

A Look at Leisure

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YOUTH AND LEISURE

Leisure plays an important role in the lives of youth. This bulletin examines the types of activities that youth enjoy, their reasons for participating, and potential benefits associated with participation. Programming approaches for the youth market are also presented.



INTRODUCTION

Youth is a time of transition from childhood to maturity. This stage of life is characterized by physical, mental, social and emotional changes. Young people are learning new skills, expanding their abilities, and establishing themselves as individuals.

In 1985, the United Nation's International Year of Youth defined youth as 13 to 24 years of age. Since much of the research on youth deals with the teen years, this bulletin will focus on youth or adolescents between 13 and 19 years of age. Some of the findings from Alberta Recreation and Parks' 1984 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation* which apply to youth between 18 and 24 years of age will also be presented.

Leisure can play an important role in the transition from childhood to adulthood. In order for youth agencies to deliver beneficial programmes, they must be aware of adolescent development and the role recreation can play during this stage of life (2)¹ Programming for youth is very challenging since young people's needs and interests are constantly changing. In addition, many youth are hard to reach with traditional programmes.

The International Year of Youth (1985) helped to focus interest on Canadian youth. As a result, a great deal of resource material has been written on programming for and communicating with the youth market. Following a discussion of research findings on youth and their activities, this bulletin will present some of the key elements for successful youth programmes.

Some of the highlights which are discussed in this bulletin are:

- Youth receive their greatest enjoyment from two areas -friendship and music.
- There is a dramatic decline in fitness levels over the teen years.
- Youth require a comfortable, non-threatening leisure environment in which to develop their skills and confidence.

1 Note: References are indicated by numbers on the last page of the bulletin.



TODAY'S YOUTH

What are some characteristics of today's youth market?

- Youth between 13 and 19 years of age make up about 10% of the Alberta population.
- Today's youth are better educated than those in the past. The percent of young persons with some secondary education increased from 75% in 1960 to 90% in 1981 (2).
- The unemployment rate is almost twice as high among young people than the population as a whole. The 1987 rate for youth 15 to 19 years of age was 16.9%, compared to 9.6% for all Albertans.
- Many of today's trends, such as increasing youth unemployment and changing family structure, are having a major impact on youth (13). With higher rates of divorce, youth are looking outside the family unit for guidance and a stable environment (2).
- Some of the major influences on today's youth are peer groups, electronic media, the entertainment industry and institutions outside the family (8).
- Today's youth are faced with a high level of competition in schools, leading to increased stress and tension (2).

NEEDS AND INTERESTS

Youth are at a complex stage of life. They are learning skills to cope with adulthood. Successful recreation programming should recognize the needs which are particularly important at this time of life. Some of the basic needs of youth which have been recognized (2,6) include the need for:

- Belonging/feeling accepted
- Affection
- A sense of achievement/competence
- Recognition of abilities
- Independence/moving toward autonomy
- Fun and enjoyment
- New experiences
- A positive self-image.

It is important to remember that the needs and interests of early adolescents (13 to 15 years) may be quite different from those of late adolescents (15 to 18 years). The Alberta Recreation and Parks' publication, *Time for Teens* provides a good overview of the characteristics of early and late adolescents and presents some implications for programming. Males and females also differ in their needs. For ex-



ample, social relations appear to be more important to adolescent females than to males (12).

The presence of friends is a major part of nearly all adolescent activities. During this time, the peer group is a major source of self-esteem, information, and support (3).

ROLE OF LEISURE

What does leisure and recreation mean during adolescence? What role can recreation play in helping youth make the transition from childhood to maturity?

Unlike school and dependence on the family, leisure is freely chosen. By offering choices, leisure activities can provide youth with a chance to experiment and learn about themselves (12). Activities offer youth a chance to direct their energies in creative ways. In addition, participation in leisure activities may: (2)

- help youth to develop a sense of purpose;
- develop skills and confidence;
- provide a chance to socialize;
- provide an escape from family problems or an unstimulating environment;
- help to develop a growing sense of competence;
- release tensions; and
- assist in identifying career directions.

Additional benefits which may be gained from physical activity are better health, better academic performance, and improved physical appearance (11). Participation in competitive athletics can often provide high social status, particularly for males (3).

