-being, and to be engaged in their homes, families, neighbourhoods and communities.

Providing access to individualized or group leisure education in school environments has been recommended as an essential prevention strategy in North America. With input from almost 30 practitioners and researchers across the United States and Canada, the American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation (AAPAR, 2011, 23)

has recently developed a position paper arguing for inclusion of leisure education in the school systems. They recommend that: "Education should provide the foundation for appreciating leisure and learning leisure skills that will facilitate healthy leisure engagement throughout the lifespan.... Leisure education concepts should be used to make health and physical education curricula more effective, to strengthen health and physical education programming in the schools, and to support health and physical activity throughout the lifespan." Although the AAPAR position paper does not directly address mental health promotion or prevention, it does emphasize the importance of strengthening youth's developmental assets and resilience. Beyond children and youth, leisure education is relevant for those who struggle with achieving work-life balance or to cope with stress, for those living with chronic health conditions, and to support those who are unemployed or underemployed. As Caldwell noted, "Many people need leisure guidance, education, and counselling to help them reap the beneficial outcomes of leisure and avoid the negative outcomes that are possible". The following section presents a model of leisure behaviour that informs how we might think about educating for, about and through leisure in order to enhance the well-being of individuals, families and communities.

A Leisure Behaviour Model that informs Leisure Education

Brenda Robertson (second author) was invited to speak at the National Recreation Summit and to present a model of leisure education that she has developed as a means of explaining leisure behavior. This model stems from her dissertation research in which she endeavoured to explain why certain youth engage in delinquent activity as a form of recreation. The model has since been applied to work with a myriad of populations includ-

ing recovering addicts, retirees, obese children, and incarcerated youth to name but a few (e.g., Robertson, 2000, 2001; Robertson, Link, Sivan & Shannon, 2008; Robertson, & Lutes, 2003; Shannon & Robertson, 2009; Shannon, Robertson, Werner, & Wagner, 2010).

Understanding leisure behavior, and why individuals make the choices that they do during free time, informs the process of leisure education. In order to develop leisure education initiatives that will facilitate positive leisure functioning, one must first understand the decision process related to the use of free time. The following model illustrates the process that determines how decisions about leisure engagement are made. Generally, individuals are not consciously aware that such a cognitive process is occurring and guiding leisure decision-making. The purpose of leisure education is to create a conscious awareness of this process in order that one might intervene in ways that will enhance leisure functioning.

The following is a description of each of the key components of the model.

Needs. Engagement in specific activities is motivated by a conscious or subconscious desire to satisfy a particular need. In the same way that messages from our body inform the brain that we need to eat, drink, or sleep and specific actions follow, our brains are constantly receiving messages about our social psychological needs. These messages motivate all behaviours, not simply those associated with leisure or use of free time. Within the context of work or school we are often constrained by our ability to pursue actions to satisfy specific needs. For example, a clerk at a busy grocery store is not free to act immediately should the need for solitude arise. Certain forms of work provide greater flexibility and opportunities to satisfy a myriad of needs within the context of the job. It is that very feature that draws certain individuals to certain types of occupations. During free time individuals have far greater opportunity to

