

Introduction to the Special Issue on the Family: A Refocus on Family

Research related to family leisure is not new. Scholars have been examining the family leisure relationship for over 70 years (Hawkes, 1991; Holman & Epperson, 1984). Therapeutic recreation practitioners and researchers have recognized the vital role of families for many years as well, and have identified family strength and related family variables as important benefits and outcomes of therapeutic recreation programming (DeSalvatore & Roseman, 1986; Malkin, Phillips, & Chumbler, 1991; Pommier & Witt, 1995). In recent years, there has been a significant resurgence of interest in the family. Although families have changed substantially in structure, complexity, and dynamics, they remain, in all their diversity, the fundamental unit of our society.

In light of recent world events, more and more individuals are changing priorities and refocusing efforts on spending quality time with and strengthening their own families. Politicians, businesses, religious and community organizations, and the media have all joined the family bandwagon. It is rare to find a political campaign that does not include efforts to “strengthen families” or “build family values in the community.” Television commercials and magazine advertisements abound with marketing efforts that reflect a cultural spotlight on families. Recreation and leisure professionals have also increased their focus on families in recent years. The tourism industry now caters specifically to the family vacation market. Disney World is still the world’s number one family attraction, but thousands of other destinations including local and national parks, zoos, and family focused museums have now added to the competition. *Family Fun*, a monthly publication on family recreation both inside and outside the home, presents annual “family-friendly travel awards” to the nation’s top family travel destinations. Premier Cruise Line, better known as “The Big Red Boat,” offers an entire fleet of cruise ships where you and your children can join Bugs Bunny and his gang for cruise packages complete with all-day children and family focused entertainment, recreation, and educational programming. Milton Bradley and Parker Brothers advertise the value of a weekly “family game night” from a child’s point of view. Disney’s family home entertainment videos are a multi-billion dollar industry. And park and recreation departments regularly market benefits and new programs based on the age-old adage, “The family that plays together, stays together.”

This resurgence of family interest has been reflected among the family leisure research as well in recent years. In 1997, through the concerted efforts of many scholars, a special issue of the *Journal of Leisure Research (JLR)* was dedicated to family leisure. The research in that issue reflected substantial progress as well as some continued challenges in this line of study. Researchers began to recognize the diversity of today’s families and the “multiple ways that

families are constructed and enacted” (Freysinger, 1991, p. 1). They also began to employ different methodologies, to collect data from multiple sources in families including children, and to utilize more refined theoretical frameworks to guide research. It was recommended that these approaches continue to be utilized, developed, and modified, and that inquiry into family leisure continue to increase in the future.

Researchers appear to have responded to the challenge as they continue to focus on family leisure. Each year following the *JLR* special issue, a thematic session showcasing family leisure research has been included in the Leisure Research Symposium held in conjunction with the National Recreation and Park Association Annual Congress. In fact, in 2001 and 2002 it became necessary to have two thematic sessions to present all the research related to family leisure. Additionally, in the fall of 2002 leading scholars gathered from across North America to a family camp in Utah for a Family Leisure Retreat. Scholars discussed current lines of research, various theoretical and methodological approaches, critical needs, collaborative works, and future direction for family leisure study. The following quotes reflect the nature and possible impact of this discussion:

“Family leisure is not a given—people don’t necessarily know how to do it, how to get the most out of it.”—Colleen Hood, Ph.D.

“Family leisure is a very complex phenomenon, which can be conceptualized, theorized, and researched in a variety of ways. Given the range of perspectives and approaches, it was particularly beneficial to take the time at the retreat to share ideas and to learn from each other in a relaxed and supportive environment.”—Sue Shaw, Ph.D.

“It is conceivable that the impact and influence of this retreat will guide family leisure research and programming throughout the coming decade.”—Brian Hill, Ph.D.

The recent refocus on family is evident throughout the field of therapeutic recreation. Practitioners and researchers alike have not only focused on strengthening the effects and carryover of interventions for individuals by addressing family needs in treatment approaches, they have examined relationships and provided interventions focused on making “improved quality of family life” a primary goal for therapeutic recreation. Therefore, the Editors of the *Therapeutic Recreation Journal (TRJ)* felt there was no better time to call for a Special Issue on the Family, in which family research with direct implications to therapeutic recreation practice could be presented and discussed. The response to the call was excellent, and it is likely that further family related research will appear in future regular issues of *TRJ*. The four studies in this issue represent a broad spectrum of research with a variety of implications for therapeutic recreation practice throughout the field. Populations studied include families who have a child with a disability, interracial families with at least one adoptive child, families that include an

at-risk adolescent, and families that include an adult with a recent spinal cord injury. Multiple approaches and methodologies were represented, different theoretical frameworks were utilized, and an array of family outcome variables were identified and discussed. We invite readers to thoughtfully examine and utilize findings as they apply in their own area of practice or research, and we encourage continued dialogue, program development, and scholarly inquiry into the influence of therapeutic recreation on today's families.

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