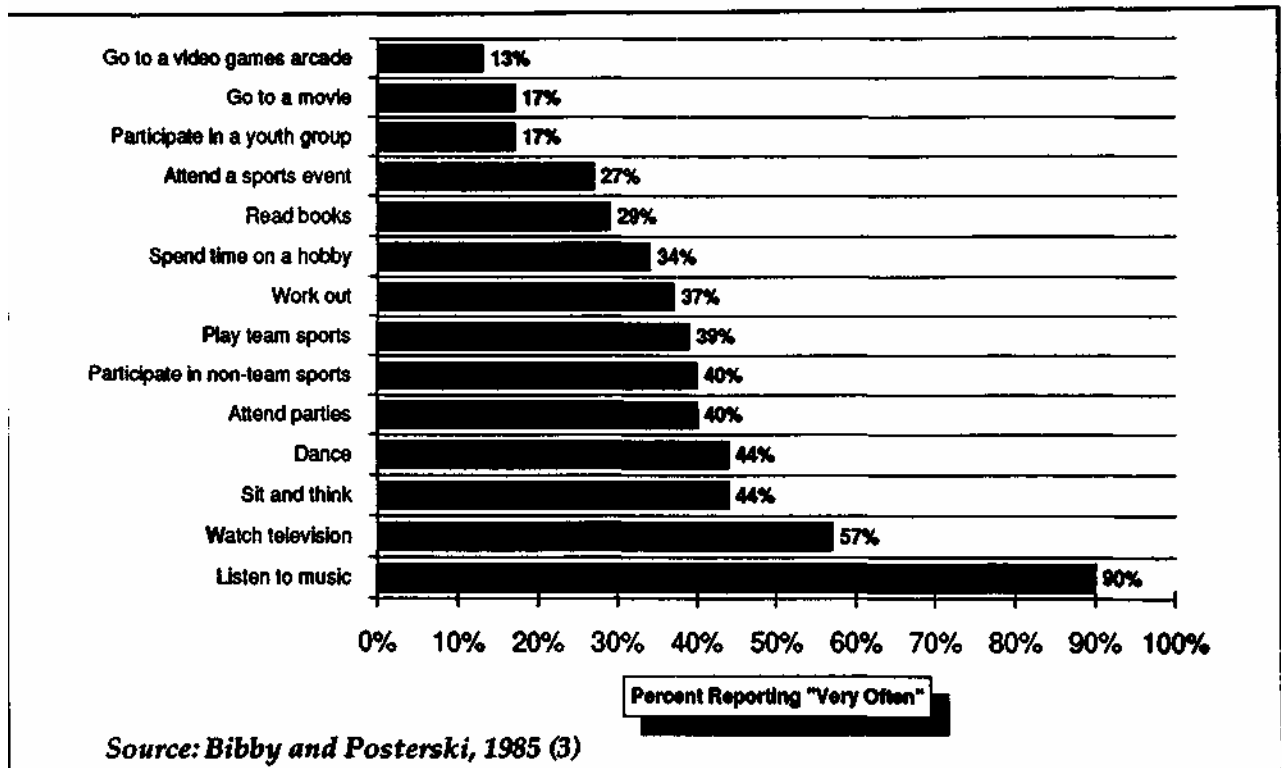
The 1984 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation* examined the reasons why older youth (18 to 24 years of age) participate in recreation activities. There were several reasons which were more important to youth than to any other age group. These were: learning new skills; excitement; competition; being away from the family; and meeting people of the opposite sex.

PARTICIPATION IN ACTIVITIES

How do Canadian youth spend their leisure time? A recent study (3) looked at participation by Canadian teenagers in a range of activities. This study found that teenagers (aged 15 to 19 years) receive their greatest enjoyment from two areas - relationships and music.



Figure 1
Youth Participation in Activities.



The percentages of Canadian youth participating "very often" in various activities are shown in Figure 1.

