

## **PARTICIPATION OF DIVORCED SINGLE PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN IN OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE ATTITUDES AND RELATIONSHIPS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Divorce is one of the most stressful events a child or adult might ever experience. Enhancing family functioning is a key intended outcome in designing family leisure programmes aimed at developing life-enhancing attitudes and relationships. Nonetheless, the actual effects on families participating in such programmes, specifically single-parent families, have not yet been reported. Two divorced single-parent families headed by the mother with adolescent children participated in this small scale four-day adventure intervention programme including a high-ropes course, equine-assisted therapy, mountain-biking treasure hunt, hiking, abseiling and rock-climbing. Qualitative data collected from semi-structured one-on-one interviews, field notes and participant observation were analysed rendering two main themes, namely attitudes and relationships, each with its own set of subthemes: attitudes, comprising self-esteem and motivation; and relationships, comprising communication, problem solving, respect and trust. The leisure intervention programme played a positive role in improving attitudes and the relationships between the divorced single-parent mothers and their children.*

**Key words:** Leisure; Outdoor activities; Relationships; Attitude; Divorce; Single parenting; Adolescent children.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Rising divorce rates have resulted in numerous changes in family life. In 2011, 20 980 divorces were reported in South Africa, affecting 11 457 children under the age of 18 (Stats SA, 2011). Divorce can be one of the most stressful events experienced by a child or adult during their lifetime, with potentially serious adverse effects on parent-child attitudes and relationships (Janzen & Harris, 1997).

Quantitative studies of leisure and its effects on family functioning and satisfaction with family life indicate that families recognise the value of shared leisure time and the possible benefits of time spent together (Agate *et al.*, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2009; Hornberger *et al.*, 2010). The Core and Balance model of family leisure functioning identifies two types of leisure activities in which families participate (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). 'Core' family leisure activities include those taking place at home regularly, for example, watching television as a family, whereas 'balance' family leisure activities are less frequent, take place away from home and

require resources including time and finances, like a family holiday. The skills developed during balance type leisure activities can be adapted and generalised to core leisure activities, although families need an appropriate mix between these two (Agate *et al.*, 2007). Nonetheless, Hornberger *et al.* (2010) found that single-parent families spend less time on both core and balance leisure activities than two parent families.

Research studies on family leisure time primarily made use of quantitative research designs (Agate *et al.*, 2007; Smith *et al.*, 2009; Hornberger *et al.*, 2010), and only a few researchers have analysed the effects of an outdoor intervention programme on family leisure (Shaw & Dawson, 2001; Huff *et al.*, 2003; Wells *et al.*, 2004; Sullivan *et al.*, 2010). Results indicate that the use of the outdoors during interventions contributes to family cohesiveness, communication, trust and support, affection and the resolution of family conflict (Huff *et al.*, 2003; Wells *et al.*, 2004). The sparse published research on leisure that focuses specifically on attitudes and relationships of divorced single parents and their children is striking.

## **PURPOSE OF RESEARCH**

The purpose of this study was, therefore, to explore the effect of an outdoor intervention programme on the attitudes and relationships of two South African divorced single parents and their children. The findings offer a starting point for further investigation of outdoor programmes specifically for single parents and their children.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Formulation of attitudes and relationships**

Attitudes, according to Baron (2001:628), are “the lasting evaluations of various aspects of the social world that are stored in memory”. Attitudes may be influenced by family members, an individual’s mental health, or a current situation and accompanying emotions (Baron, 2001; Gass & Seiter, 2002). Individuals’ attitudes can be influenced to be positive on condition that the individual feels competent enough to be positive and has support from other family members (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2009).

Relationships have been defined as “a reciprocal, dynamic, interpersonal connection characterised by patterns of emotional exchange, communication, and behavioural interaction” (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010:23). Although ‘healthy family relationships’ are difficult to define, it is easier to identify the elements contributing to them. One of these is communication within the family unit (Mactavish & Schleien, 1998), which enhances family functioning and plays a vital role in laying the foundation for developing trust (Kerr *et al.*, 1999), addressing conflict and solving problems (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010). Another important element is respect, which not only contributes to effective communication, but also to positive attitudes including self-esteem (Frei & Shaver, 2002).

### **Single-parent families**

Single-parent families are households where only one of the parents lives with the children (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010), and could be the result of death, a child born to an unmarried

woman, abandonment or disappearance of one parent or divorce (Janzen & Harris, 1997), which is the focus of this study. Divorce is associated with reduced levels of well-being and poor parent-child relationships (Leman, 2000; Von Wielligh, 2003; Ahrons, 2007). Parents often do not have good relationships with each other following divorce (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2007), making it difficult for the children to envisage healthy relationships, since the relationship between parents is recognised as the foundation for that between parents and children (Leman, 2000).

