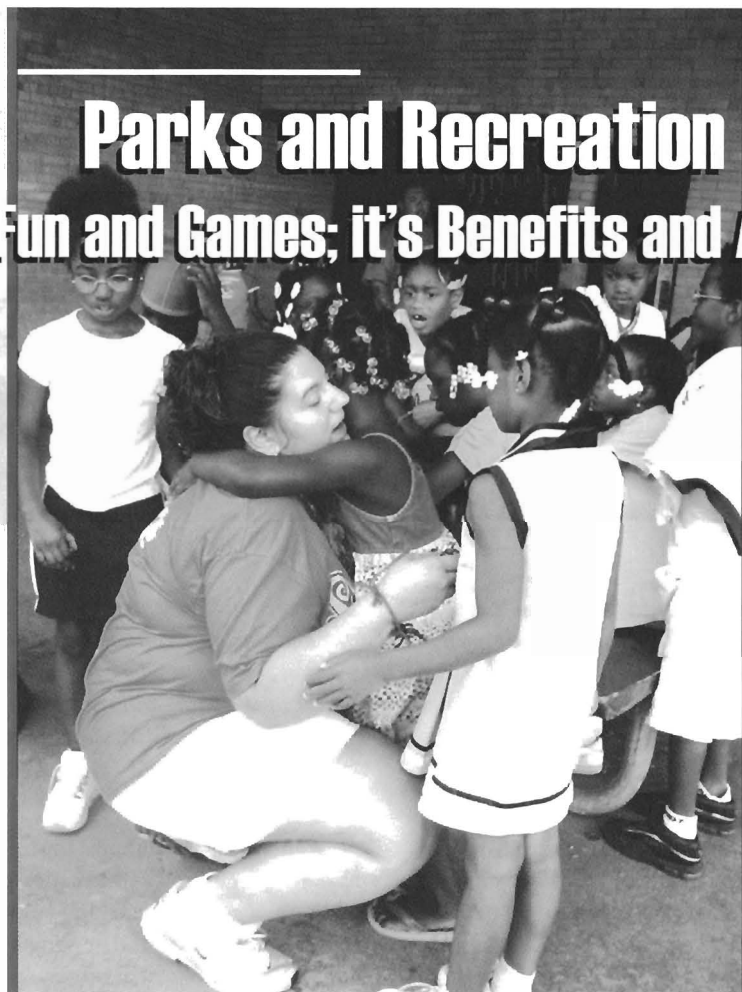


Parks and Recreation

More than Fun and Games; it's Benefits and Accountability



[FEATURE STORY]

By Roger Coles, Ed.D, CPRP, MRPA Past President

Leadership means:

- 1) having a common vision leading to a preferred future,
- 2) meeting the needs of a changing society,
- 3) being at the table when issues are framed and decisions are made, and
- 4) increasing resources to achieve desired outcomes.

This is the goal of the VIP (Vision, Insight, and Planning) project. This plan develops strategies and performance measures to reposition the parks and recreation profession. The purpose of this plan is to be proactive through developing and implementing a vision and action plan for the profession that creates future success. It is a plan for the parks and recreation profession and relates specifically to the actions and best practices of professionals in the delivery of services at the local level.

Children and learning

Children's lives are spent in three principle and overlapping areas:

- 1) home and family,
- 2) school, and
- 3) community, with play and recreation occurring in all three areas.

Regretfully, play and recreation have received the least attention in terms of research and social policy priority.

In 1912, John Dewey argued that schools should be educating youth for the wise use of leisure time. That basic premise is one of the seven cardinal principles of education.

Many children do not learn effectively exclusively within a classroom. They need alternative hands-on learning environments to match their varied learning styles. Test-driven education mandates often do not emphasize children's emotional and social needs and opportunities for creativity. City parks, greenways, and naturalized school grounds can motivate young people to learn through and about the natural environment.

Children are motivated to learn when they can make their own discoveries outdoors. Computers can never substitute for hands-on multi-sensory experiences. School parks are the most obvious places to stimulate these learning processes, but they must provide more than just additional sports facilities that serve a small minority of children.

The latest data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 15 percent of children 6 to 19 years old are overweight, yet school districts across the country have been curtailing recess or eliminating it altogether. An estimated 8 percent of children 3 to 17 years old have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other learning disabilities

and these numbers are rising. Recent scientific research is beginning to demonstrate an intriguing health-promoting impact on everyday green space on child development, in particular on ADHD-like behavior.

Our children today are being torn between television, couch, and computer screens, and the free range spaces of the neighborhood, streets, school grounds, and city parks. These spaces must be designed to be so attractive that they will help win the tug-of-war between sedentary indoor life and an active life outdoors.

Parks and public health

People value the time they spend in city parks, whether walking a dog, playing basketball, or having a picnic. Along with these expected leisure amenities, parks can also provide a range of measurable health benefits from providing direct contact with nature and a cleaner environment, to opportunities for physical activity and social intervention.