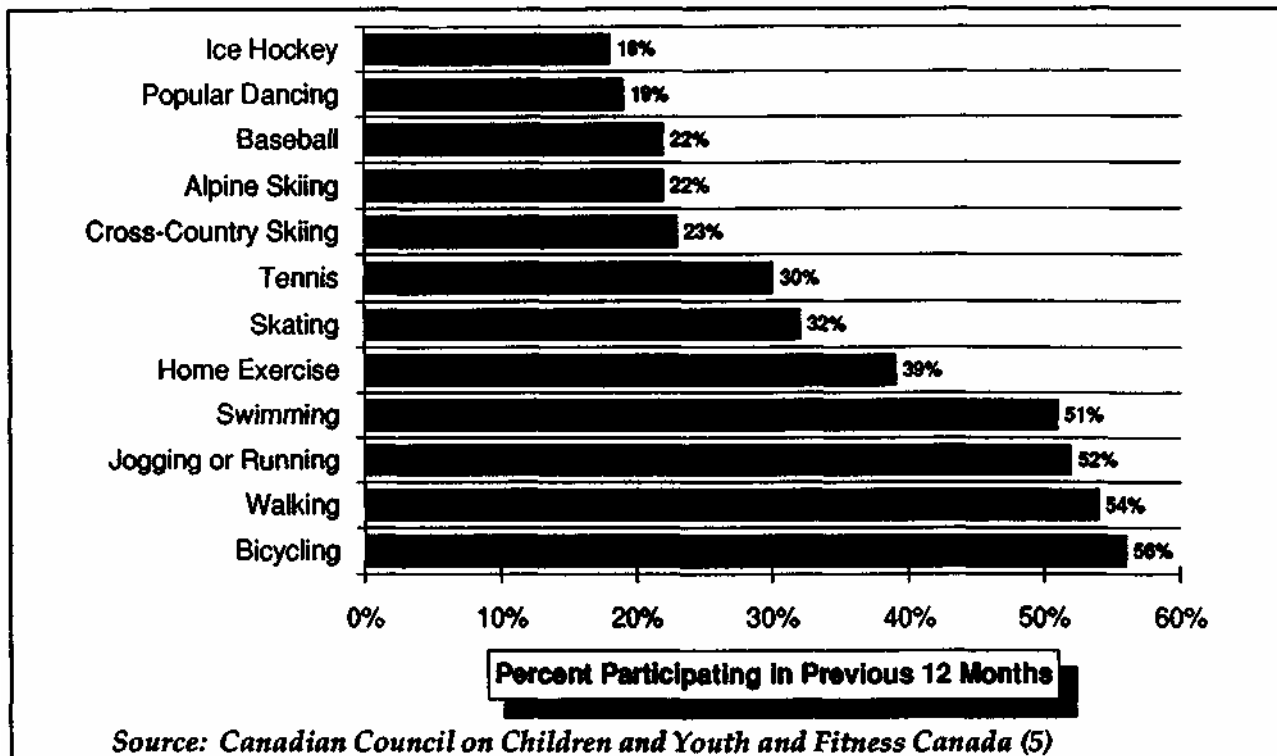
A recent study of Calgary youth (7) also demonstrated the importance of music and watching television. This study also showed that about 30% of Calgary youth took lessons (such as music and dance) at least once a week. Close to one-half of youth participated in arts/crafts or hobbies. A small proportion of youth participated in organized clubs.

The Canada Fitness Survey examined the participation of youth in a variety of physical activities. Figure 2 shows that over one-half of Canadian youth had participated in bicycling, walking, jogging or running, or swimming during the previous year.

The results of the 1984 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation* suggest that recreation participation of youth between 18 and 24 years of age is less stable than that of older age groups. Youth may be experimenting with activities, since they are starting and dropping activities at a greater rate than older respondents.



Figure 2
Most Popular Physical Activities of Canadian Youth



YOUTH AND FITNESS

The 1981 Canada Fitness Survey found that 65% of Canadian youth participated in leisure time physical activity at an active level (3 hours a week). It is interesting to note that youth in Western Canada have a higher level of involvement in physical activity than do youth in other parts of Canada.

