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## ***Literature Review on Learning through Recreation***

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### **Introduction**

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## Introduction

There is virtually unanimous agreement on the importance of recreation in developing the physical, psychological and social abilities of children and youth. The trust placed in recreation as a factor affecting personal development is often based on personal experience. Everyone can refer to their own experiences to appreciate the effects of recreation on their own well-being. But beyond first impressions and vague intuitions, there is a scientific literature that for several decades has been substantiating the crucial role played by recreation in the development of children and youth, which has expanded continuously and brought some conceptual clarification to this field of knowledge.

Some health and social science studies focus on the contribution of recreation to fostering the biological development and moral, social and civic activities of youth. Other studies start from the assumption that recreation has a beneficial effect on youth, and then identify the social, economic, political and cultural factors that inhibit access to and participation in recreational activities by young people. Our literature review will be based on these two approaches to the relationship between youth and recreational activity. It will first examine the effects of recreation on the physical and psychosocial development of youth, and then review the factors affecting participation by young people in recreation activities. To begin, we will define the scope of the literature covered and demarcate the boundaries of our research.

## ***Structuring the Literature Review – Scope and Focus***

This literature review will summarize what we know about the access of young people between 10 and 15 years of age to structured recreational activities, and the effects of these activities. Fitness Canada defines recreation as comprising all socially acceptable activities in which a person may choose to take part that will make his or her leisure time more interesting, more enjoyable, and personally satisfying (McKay, *et al.*, 1996: 284). There are many forms of recreation – reading, playing sports, engaging in artistic pursuits, hanging out, camping, making music in a group, surfing the Web, and so on. We view *structured recreation* as a significantly smaller subset of recreation, which consists of recreational activities involving elements of instruction, choice and skill development.<sup>1</sup>

Structured recreation is this kind of recreation that will be considered in this literature review. Our definition sets aside individual or family-based forms of recreation, as well as forms of recreation which are interpersonal but do not involve instruction or skill development.<sup>2</sup> The reason for delimiting our interest in this way is that our first goal is to identify the impact of *organized recreational activities outside the home* on the transition from youth to adulthood. Our second goal is to analyze the broad social consequences of choices made by public authorities about the distribution of recreational resources, about who has access to them, at what cost and in what circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the definition found in the Laidlaw Foundation document entitled *Learning through Recreation* (2000).

<sup>2</sup> *Learning through Recreation* also mentions *interpersonal recreation*, defined as activities involving pleasure-related choices and interpersonal interactions. We believe that this definition encompasses too broad a range of activities to be assessed in this review.

This literature review is primarily an overview rather than an exhaustive inventory of the literature. We are endeavouring to organize the literature around specific issues characteristic of the way young people relate to recreation. We have given priority to Canadian literature, bearing in mind that the handful of existing literature reviews on this topic do not take into account the national origins of the studies' authors. Sifting out the Canadian literature from the copious American literature seemed a useful exercise; however, this is not common practice. We decided to introduce foreign studies wherever it appeared that they would contribute to a particular topic, or wherever relevant Canadian literature was sparse or even silent on the topic. Thus, the foreign literature sheds light on the gaps in the Canadian literature, and suggests new avenues to be explored within the framework of future research in Canada. Noting gaps in the literature is just as important as itemizing what is already available on the topic. Therefore, we will conclude each section by enumerating the gaps in knowledge so as to guide future research in the area of youth and recreation.

We have decided to examine only the scientific literature, that is to say, the literature originating within research institutes or universities. Some reports published by governments or by private or public organizations will also be taken into account when they are scientific in character or when, as a result of their impact on new programs or new orientations, they have left their imprint on the field. We will also give priority to recent studies (from 1990 on). At the same time, however, we note less recent studies that are still considered important. Unless a historical review is necessary for an understanding of the issue at hand, we have neither employed an historical approach nor documented the evolution of the issue.

