

# Factors associated with leisure activity among young adults with developmental disabilities

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Received 15 February 2005; received in revised form 27 May 2005; accepted 31 May 2005

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## Abstract

The framework of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) was applied to examine the factors associated with childhood impairment and leisure activity. Information on leisure activity was obtained using a structured questionnaire from a population-based cohort of young adults with childhood impairment. The results underscore the differences in leisure lifestyles by impairment type and severity. Activity limitations, educational attainment, and the acquisition of adult social roles were significant predictors of leisure activity. This study emphasizes the importance of improving daily activities, increasing attendance of postsecondary school and opportunities for competitive employment and participation in impairment-related programs to help increase the number and scope of types of leisure activities for young adults with developmental disabilities.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

*Keywords:* ICF; Developmental disabilities; Transition; Population-based study; Mental retardation; Cerebral palsy; Hearing loss; Vision impairment; Epilepsy

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## 1. Introduction

Leisure time activities occur during an individuals' unobligated time and frequently reflect social interaction (Dattilo & Schlein, 1994). In our society an individual's free time is often considered to be of lesser importance than the time occupied by commitments to employment, education or taking

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care of one's children. As a result, little research has focused on understanding the factors that predict participation in a rich array of leisure activities. Young adults with developmental disabilities, mental retardation in particular, experience challenges in engaging in leisure activities (Dattilo & Schleien, 1994). Individuals with developmental disabilities have typically been offered a narrow range of stereotypical activities ranging from arts and crafts or bowling to activities at "handicapped only" centers or camps which segregate individuals with developmental disabilities from their peers without developmental problems (Dattilo, 1991; Schleien & Werder, 1985). A major concern of parents and service providers is that young adults with developmental disabilities experience a limited number and diversity of integrated leisure activities. These concerns are magnified as children with developmental disabilities become young adults and leave their childhood family, educational, and service support systems. Examining the characteristics and predictors of leisure activities may help identify areas for intervention to improve the number and scope of types of leisure activities for young adults with childhood impairment.

Types of leisure activities are quite varied ranging from getting together with friends to reading a book and may provide a wide spectrum of benefits from social skill development to personal fulfillment. Young adults participating in more leisure activities may garner more types of benefits from having a richer diversity of experiences than those with a limited number of leisure activities. The many types of leisure activities can be represented by three general categories: (1) organized group; (2) informal social; and (3) informal individual. Organized group activities occur outside of the individual's home and facilitate social interaction (e.g. going to a religious service, playing an organized sport). Informal social activities are primarily social and casual in nature (e.g. getting together with friends, going out to eat or on a date). Informal individual leisure activities occur primarily within a subject's living environment and do not necessarily imply interaction with other people (e.g. reading a book, doing a hobby) (Ittenbach, Bruininks, Thurlow & McGrew, 1993).

Since different abilities may be required for different types of leisure activities, we posit that the number and assortment of types of leisure activities will vary by type and severity of impairment. For example, reading may be difficult for individuals with severe mental retardation while playing an organized sport may pose challenges for individuals with cerebral palsy. In addition, young adults with severe impairments may participate in a narrow range of leisure activities most of which do not require social interaction (e.g. visiting a park, going for a walk, doing a hobby) (Aveno, 1987). For young adults with isolated mild mental retardation, the number of leisure activities may be greater and the types of activities may be more varied, many of which include social interactions with other individuals (Kjellberg, 2002).

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health (ICF) captures leisure activity within the domain of participation, more specifically within the area of community, social, and civic life. Leisure activity is described distinctly from other areas of an individual's life experiences such as daily functioning, competitive employment, and independent living. Application of the ICF to this study affords the opportunity to test hypotheses to better understand the factors associated with participation in leisure activity.

Participation in leisure activities also may be closely linked to individuals' functional status. Limitations in carrying out daily tasks (e.g. bathing, dressing, fixing meals, talking on the phone) represent basic functional status. Testing the mediational effects of activity limitations on the relationship between impairment and leisure activities may identify modifiable areas for intervention.

A number of markers of adulthood (e.g. competitive employment, living independently) may also facilitate participation in leisure activities. Employment provides a setting that fosters social

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