Health studies have shown that contact with nature (plants, animals, wilderness, and pleasing landscapes) offers a range of medical benefits. These include lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, enhanced survival after a heart attack, more rapid recovery from surgery, fewer minor medical complaints, and lower self-reported stress. In fact, recent research suggests that exercise is more beneficial, leading to enhanced tranquility and more relief of anxiety and depression, when it occurs in natural settings like parks rather than along urban streets.²

Ethnic groups also differ in their preferences. Race and ethnicity have been associated with choice of parks and with the types of activities engaged in by park users. It was found that blacks were more likely to use facility-based urban recreational parks while whites were more likely to use wildland parks for such activities as camping and hiking.³ A study of Chicago's Lincoln Park found that all groups valued certain park attributes such as the lake, ponds, and zoo. In this study, whites exhibited higher participation rates in active individual pursuits such as hiking, walking, and jogging, while black, Hispanic, and Asian park users exhibited higher participation rates in passive activities such as sitting and relaxing, while Asians and Hispanics participated more heavily in group social activities such as picnicking.⁴

On the basis of the literature, it's clear that benefits received from participation in park and recreation are health-related. In other words, using park and recreation services has a positive relation to personal health by improving our physical and mental health.

Youth, crime and recreation

- 80 percent of crime is committed by children ages 13 to 22.
 - Victims of crime in California are mainly between the ages of 12 and 24 years.
 - 16 to 20 year-olds are the fastest growing crime group.
- \$Incarcerations per 100,000 people:

·U.S.	455
·China	111
·Great Britain	97
·Sweden	44

- To build one prison cell costs \$100,000.

A full 40 percent of a schoolchild's waking hours is discretionary time. Although criminologists have found no way to measure directly how much crime is caused by a lack of open space and recreation opportunities, plenty of evidence shows that crime frequently drops, sometimes dramatically, when these things are improved. Yet investments in parks and open space have generally been considered low priority.

On school days, the prime time for violent juvenile crime is from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.. The good news is that after-school programs are now proven to greatly reduce the terrible prospect that children and teens will be caught up in behaviors that can ruin their lives and devastate thousands of innocent families. Good after-school programs really work, keeping kids safe and out of trouble and helping them learn to get along with others and succeed in school and in life. Rigorous studies now show after-school programs can:

- Reduce juvenile crime and violence.
- Reduce drug use and addiction.
- Cut other risky behavior like smoking and alcohol abuse
- Reduce teen sex and teen pregnancies.
- Boost school success and high school graduation.

As examples from across the nation make clear, community green spaces and recreation programs can make a difference. In Philadelphia, after police helped neighborhood volunteers clean up vacant lots and plant gardens, burglaries and

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thefts dropped 90 percent.⁵ In the summertime, when Phoenix basketball courts and other recreation facilities are kept open until 2 a.m., police calls reporting juvenile crime drop as much as 55 percent.⁶

It costs approximately \$40,000 to incarcerate a juvenile offender for one year. With that money, San Carlos Parks and Recreation in California could have him or her attend camp for 2 weeks, play soccer for 3 months, play basketball for 3 more months, receive help at the Youth Center Homework Center/Computer Lab everyday after school, participate in daily Youth Center programs, take 2 supervised adventure trips, 36 classes of Spanish, 9 piano lessons, 13 ballet lessons, 3 cartooning classes, 8 Mad Science classes, 5 karate classes, 9 acting lessons through the Children's Theater, 7 ice skating classes, 5 rock climbing classes, 7 ice hockey classes, 8 tap dance classes, 8 tennis lessons, 9 Masters Art classes, 9 gymnastics classes, 5 fencing classes and receive a Babysitting Certificate after taking 3 classes. After which they could return to you: \$37,797 and one much happier and healthier kid.

Prevention has been a primary goal of law enforcement agencies and those in related fields who seek to divert youths from antisocial behaviors at an early age. Comprehensive strategies involving health, family, employment, education, and recreation can play an important role in preventing juvenile delinquency.

Economic impact

A study by the National Association of Realtors in 2001 found that 50 percent of voters would be willing to pay 10 percent more for a house located near a park or protected open space. And 57 percent would choose a home close to a park.

Parks provide intrinsic environmental, aesthetic, and recreation benefits to our cities. They are also a source of positive economic benefits. They enhance property values, increase municipal revenue, bring in home buyers and workers, and attract retirees. Parks do not demand municipal services. They cost the community little beyond acquisition expenses but provide many economic benefits. People frequently are willing to pay a larger amount of money for a home located close to an attractive park or open space area than they are for a home farther away. The increase in home value means that owners of these properties will pay higher property taxes. American cities large and small are creating parks as focal points for economic development and neighborhood renewal.

A local park in Lexington County in South Carolina hosted a USTA Southern Sectional for 2,500 participants for two weeks in 2004, and the economic impact was \$13.2 million to the local economy. In that same state, a local park hosted a re-enactment for 15,200 participants over 3 days and the economic impact was \$3.6 million.

Across the nation, parks, protected rivers, scenic lands, wildlife habitat, and recreational open space help support a \$502 billion tourism industry

Parks and protected open space are increasingly recognized as vital to the quality of life that fuels economic health. Real estate industry analysts confirm quality of life as a determining factor in real estate values and economic vitality. Nationwide, easy access to parks and open space has become a new measure of community wealth; an important way to attract businesses and residents by guaranteeing both quality of life and economic health.

As the nation moves toward a mixed economy based on services, light industry, consumer goods, and new technologies, businesses and their employees are no longer tied to traditional industrial centers. Today, businesses and people are free to shop for an appealing location, and they clearly prefer communities with a high quality of life, including an abundance of parks, open space, and nearby recreation.

Footnotes

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