Recreation: Not Just Fun and Games

December 6, 2001 – It is time recreation got the serious attention it deserves in public policy and in the budgets of all levels of government.

That's the thrust of reports commissioned by the Laidlaw Foundation and released today by the Canadian Council on Social Development (CCSD) and Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN). ***A Data Analysis: Learning through Recreation*** by Andrew Jackson, Paul Roberts and Shelley Harman of the CCSD, and ***A Literature Review on Learning through Recreation*** by Caroline Beauvais of CPRN, map the current data and scientific literature on the effects of participation in *structured recreation* by youth.

Structured recreation describes recreational activities outside the family that involve elements of instruction, choice and skill development.

"Our findings point to one conclusion in particular," says Andrew Jackson. "Policy makers need to see structured recreation as a public good."

Why? Because of its significant social benefits. Participation by young people in structured recreation appears to play an important role in fostering active citizenship, social inclusion, improving physical and mental health, increasing self-esteem among adolescent girls and encouraging better academic performance.

Given such important beneficial effects, access to structured recreation is vital.

"There are significant barriers to equal participation, today, based on income, gender and other factors," says Jackson. "These must be addressed."

While there is enough evidence to merit greater public attention to structured recreation immediately, we still need to know more.

"The relationship between recreation and benefits is complex," says Caroline Beauvais. "We can say that structured recreation has positive outcomes, but we are much less confident about the conditions that will produce such benefits."

Additional research to clarify just how the benefits of recreation can be maximized, Beauvais argues, will help guarantee the effectiveness of future public programs.

"In sum, these papers bear a three-pronged message: Treat structured recreation as a public good; Take steps to remove the barriers to participation and; Move ahead with research to make our efforts more effective."

The findings of both papers and their recommendations for further research are included in a joint summary report, ***Four Hypotheses about the Public Policy Significance of Youth Recreation: Lessons from a Literature Review and a Data Analysis on "Learning through Recreation"***.

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