

Introduction to the Special Issue The Role of Therapeutic Recreation With People on the Autism Spectrum

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Guest Editors

Recreation is an important component of the human experience, and is critical to everyone's quality of life. These principles are extended to include the 3.5 million individuals who are on the Autism Spectrum (ASD) (<http://www.autism-society.org/what-is/facts-and-statistics/>). ASD is one of the most common developmental disabilities. Therapeutic recreation professionals have the opportunity to increase their role in applying interventions to develop and sustain health and recreation-related skills with participants and their caregivers. Individuals with ASD may experience difficulties with reciprocal interaction, self-initiation, motor planning, activity planning and sequencing; and tend to have limited leisure repertoires (Mobily & MacNeil, 2002). These issues are barriers to leisure engagement that can be addressed with therapeutic recreation interventions. With appropriate individualized supports and interventions, these individuals can learn leisure skills to use and enjoy over a lifetime and can develop social skills that enable successful participation in a variety of recreation contexts. While there is considerable literature and research on the general needs and effective interventions for persons with ASD, there is limited literature specific to ASD and therapeutic recreation. Thus, for the therapeutic recreation profession, there is a need to contribute to the therapeutic recreation body of knowledge through research and documentation of effective interventions. In this special issue of the *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, the authors highlight the need for evidence to inform practice as their manuscripts document the effectiveness of specific interventions including aquatics, physical activity, animal-assisted therapy, and family participation in camping.

In the first article, Lawson and Little designed and evaluated an aquatic intervention having unique sensory elements. An eight-week Sensory Enriched Aquatics program with pre-post assessments targeted sleep behaviors in 10 youth under 14 years of age with ASD. The results documented that older children with decreased autism severity responded positively to the intervention. The program was well received by the parents. The authors note the need for aquatics with children with ASD.

In the second article, the authors (Guest, Balogh, Dogra, and Lloyd) report the results of a multisport camp intervention for girls (CA 8-11) with targeted outcomes that included increased motor skills and social skills. Thirteen girls participated in the five-day intervention. A pre-post-assessment with an eight-week follow-up measured motor skills, physical activity levels, physical self-perception, and social and adaptive behavior. Results noted significant improvements in motor and social skills among

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the subjects. The authors noted the importance of including motor skills training to improve physical activity levels of ASD in therapeutic recreation.

The third article by Hallyburton and Hinton provides a systematic review of literature on the use of canine therapy with individuals who have ASD. The authors conducted an in-depth review of studies from several health and human service professions from the previous 10 years that examined the effectiveness of the use of canine interventions with this population. Ten studies met the inclusion criteria. Results of these studies were reported as they related to the descriptive characteristics of ASD found in the DSM-5. Each of the studies noted positive outcomes of this intervention. The authors present a series of questions to aid in the application of this intervention through APIED.

The last article by Townsend uses the Core and Balance framework to examine the importance of leisure to the well-being of families who have a child who has ASD. The author examined the immediate and long-term influence on families who participated in a two-day, two-night camp designed for families with a child with ASD. During camp, family members participated in two leisure education sessions. Townsend conducted interviews with the families twice, at two and six months post-camp participation. The findings indicated that parents developed a deep awareness of their family's leisure experiences and the importance of intentional leisure engagement. An unintended, but important finding for RT, was that the family's leisure experiences with other families who had a child on the ASD were found to provide positive social support. The importance of having trained professional staff like CTRSs during experiential interventions is noted by the author.

The concluding piece is a review of a resource manual, *Developing Leisure Time Skills for People with Autism Spectrum Disorders Practical Strategies for Home, School, and Community* ([2nd Ed.], Coyne, Klagge, & Nyberg), presented by Watson. The reviewer outlines the contents of this six chapter publication noting the significance of various elements of APIED to design and implementation of interventions with ASD participants in a variety of settings. The resource uses case studies to present meaningful leisure to children in ASD. Characteristics of participants and the contextual environment are assessed to ensure appropriate intervention selection. Selected experiences are feasible in the home, school, work, and community. The applied nature of the resource facilitates its use in academic and practice settings.

Together, these articles offer intervention effectiveness, application for other studies to RT, and the use of RT as a means of therapy. This special issue spotlights a variety of scholarly approaches related to therapeutic recreation and ASD. Articles provide the opportunity to develop best practices to provide therapeutic recreation services. The quantitative and qualitative studies contribute to the evidence of effective interventions provided by recreation therapists. We have learned of the importance of leisure in the lives of people who are on the autism spectrum and their families and the significance of recreation therapy interventions to their health and well-being.

References

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