To do this literature review, we used several sources to find the documents that could be of some relevance. First, we identified literature reviews and any reference documents that already exist on the subject of recreation, leisure or physical activity. Books such the *Conclusions of The 1992 International Consensus Symposium on Physical Activity, Fitness, and Health* (Bouchard, Shepard and Stephens, 1994), *Sport in Society* (Coakley, 2001), *Benefits of Leisure* (Driver, Brown and Peterson, 1991), *Benefits and Impact of Physical Activity for Ontario* (Craig, Russell and Cameron, 1995), *Overcoming Systemic Barriers to Access in Active Living* (Donnelly and Harvey, 1996) were useful for assessing the existing state of knowledge.

Interviews were also conducted with two experts in the field: Robin Wright, Assistant Professor at The School of Social Work, McGill University; and Jean Harvey, Professor, School of Human Kinetics at Ottawa University. These experts directed us to more detailed research findings. We used also databanks such as *Sport Discuss* and many others in the social sciences to find relevant articles and scientific reviews. The goal was a synthetic literature review of published academic studies of youth and structured recreation that would help the Laidlaw Foundation identify research gaps and research needs for the future in Canada. Therefore, we have put the emphasis on documents and articles that reflect the current field of knowledge in Canada, without claiming this is an exhaustive review of the subject.

We will now take a closer look at the relationship between youth and recreation.

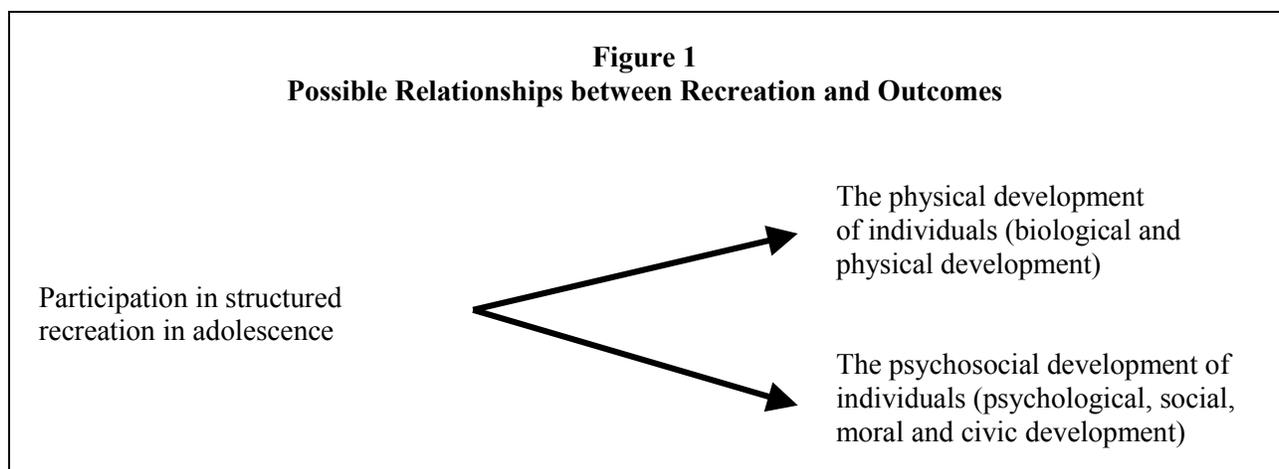
## ***The Two Dimensions of the Relationship between Youth and Recreation***

The Laidlaw Foundation (1999) identified four major hypotheses concerning the policy significance of youth recreation. They are:

1. ***The Human Development Hypothesis:*** The absence of structured recreation for youth negatively affects the long run socio-emotional human development of youth as adults.
2. ***The Civic Competence Hypothesis:*** The absence of involvement by youth in interpersonal recreation activities affects an individual's future civic competence and also affects the quality of democracy.
3. ***The Insufficiency Hypothesis:*** Significant numbers of youth are not participating in recreation activities at levels sufficient to support their human development and future civic competence.
4. ***The Inadequacy Hypothesis:*** Non-participation by youth in recreation and arts activities can be related to the inadequacy of existing public systems dealing with the provision of youth recreation.