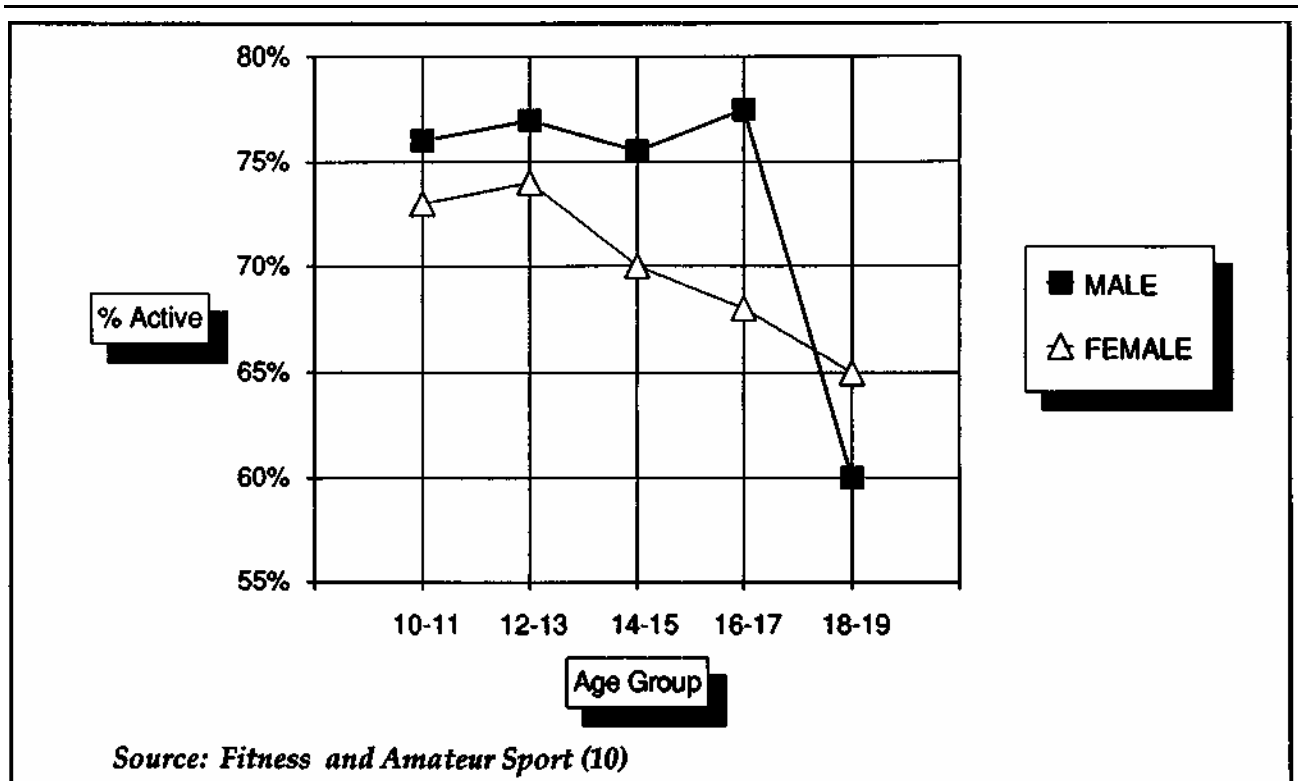
There is a dramatic decline in fitness over the teen years, however. The Fitness Survey found that the percent of Canadian youth reaching recommended fitness levels drops from 96% at age 13 to 40% by the end of adolescence.

Figure 3 shows how participation in physical activities declines from the age of twelve. This graph also shows how the participation levels of males and females vary across the adolescent years. Overall, adolescent females have lower levels of participation than males. Males of 18 and 19 years of age show a marked decline in participation, resulting in lower rates than females of the same age.

Many youth do not feel they need to make a special effort to be active - they feel they are naturally fit! Only 59% of Canadian youth



Figure 3
Active Canadian Youth 1981



regard regular physical activity as very important to their well-being. Regular physical activity ranks more highly in importance for males than females (9).

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Many of the obstacles to participation in leisure activities which are experienced by youth are similar to those encountered by adults. Some obstacles to participation identified by youth include: (5,7,9)

- A perceived lack of time due to work, school, or other leisure activities;
- The perception that there are inadequate facilities or that facilities are too far away;
- Lack of energy and self discipline; cost; apathy; and inactive companions; and,
- Lack of mobility and lack of permission from parents.

Several of these points are borne out in the findings of the 1984 *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation*. Obstacles which were more important for youth under 24 years than for older respondents were: not know-



ing where to participate; lack of partners with whom to participate; the cost of equipment; and, not being at ease in social situations.

Youth are very concerned about how they appear in the eyes of others. Thus the need for peer approval may play an important role in the choice of leisure activities. For example, even the choice of a musical instrument (e.g., guitar or cello) may influence whether one is accepted or not among peer group members. The youth subculture may have such strong norms that individual options and choices may be very limited (12).

Self-doubt and fear of failure is also a concern for many youth. Therefore, young people are best motivated by situations which are supportive and non-threatening (5).

HARD-TO-REACH YOUTH

Contacting hard-to-reach youth is one of the major challenges of agencies concerned with adolescents. About 60% of youth may be viewed as semi-active or hard-to-reach. This includes school drop-outs, the unemployed, delinquents, the disabled, and immigrants.

For unemployed youth, a large portion of the day consists of "enforced" leisure. Their activities are primarily listening to music and being with friends. The Canada Fitness Survey found that these youth are less fit than students and employed youth of the same age (11).

Many traditional activities have little appeal for the adolescent who does not relate to the basic values of society (12). There may be strong resistance to physical activity. Many youth do not see activity as fun.