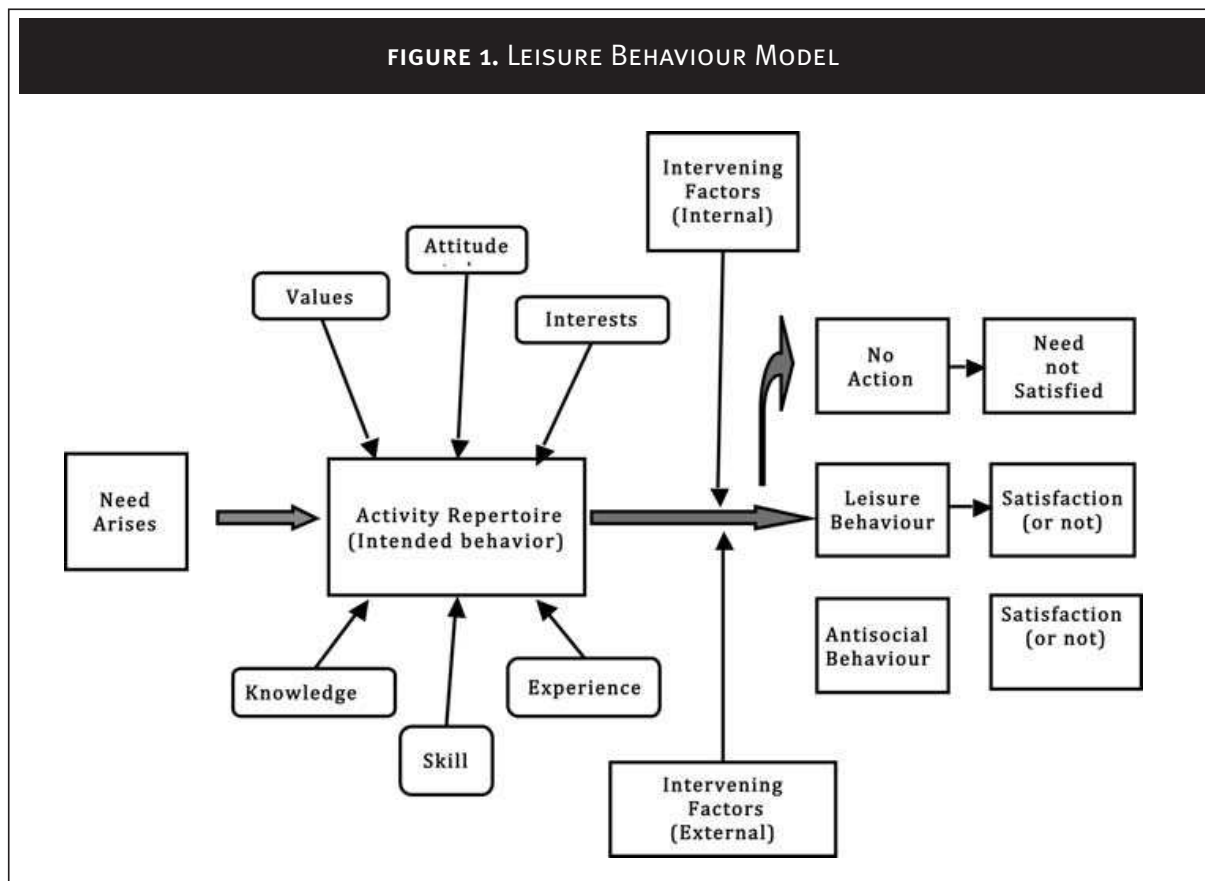
act in a manner that will satisfy their dominant needs at that particular time.

All persons have the capacity to experience similar needs. However, individual life experiences facilitate some needs being more dominant than others in certain individuals and at certain times. For example, individuals raised in a competitive home environment may learn to value competition and seek it in their lives. That is why there are individuals who crave adventure and challenge while others are driven by the need for creative expression. There are people who constantly search out opportunities for social interaction while others prefer their solitude. Most people possess a range of needs and seek to satisfy the more dominant ones as they arise. That explains why sometimes we seek out social situations and the company of others while at other times we prefer to be alone.

Our daily activities, many of which are beyond our control, cause certain needs to arise at certain times that motivate what we do during free time. The young professional who relieves job stress by going for a run after work; the mother who escapes from the family by locking the bathroom door and soaking in the tub; or the seniors who live alone and meet regularly for a card game with friends are all examples of individuals with certain needs that, in turn, motivate their free time behaviours. There exists a broad range of needs that can be satisfied through leisure. Examples include the need to: acquire knowledge, be adventurous, be challenged, commune with nature, compete, be creative, discover, escape, master skills, be playful, express oneself, experience solitude, and seek spiritual connection. Unfortunately many people do not know how to “tune in” to (identify or be aware of) their needs or how to select pursuits that will satisfy these needs at the same time enhancing their health and well-being.

Leisure repertoire. Once a need arises that an individual seeks to satisfy, there are usually a number of activity alternatives to pur-

FIGURE 1. LEISURE BEHAVIOUR MODEL



sue. In the model they are referred to as activities contained within one's leisure repertoire; that is, those activities in which the individual could engage in order to satisfy a particular need. There are a multitude of activities that could satisfy a specific need but no activity will necessarily satisfy the same need for every individual. For example, the need to feel a sense of connection to the past could be met through such activities as reading a historical novel, talking to one's grandparents, visiting a museum or historic site, or becoming a historic re-enactor to name but a few. In order for an activity to become part one's leisure activity repertoire, there must be congruence with people's values, attitudes, knowledge, interest, skills and experience. Each of these is described below as conditions for satisfying needs through leisure:

Values. The activity must not conflict with the individual's personal values. For example, if an individual values preservation of the natural environment, they are not likely to ride

on motorized vehicles that damage the forest floor. Another example is an individual who values physical fitness and time with family may go for a bike ride with his/her partner and children rather than watch television.