We think that these hypotheses can be conceived as two aspects of the relationship between youth and recreation. The first dimension of this relationship is the impact of recreation on the biological, social, emotional and civic development of youth. The second dimension of the relationship consists of social, economic, cultural and political factors that are barriers to participation by youth. The first aspect of the relationship responds to the *Human Development Hypothesis* (#1), the *Civic Competence Hypothesis* (#2), and the *Insufficiency Hypothesis* (#3) identified in *Learning in Recreation* (Laidlaw, 1999). The second corresponds to a part of the *Civic Competence Hypothesis* (#2), but primarily assesses the *Inadequacy Hypothesis* (#4).

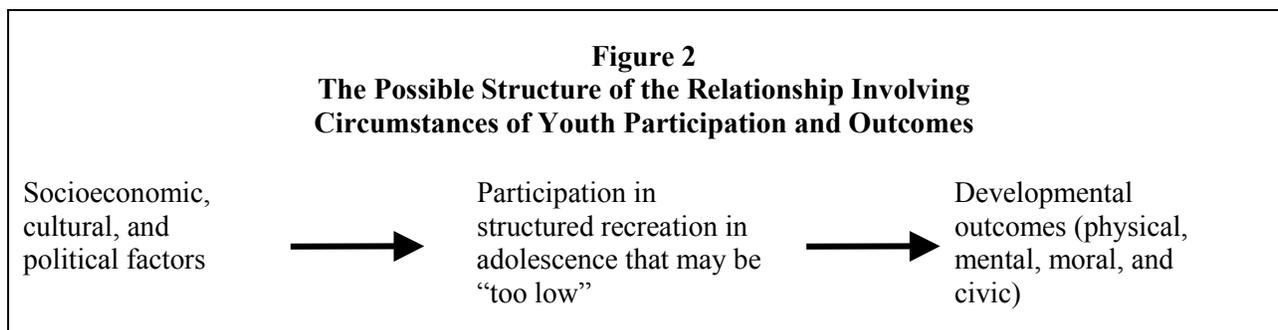
Laidlaw's hypotheses are framed in the negative, only considering the *absence* of participation in structured recreation. However, the literature review considers relationships between outcomes and *both* non-participation *and* participation. Looking only at *absence* would leave too many unanswered questions.



As we said, the first dimension of this relationship is the impact of recreation on the biological, social, emotional and civic development of youth. The central issue here is whether participation in structured recreation during adolescence affects the physical and psychosocial development of individuals. Our literature review canvasses the published literature for research studies confirming or invalidating the two relationships set out graphically in Figure 1. The arrows indicate our expectation of a possible correlation between the two factors, although not necessarily a causal relationship.

We will also attempt to establish the level of participation required to obtain specific results. In this literature, we distinguish short-term from long-term impacts to find out the following: (1) if the two types of impacts show similarities; (2) if some impacts emerge only over the long term; and (3) if certain impacts quickly fade following participation in an activity.

The second dimension of the relationship between youth and recreation consists of social, economic, cultural and political factors that are barriers to participation by youth. A number of correlates of the patterns of participation generate (at least in some parts of the adolescent population) a level of participation that is too low to produce positive outcomes in either physical or psychosocial development. The possible structure of the relationship can be represented graphically, as in Figure 2.



Therefore, the literature review will examine all studies that establish the minimum levels of participation necessary to generate positive outcomes, and that report on the social correlates of rates of participation (or vice versa). We will examine the barriers to recreation identified in the literature and their impact on youth participation rates in structured recreational activities. If literature exists on the topic, we will attempt to establish if low participation affects the development of youth.

The literature review is organized around the two dimensions of the relationship between youth and recreation, as noted above. Each dimension is discussed in a separate section. Each part begins by introducing and summarizing the field of study and ends by identifying the inadequacies of the literature in the field.