As for all youth, the presence of friends is important. "Hanging out" at shopping centres, parks, street corners, and school yards provides a setting within which to be seen and to share time with friends.

Drug use and delinquency is often a way of gaining social approval within adolescent groups (12). A recent study by AADAC (1) found that, in Alberta, slightly fewer than one half of teenagers drink. The number of teenage drinkers aged 12-17 has declined since 1980. About one-quarter of teenagers use marijuana, while less than 5% use other types of drugs.

There is a concern that many youth may be left out of existing programmes. Low-income youth, in particular, may not have the same access to programmes as do youth in other economic situations.



PROGRAMMING FOR YOUTH

It is a major challenge for recreation agencies to attract youth to their facilities and programmes. There are several observations which may be made about youth programming.

There is often a gap between programmes most commonly offered (such as volleyball, football, and floor hockey) and those to which youth want access. According to the Bibby and Posterski study/ about 40% of youth participate in traditional sports involving teams and competition. The challenge is to narrow the gap between commonly offered programmes and the activities which many youth prefer. (4)

A recent Canadian study found that lifetime recreational interest is not a very significant goal for the majority of youth agencies (4). Building positive attitudes toward leisure and some basic skills for enjoyment can carry over into participation during the adult years. There is thus a need for more "adult" and individual activities which can be enjoyed throughout life.

It is important to determine which adolescent groups are not as well served as others in your community. For example, an Ontario study found that older youth, ethnic youth, females, and males who are not interested in sports were not as well served as other youth groups (13). There is also a need for coordination among agencies serving youth, including recreation, education, health, and employment agencies (13).

What are some ways of encouraging youth to participate in your programmes"? Some of the key programming ideas which have been developed by various agencies (2,4,5,6,13,14) are summarized below:

Provide choices and options. As reported above, youth are interested in new experiences and challenges. Agencies should provide a broad span of activities so that adolescents can discover something about the types of activities they prefer.

Emphasize fun, socializing, adventure/challenge, and certain amount of risk. Studies show that these are important aspects of recreation for youth.

- Take advantage of fads and trends to introduce new programmes. Innovative programmes are important since the needs and interests of youth are constantly changing. Programmes should be kept up-to-date. It is interesting to note that, in a recent study, Alberta ranked highly in the availability of innovative programmes for youth (4).



- Youth receive great enjoyment from friendships. Provide activities that involve friends or which may lead to new social contacts.
- Programme managers have found that youth prefer unstructured opportunities (4). There is a need for more flexibility in programmes and more short-term options.
- most youth require an environment which is non-threatening and allows them to try new experiences in a comfortable atmosphere.
- Hard-to-reach youth may be more easily motivated toward non-conventional activities such as dancing or computer games. Attracting youth to these programmes may expose them to other programmes offered by the agency. The Canadian Council on Children and Youth (4) offers several other suggestions for reaching this youth market.
- The discussion of barriers to recreation participation reported that lack of mobility and cost are obstacles experienced by youth. Facilities should therefore be affordable and accessible.
- Youth should be involved in planning their own programmes. This will provide opportunities to experience successes and failures and help youth develop decision-making skills.
- The discussion has emphasized that youth have special needs and interests. Effective programme leaders should be trained to understand and deal with these needs. Several organizations such as Alberta Recreation and Park's Blue Lake Centre, the YMCA, and church groups run leadership courses for youth and adults working with youth. A full-time youth worker may be an important asset.
- Try to provide an area (such as a Youth Lounge) which youth can identify as their own space. This type of setting will help to meet the needs of belonging and independence which youth express.
- Opening lines of communication with youth is important. The *Public Opinion Survey on Recreation* found that not knowing where to participate in an activity is an obstacle for youth. A regular newsletter or a teen column in the local paper will keep youth informed of your services and programmes. Try to establish links with existing youth groups such as high school councils. Identify peer group leaders who may provide links with young people in the community.
- Make use of resource material on youth and leisure, such as that offered by Alberta Recreation and Parks and AADAC.



Positive use of leisure can play an important role in adolescent development. This discussion has outlined several approaches for meeting the challenge of programming for today's youth. Being innovative/ opening lines of communication with youth, and sharing ideas with other agencies are key elements in meeting this challenge.

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FUTURE ISSUES

The next issue of *A Look at Leisure* will focus on arts and cultural activities.

INFORMATION

If you require more information, or would like to change your mailing address, please contact:

*Janet Fletcher
Recreation Planner
Recreation Development Division
Alberta Recreation and Parks
Standard Life Building
10405 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
T5J3N4
Phone:(403)427-4685*



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