Attitudes. Activities toward which one has developed a negative attitude are not likely to be part of the individual's leisure activity repertoire. It is certainly possible to develop a negative attitude toward an activity that one has tried and did not enjoy. Often times, however, negative attitudes are formed against activities based upon assumptions and stereotypes. When properly introduced to a recreation pursuit, however, people often develop a new attitude – a more positive and informed one – that helps them to be more open to a given activity becoming part of their leisure repertoire.

Knowledge. In order for an activity to become part of the repertoire one must not only have knowledge of the activity, but also of aspects relating to it. Spelunking, body surfing,

or origami will not be in one's repertoire if the individual has no knowledge of what these activities are or that they even exist. If one has an awareness of spelunking, but does not know how to become involved in the activity, where to go to engage in spelunking, or what equipment is required then s/he is not likely to participate.

Interest. Certain activities capture our interest and others do not. Even if the other factors normally indicating an activity would be included in one's repertoire were present, if we are simply not interested in a specific activity, we are not likely to pursue it even though it may hold the potential to satisfy a specific need. Lack of interest may be caused by a number of factors. For example, certain activities better fit with our self-concept than others. Stereotypes associated with specific pursuits may foster or prevent interest from developing.

Skills. In order to engage in any activity, a certain set of skills is required. In all cases there are the technical skills such as being able to shuffle and deal a deck in card games, read a map and use a compass in orienteering, or deliver a rock and sweep in curling. In addition, certain pursuits require additional skills such as teamwork skills, social skills, or physical strength. Without at least minimal skills, participation in most activities is not possible and therefore will not be included in one's leisure activity repertoire.

Experience. Past experience with activities may determine whether or not we intend to continue to pursue them. Even if our knowledge is somewhat limited, and our skills not particularly well honed, if the experience we have with an activity is positive, chances are we will pursue it again. Negative experiences, particularly of a traumatic nature, may prevent us from engaging in that activity in the future. A first time camper who experiences negative climatic conditions, a boy scout who is taunted by other youth, or a skier who gets trapped in an avalanche may all cease involvement in the activity.

The greater the number of activities contained in one's repertoire, the better the chances that when a need arises the individual will be able to identify an activity to pursue in order to satisfy their need. Once an activity is identified that could satisfy the need, certain factors may intervene that, unless negotiated, can prevent participation in the intended behaviour. These are called internal and external intervening factors or constraints. An internal intervening constraint would be one rooted within a person while the external ones exist separate from the individual. These are described more fully below

Intervening constraints. Once it is determined that an individual has one or more activities in his or her repertoire to satisfy a need that has arisen and intends to participate, a number of internal and external factors or constraints could intervene that must be negotiated. The following are some of the more common internal constraints that can intervene between our intention to engage in a certain activity and our ability to do so: no one with whom to engage in the activity, perceived social role, inappropriate level of challenge, low self-efficacy, and sense of entitlement to name but a few. Extrinsic or external constraints could include: lack of time, insufficient funds, unfavourable weather conditions, activity scheduling, or lack of access to transportation.

Constraint negotiation is the process through which ways and means are found to overcome constraints that arise. In many cases, ways can be found to overcome a constraint. In cases where this is not possible, if the leisure activity repertoire is sufficiently large and diverse, another activity can be pursued in order to satisfy the need. The key to negotiating constraints is self-responsibility. Individuals must learn to accept responsibility for their own leisure functioning and through leisure education they can acquire the knowledge and skills required to do so.

Leisure Behaviour and Outcomes

Depending upon the success that one has in negotiating constraints that arise, there are three outcomes that usually occur. The first is that the individual is able to engage in the chosen activity with the intention of satisfying the motivating need. Ideally, the chosen activity not only satisfies this need, but benefits the individual more broadly in terms of health and well-being. However, there are numerous circumstances beyond a person's control that can prevent total satisfaction. In certain cases, for example, if individuals do not possess appropriate activities in their repertoire or if they are unable to successfully negotiate constraints, they will not likely engage in leisure behaviour that they will find satisfying. In such cases individuals experience negative feelings such as boredom, apathy, and frustration and may turn to activities such as excessive television viewing as a form of escape. The third behaviour that has been observed is when an individual lacks an appropriate activity in his or her repertoire or is unable to negotiate intervening constraints, but is motivated to action. It is in this situation that individuals will seek out alternative, deviant and/or delinquent, or unhealthy means of satisfying their needs. Such activities fall outside of what is generally considered to be socially acceptable or appropriate. Although potentially harmful to the individual and society, such behaviours have been proven successful in satisfying individual needs.

