



Construction of Meaningful Family Experiences

Dr. Barry A. Garst, Virginia Cooperative Extension
Virginia Tech, 107 Hutcheson Hall, Blacksburg, Virginia, 24061
bgarst@vt.edu, (540) 231-9414

Key Concepts

- Participation in family camps has increased approximately 24% since 2000 (Keer, 2006). Family camp experiences may be one way to enhance communication and interaction among family members. Two studies (one group of 31 families and a second group of 15 families, each of which had at least one child in the range of 9-12 years old) explored the role of family leisure and family vacations in the construction of positive, meaningful family experiences and family functioning.

Key Findings

- Parents are concerned about the pressures and stress on families in today's society and worried about their children getting into "trouble" with drugs or alcohol when they became teenagers.
- Families need extended periods of time together in environments that are conducive to enhanced family interaction and communication, but organizing and facilitating extended family experiences creates a lot of work for parents.
- Parents found it to be crucial that close relationships be developed with their children and that a sense of togetherness is fostered in their families through shared experiences.
- Families need to enjoy themselves when participating in shared experiences, and activities need to be particularly appealing to children.
- Family vacations are a powerful source of family memories, which contribute to a strong, positive sense of family.

How to Use

- Camp directors should recognize the desire that families have for extended, positive shared family experiences, and should assess the feasibility of adding family camps as program opportunities.
- Family camps should be structured so that activities appeal to both children and parents. Involving members from several families in an advisory committee to plan family camps could insure an appealing family camp program.
- Family camps should be structured so that there are ample opportunities for communication and interaction. For example, purposeful planned team-building activities that require family members to work together towards common goals, scheduling time for family reflection at the end of each day of family camp, and allowing "free-time" for families to construct their own experiences spontaneously.
- Given the importance of creating family memories, camp directors or camp staff should consider strategies for facilitating this memory-making process. For example, providing families with the opportunity to create a CD of their family camp experiences using a digital camera or video-camera.

Source

Keer, G. (2006). Family Camp Has Its Days in the Sun.

Shaw, S. M., Delamere, F. M., & Havitz, M. E. (In Press). The Social Construction of Family: The Role of Family Leisure and Family Vacations. In L. Bella (Ed.) Family Making. Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing.