Strengthening Marriages & Families

Through Wholesome Recreation

by Mark Widmer

When I think about family recreation, one of the first things that comes to my mind is my vacations with my own family. Our experiences are always the same. We have four kids, and my eight-year-old asks for fourteen hours "Are we there yet?" while the other kids have "seat wars" over who is too close to whom. They also fight over the hand-held video game. We only have one, and even my daughter who is too young to play anything yet wants her turn just to hold it. And at some point, our daughter will get carsick, and the van will overheat, and I will try to fix it by turning on the heat in the 90-degree weather. As you can see from my experiences, and probably from you own as well, family recreation is often mixed in with battles of preparation and execution.
Trying to manage children during family outings can be a real challenge. But what often happens is that we as parents have good experiences, and, although we may not know it, our children are probably having great experiences. Here is an example. Charles Francis Adams was a grandson of the second president of the United States, a successful lawyer, and ambassador to Great Britain. Although he had little free time, one day he took his son fishing. In his diary, he wrote "Went fishing with my son today. A day wasted." On that same day, his son wrote "Went fishing with my father today, the most wonderful day of my life."

We need to think about the opportunities we have to affect the lives of our children. We do not always realize how much they want to be with us.

Defining recreation
There are numerous ways to use recreation to make your family life happier. When people engage in leisure, we do it for the joy of activity. We genuinely want to do it. For example, if you run for some other reason than fun, then running, for you, is not leisure. Recreation has been defined as a leisure time we use to restore, refresh, and regain control in our lives. It provides opportunities for accomplishment and fosters feelings of self-worth, enjoyment, and pleasure. It is also socially constructed and morally acceptable.

In light of this definition of leisure, combining "family" and "recreation" can seem contradictory to some. How many of us, as parents, always feel like our family recreation is a freely chosen, positive experience? Family recreation is sometimes viewed as a burden by parents who feel it is something we have to do. Family recreation takes some effort on our part, and I want to give you some perspectives for engaging in effective recreation with your own families.

Aristotelian leisure
The first perspective comes from Aristotle, the great philosopher who lived over two thousand years ago. According to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the good life is characterized by the habit of virtuous action. Contemporary happiness, by contrast, is viewed by many as a transient state of well feeling. We say to ourselves, how many of these activities can we string together? The more of these activities we string together, we think, the happier we will be.

This logic, however, is problematic. If we go back to the times when family recreation generally was found in the form of work and many modern conveniences were not available, you would think those people would have been sad. However, psychologists agree that depression is at epidemic proportions today. It is much more common than it was years ago. Part of the problem is rising expectations. We are told that we have to meet a higher standard of materialism. The question is, what would really make us happy? What is
the “good life?” Aristotle wrote that the good life consists of leisure that is
• Intellectually stimulating,
• Creative,
• Moral, and
• Conducive to good human relationships.

Learning during leisure time is important. My family likes to go biking with some friends.

During these outings, we try to teach our children things like changing bike tires and constructing jumps, which are valuable skills. As we learn about these activities, the bike riding becomes a richer experience for us. Creative activity is pretty diverse. It may involve art or drawing, learning to play the piano, as well as many other activities such as finding a creative way to fix a tire. Moral behavior involves living virtuously, and good human relationships are built through doing activities that meet the other criteria, especially as we add creative and intellectual elements.

Reading is one of the best things we can do with our families. Movies do not promote interaction in my family in the same way books do, as is evidenced by the fact that I am always telling my kids to be quiet when they ask me a question while I am watching television or a movie. (I suspect I am not alone in that.)

In the past, psychology has focused on how to take people

Aristotle taught that this notion of virtue—not seeking pleasure, but doing good—is what will help you be happy.

Recruitment as a family is a great way to do this. Recreation also gives us the opportunity to model these virtues. Much of what is on television does not cultivate these signature strengths. When we do watch television, we need to find the programs that teach virtues.

A friend of mine took his family to Haiti to volunteer in some orphanages there. This man’s 15-year-old son was having some regular teenaged-problems that were causing some discord in the home. When the family first arrived, the son had little involvement with the orphans. By the end of the trip, however, this young man had developed a deep compassion for other people. The values that he used to have for his own possessions and friends changed. He got along better with his parents and siblings. I am not saying that we all need to go to Haiti, but we do need to consider spending time doing things that promote signature strengths.

Contrast this experience with what happened at one of my 8-year-old son’s soccer games. There was a parent who disagreed with the referee’s call and so he started yelling. Another parent walked up to him and tried to calm him to no avail. This loud parent was doing his son a disservice by not modeling signature strengths.

A survey done in 1985 reported that playing with children
was one of the most pleasurable activities we participate in, but that we actually spend most of our time watching television, an item much farther down on the list of things that bring us pleasure. I find that when I get home from work, I want to watch television because it is easy. My kids will come and try to get me to play with them. When I get up and go with them to play, both they and I have a better experience. More recent research suggests that we spend one-third of our time with the media—time that could be better spent actively involved with our families.

Optimizing skill and challenge

A scientist discovered that people across cultures find pleasure in similar experiences. In the experiences we engage in where we have high levels of skills and low levels of challenge, we are bored. When we have low levels of skills and high levels of challenge, the result is frustration. We have the best experiences when we have high levels of skills and high levels of challenges. This optimal blend of skill and challenge is more frequently achieved while at work instead of during our leisure time because our leisure activities are less structured.

Looking at the characteristics of pleasurable experiences can give us further insight into why we seem to have more pleasure at work.

- Challenge
- Merging of action with environment
- Clear goals and feedback
- Concentration on the task at hand
- Sense of control
- Loss of self-consciousness
- Transformation of time

We need to do things that are not easy for us, and when we do, we need to become involved in our environment. Activities also need to have goals attached and as we strive for the goals, we need to be told how we are progressing. The reason television is pleasurable is because it is organized for us, but that is also the problem with it—we don’t have to concentrate on our own. As we participate in productive activities, we have a sense of control, which promotes well being. We also stop thinking about what we are doing, and then the time seems to fly by. When we are bored, it seems to take forever for time to go by.

It is a dilemma to match skills with challenges in families because the children, when younger, are at so many different levels. Finding the right activities will require parents to be creative, such as having the older children teach the younger children. In my family, we play chess. Our four-year-old daughter wants to play, and so I tell her how to move the pieces and she will do this with me for an hour. Another thing you can do is break up the family into groups according to ability level. There is nothing wrong with doing this.

In general, the research on family recreation shows that it promotes family bonding and child development. There is the downside that family recreation can be a source of stress for caregivers, although play also results in control and intellectual growth. Recreation helps children learn
social and language skills, along with an appreciation for the natural world. One caution: A lot of us might see a talent in our children like dancing and so we will put them in one activity and really push them. There is a downside to that. Children who are pushed to do just one activity are often less playful, less socially flexible, and miss out on important opportunities for growth and development.

Research on pleasurable experiences for teenagers shows that the things teenagers normally spend time doing, such as going to the mall, do not provide them with the high degree of pleasure that things like hobbies, homework, athletics, and other activities will. The productive kids who do these things think that they are not having as much fun, but the research shows the opposite.

Recreation for all age levels
Brigham Young University Professor Dave Dollahite has done research on father’s play. His study led him to conclude that recreation with family is associated with pleasure among both parents and children. Play allows the mother or father to communicate at the child’s level. Children like to play because they like to feel loved.

I have done quite a bit of research personally with adolescents. What I have done is looked at virtuous leisure in contrast with bad leisure. We can look at delinquent behavior and connect it too poor leisure, especially in terms of boredom producing delinquency. Bored kids often turn to drugs to deal with not having anything to do. In contrast, kids who have the opportunity to participate in a variety of family activities develop better self-esteem, can decide easier what types of careers they are interested in, and are less likely to participate in delinquent behaviors.

Another experiment I have done involved giving families challenges and checking for problem-solving and communication skills. Four groups went on different survival treks. What we found is that these activities built the skills we were looking for, not just while the families were participating, but also at home afterward.

Conclusion
Activities where we are learning, being creative, and serving other people bring us the most happiness. The research shows that we don’t need money to have positive family recreation experiences. Activities that require only skills as resources are just as beneficial. How we choose our activities, however, affects our quality of life and our personal development and the development of our children. None of us wants to waste our time, which should lead us to seek richness and find diversity in our recreation. Think about happiness and “the good life.” Help your children and those around you to have positive experiences. If you will follow these principles, you will find joy in your recreational opportunities and happiness in your life.

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