Understanding factors that facilitate leisure behaviour informs the development of leisure education processes which assist individuals to identify their needs, develop large diverse repertoires, and negotiate constraints in order to engage in satisfying forms of leisure behaviour. In this next section we draw on this leisure behaviour model as a way to argue for leisure education as a means of promoting mental health and well-being across the life course.

Making a Case for Leisure Education for Mental Health Promotion¹

In Canada, widespread attention is currently focused on the significant personal and public costs associated with overeating, smoking and leading a sedentary lifestyle, all of which put people at risk for developing chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and arthritis. While poverty and lack of access to services and supports are additional risks for developing chronic physical diseases what is less widely publicized is that poor mental health has just as great personal, family and societal costs. Moreover these same lifestyle, social and environmental factors are also determinants of poor mental health (Health Canada, 2002). Leisure education has the potential to be an effective way to enhance the mental health and well-being as well as leisure behaviours of people across the life course.

The relevance of recreation and leisure for mental health is highlighted when one considers that mental health is viewed as including capacities to "experience pleasure and enjoyment...pursue goals and interests; and, explore choices and make decisions" (Kirby & Keon, 2004). Leisure scholars have described and provided evidence of the abundant mental health benefits available from leisure and recreation (Caldwell, 2005). In fact, leisure and recreation activities have been viewed as essential to optimal development across the life course because they promote resiliency and, to that end, can be considered "protective factors" for health and wellbeing. Conversely, lack of social inclusion and engagement can put people at risk not only for poor mental health but for other risk behaviours. For example, young people who report poor social connectedness are two to three times more likely to experience depressive symptoms than youth who report stronger social networks. A combination of greater depression and delinquency is especially true for youth who perceive themselves to be

alienated from their peers, families and/or community and who primarily engage in unstructured free time activities (Bonhart, Richards, Kohl & Randall, 2009). Unfortunately, while many people with mental health problems could benefit from recreation participation, they often disengage from recreation activities and social relationships that could ameliorate problems.

There is also evidence that youth with mental health and/or behavioural problems may experience additional barriers to recreation participation not experienced by “typical” peers, including low self-esteem, reluctance to explore new activities and settings (often due to lack of prior success), below-average competence and skills, and lack of parental and peer support to participate in recreation. In recreation and camp programs, bullying and being left out contribute to further social isolation and mental distress (Davies, Davis, Cook & Waters, 2007). Ensuring vulnerable populations—especially children, youth, older adults and persons who live with a chronic health condition or disability—have access to supportive environments and educational opportunities in which they can develop skills and competence and express their talents is key to developing their competence, confidence and resilience and their mental health. This is where and why leisure education is needed.

Developing and strengthening people’s internal or social “protective” resources for mental health and well-being can enhance their capacities to interact and engage successfully and to withstand challenges experienced in many different life contexts across the life course (e.g., school, work, families, and communities). Depending on the activity and its meaning for individuals, leisure and recreation can provide opportunities to: experience hope, optimism and enjoyment; develop and demonstrate a sense of purpose, competence, and self-determination; and to experience a break from life stresses.

Intentionally designed recreation or leisure programs can enable participants to develop skills, confidence, and a sense of belonging through experiencing challenges, social support, and acceptance. Fostering developmental assets, such as positive self-regard, sense of self-responsibility, and coping and conflict resolution skills will enable youth to face challenges in other life domains, such as school or work. These can be considered *needs* identified in Robertson’s leisure behaviour model and can be developed and strengthened if programs are *intentionally* designed to promote or cultivate them. In fact, with most participants, it is not sufficient to just provide positive and enjoyable experiences; participants need to be helped to see how they can transfer what they have gained from these experiences to their everyday lives outside of program participation (Hutchinson & Dattilo, 2003).

Focusing on building people’s *leisure repertoire* is also an essential part of ensuring that participants are supported in becoming socially connected and engaged in personally meaningful activities; in turn this engagement and social inclusion are keys to people’s mental health and well-being. However, despite availability of numerous recreation and leisure opportunities in most communities, there are many people of all ages who are not engaged and who experience social isolation and mental health problems. Moreover, many people experience barriers to participation, to being able to experience these benefits, and to being able to take action on these benefits because of living stressful lives or in unsupportive, unsafe physical or social environments. Again this is where leisure education is needed to facilitate not only the development of skills, knowledge and confidence to *engage* in preferred activities but also the skills, knowledge and confidence to *overcome constraints* to participation. As Robertson noted, in order to do this people need to be supported in iden-

tifying activities that are consistent with their values, interests and experiences.

Leisure (play, recreation)-based coping skills interventions are receiving growing attention to better prepare children and youth to have the skills and confidence to cope with stressful or risky social environments. It is notable, however, that to date these interventions have not been designed or facilitated by leisure educators or researchers. For example the Fun FRIENDS program is a school-based intervention program for preschool children (Pahl & Barrett, 2010). The Fun FRIENDS program was designed to teach children strategies in a play-based manner to prevent anxiety and to increase social and emotional strength. The program was evaluated with children aged four to six years attending preschool in Brisbane, Australia (n = 263). At 12-month follow-up improvements were found on anxiety, behavioural inhibition and social-emotional competence for children in the intervention group. In a program for preadolescent girls that combined sport/physical activity and mentoring for healthy lifestyle choices the girls experienced an increased sense of self-responsibility, connections to the community and a sense of belonging, along with developing planning and leadership skills (Bruening, Dover & Clark, 2010). Incorporating leisure education within these programs would enable youth to see how everyday enjoyable activities could both help them feel better and could help part of living a healthy life.

Leisure education, in the form of peer leisure mentors or coaches, may be a promising way to support people's transition from healthcare-to-community environments following an acute health crisis (e.g., after being hospitalized for depression) or to support people who experience ongoing challenges to leisure engagement because of mental illness. For example, the "Recreation Mentoring Program" (RMP) is a community-wide program designed to target children exhibiting problems at home, school or community (Ander-

son et al., 2006). The RMP is a partnership between many youth-serving organizations in Ontario, Canada, including hospitals, schools, and recreation organizations. The program pairs a child with a trained young adult volunteer mentor. The trained volunteers are matched with at-risk children and meet regularly at a community recreation centre near the child's residence. The program is designed to overcome barriers vulnerable youth typically experience (e.g., facility fees, lack of family or peer support and reluctance to try new activities due to past failures). The mentor's role is to stimulate participation in recreation programs by supporting interest and skill development and to promote the child's continued participation after the mentorship ends.

Although the examples provided above have focused on the role of leisure education in addressing the mental health needs of children and youth there is an equal need to address barriers to meaningful engagement by adults and older adults who experience challenges to their health and well-being and to being meaningfully engaged in their communities. Helping adults and older adults to have access to leisure education will ensure they can develop the skills, knowledge and confidence to address their mental health and well-being needs through personally meaningful leisure pursuits as they face transitions and health challenges across the life course.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is clear there are excellent models for leisure education that provide guidance for the design and delivery of leisure education in community recreation and school settings. The problem is how to get these programs *into* these settings where they can be delivered. At a final session of the National Recreation Summit we, along with approximately 8 other practitioners from across Canada, came together to talk about how to incorporate leisure

education within a national agenda for recreation. We talked about the necessity of leisure education for better preparing people for expected and unexpected transitions and challenges throughout their lives, and the need to educate not only individuals but those who could support and guide individuals as they navigate their lives, such as family members, educators, and recreation leaders. We determined that without “leisure literacy” people are not going to gain the full benefits available to them from their recreation and leisure participation. We also concluded that it is important to prepare for people for “what happens after the program ends”; in other words to ensure that participants learn transferable skills to make informed decisions to meet needs in leisure and recreation outside of structured education, healthcare, sport, or recreation and leisure program environments.

To accomplish these goals we suggested that leisure education is needed in the schools and community recreation environments and that it needs to be part of other healthcare reform, education reform, or sport and physical activity agendas. We also concluded that recreation service providers need to accept (perhaps embrace) their role and responsibilities for enhancing leisure literacy within their participants and communities and to identify effective ways to do this.

Developing the skills and confidence of service providers and volunteers to shift their view of their role from programmer to leisure educator is essential in realizing this new vision. Ensuring all recreation practitioners receive leisure education training as part of their academic preparation is one part of this. Exploring new technologies (tailored, interactive web resources or social media) and new models for service delivery (e.g., training parents or peer leaders to be “leisure coaches”) may be needed to bring leisure education out of the hospitals and into communities where it has the potential to be accessible to (and therefore benefit) more people who experience barriers

to being fully engaged in activities that could contribute to their mental and physical health and well-being and to their communities.

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Notas

¹ These arguments are more fully developed in a commissioned paper prepared for the National Recreation Summit by the second author, titled: *Mental Health: Challenges, Implications and Opportunities for Community Recreation*. This paper, along with the other commissioned papers and presentations are available on this Lifestyle Information Network website: www.lin.ca

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