Individual attitudes may also be affected by divorce, but are not as easy to observe (Gass & Seiter, 2002). When one parent is forced to head a household alone, he or she may find it difficult to compensate for the day-to-day absence of the other parent (Leman, 2000; Anderson, 2003; Arnold *et al.*, 2008). It is important to note that not all single-parent families need improvement in parent-child relationships and that some children are capable in adapting to the new situation (Von Wielligh, 2003).

### **Leisure of single-parent families**

Divorced single parents often experience financial difficulties and time constraints, since there were always two parents running the household and earning an income and one parent is responsible for all this after a divorce (Leman, 2000; Anderson, 2003). Time and financial constraints may prevent divorced single-parent families from participating in leisure activities (Arnold *et al.*, 2008; Hornberger *et al.*, 2010), particularly balance activities, because free time is limited and enjoyment often depends on financial inputs and resources (Kelly, 1999 cited by Hornberger *et al.*, 2010). These constraints highlight the importance of meaningful core family leisure time and affordable, well-resourced, intervention programmes based on not only family needs, but also available resources that are specifically designed to develop skills and build relationships and, thus, contribute to the families' quality of life (Compton & Hoffman, 2013).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research design and strategy**

A descriptive qualitative research design based on a single case study intervention was adapted to investigate the role of an outdoor intervention programme in building relationships and positive attitudes between divorced single parents and their children. This design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of each family, their way of life, and the influence of individual family members on one another. This strategy was adopted as it allowed the researchers to best describe the experiences of the participants during their day-to-day activities during the intervention (Sandelowski, 2000). Data were collected by means of semi-structured one-on-one interviews, observation of participants and field notes.

### **Participants and context**

Non-probability purposive procedures were used to select participants by means of a snowball sample. The researchers used a social network and initially contacted a single parent. For inclusion, families had to be divorced for longer than 4 years, include a child/children between the ages of 12 and 15 years, with the single parent having full parental responsibilities and

rights as defined by the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (South Africa, 2005:25). The participants (N=5) were 2 divorced single-parent Caucasian families, each headed by a mother, and included her natural adolescent child/children.

### **Data collection methods**

Data were collected by means of semi-structured one-on-one interviews, participant observations and field notes, which provided the researchers with in-depth descriptions of the lived experiences of the families during the course of the intervention. The interview schedule developed was based on Greenaway's (1992) process of reviewing leisure experiences around the factual aspects of the activities done, feelings experienced while engaging in these activities, findings and conclusion made due to participation, and the future of how these experiences can translate to other day-to-day activities in the participants' lives as the focus of the open-ended questions.

### **Ethical approval**

Ethical approval was obtained from the North-West University Health Science Ethics Committee. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and allowed the families a 2-week period to confirm their participation in the study. The researcher had a follow-up meeting with each family to inform them about the procedures of the research. Each parent had to sign an informed consent form for herself, as well as for her minor child/children, where after the children signed assent to take part in this study on a voluntary basis. Families agreed to participate without any compensation and all were free to withdraw at any time without consequences.

### **Research procedures**

Although not considered as data in this study, all participants completed the Leisure Interest Measure (LIM) questionnaire (Ragheb & Beard, 1992), with no external influences from other family members. The LIM was used to measure the participants' leisure interests, which provided information about their leisure preferences. The questionnaire covered 8 leisure activities: physical; outdoor; mechanical; artistic; service; social; cultural; and reading. The results, however, indicated a high preference for outdoor and physical activities for all the participants. An outdoor intervention programme was designed, tailored to the needs of the participants as determined by the results of the LIM questionnaire. The Therapeutic Recreation Specific Program Design (Stumbo & Peterson, 2009), was used as a framework for the intervention to ensure that the outcomes were met.

The 2 families participated in a 4-day intervention programme based on the LIM assessment on separate occasions. It included a high-ropes course, equine-assisted therapy, a mountain-biking treasure hunt, hiking, abseiling and rock-climbing, with an additional day at the start that was used for mountain-bike training. During the intervention the researcher made use of an independent outdoor leader to present the activities and to ensure the safety of the families. Participant observations and field notes were recorded by the researchers throughout the duration of these activities.

The audio-recorded semi-structured interviews were held 2 weeks after the intervention with the intention of giving the families time to apply their newly acquired skills to their daily activities. The purpose and duration of the interviews were discussed beforehand and participants had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time or refuse to answer any questions. The site where the interviews were conducted varied, as the location and times were chosen by the participants for their convenience.

### **Data analysis**

The participant observations, field notes and recorded semi-structured one-on-one interviews were transcribed verbatim and the content was qualitatively analysed to derive themes and sub-themes (Sandelowski, 2000; Henderson, 2006). Codes were systematically derived by the researchers and a co-coder who worked independently. Once themes and sub-themes were deduced from the codes, the researcher and the co-coder met to confirm the findings based on the experiences of the participants.

### **Trustworthiness**

A systematic audible analytical process was used to confirm the trustworthiness of the themes and sub-themes (Henderson, 2006). The interviews took place in the settings preferred by the participants according to their schedules and the interviews were conducted in their first language. The data, which included the transcribed transcripts, were analysed by an experienced independent co-coder. Thereafter, the data was triangulated by multiple data sources. This included triangulation of the semi-structured one-on-one interviews, participant observations, field notes and literature.

The transferability of the data was enhanced through the purposive sampling method and the detailed explanation of the research procedures. Although the interventions were conducted on 2 separate occasions, it was presented in the exact same manner for both the families, which contributed to the consistency of the research. Other strategies followed to ensure the consistency included the interview schedule that was followed during the interviewing of each participant and making use of a co-coder.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The available literature on the development of relationships and attitudes was used to code the data collected from the interviews, resulting in the identification of 2 main themes, each with its own set of categories. The letters and numbers represent the participants in the following discussion (parents=P1 & P2 and children=C1, C2, C3).

### **Theme 1: Attitudes**

The literature identified 2 important aspects of attitude (*self-esteem and motivation*) that need to change before the overall attitude of an individual can change.

#### ***Self-esteem***

The development of good relationships depends on the way in which participants see themselves (Strong *et al.*, 2011). An important part of the intervention programme was to assist

participants in improving their self-esteem. On the first day of the programme the families participated in a 5m superficial abseiling exercise (abseiling off a climbing wall). Participants reported being anxious to climb on the structure because they “were afraid of heights” (P1), but they completed the exercise and “overcame their fear” (C3). During the hike on day 4, families were required to do a 25m abseil down a cliff face and participants were not as anxious as they had been on the 5m exercise. This experience drew the following comment “I decide what I can and cannot do and it all depends on me” (C3).

The increase of self-esteem was evident in Parent 1 who said “I felt a little bit more self-confident and got the feeling of ... , you can do it” during the 25m abseil. This statement is in line with the findings of Behnke *et al.* (2011), who have found that participants with high self-esteem perceive challenging life events as manageable, which in turn lowers the possibility of depression.

Also contributing to self-esteem were the kind words of the family members to each other during one of the facilitation sessions. Individual family members had to give each other a gift that they found in nature, and elaborate on the individual strengths they observed during the intervention programme. Specifically, participants talked about the meanings of the gifts they received and were asked during the interviews how it made them feel. They explained receiving the gifts as follows, “it shows me that my child sees the things I do” (P2); “it made me feel special” (C2); “happy and emotional” (C1).

### **Motivation**

According to the Oxford Dictionary (Hornby, 1998), ‘motivation’ refers to “a reason or reasons for acting or behaving in a particular way”. An individual’s motivation to complete a task will improve when they are encouraged by other members. Encouragement is a major factor contributing to individual self-esteem (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010), and is defined as “the action of giving someone support, confidence, or hope” (Hornby, 1998:758). As stated previously, participants feared heights and required support and motivation from their families throughout the high-ropes course and during the abseiling activities. They described the high-ropes course as physically demanding and believed that “motivation was needed to walk on the cables” (C1). While one member was participating, the others gave their full attention and talked them all the way through the activity, supporting them and motivating them to carry on.

The support from other family members was important for the members to feel motivated to complete the abseiling activity. The participants felt that “there was someone there for me” (C2); “I heard that they were there the whole time and they supported me, that gave me the courage to go on” (C3); and “it meant a lot to me when I heard the voices saying ‘come on’ ...” (P1). Based on the positive feedback in the current study, it appears that families expressed support by looking after each other during the activities. These findings are similar to those reported by Huff *et al.* (2003). The current findings support those of other studies that found that motivation and support can be improved through participation in leisure activities (Huff *et al.*, 2003; Voruganti *et al.*, 2006).

It could be concluded from this study that self-esteem and motivation were indeed influenced by the leisure-based programme. This was established when families confirmed its value in developing attitudes: “I definitely realised a change in attitudes, especially the attitude towards

me” (P1); and “yes” attitudes changed (C2); and “I have ... I understand them (my family members) better now” (C3). These responses indicate that leisure could have a positive effect on family attitudes.

## **Theme 2: Relationships**

The literature identified several important aspects that have an influence on the relationship itself. The sub-themes discussed during the interviews were communication, problem-solving, trust and respect.

### ***Communication***

Effective communication characterises good relationships and forms a vital part of the relationship-building process (Huff *et al.*, 2003; Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010; Compton & Hoffman, 2013). According to Shaw and Dawson (2001), families participate in leisure activities to help children establish important things in life, such as good communication skills. Participants recognised its importance and described communication skills as “important” (C2); and included “to listen and to say” (P2) what you mean and “to look at each other” (P2) while doing so. The communication skills needed during the intervention programme assisted the families with their everyday communication and participants “learned to listen and try to see things from their point of view” (C3).

These findings support the findings of Bandoroff and Scherer (1994) that leisure participation contributes to the development of good communication skills within a family. One participant highlighted the improvement of their communication during daily activities, specifically at dinner time: “we talk more around the table and laugh more” (C1). The opportunity families were afforded to spend quality time together indicated that the time they spent together every day was not enough: “it is when you spend the whole day in their company that you learn to know them as a person and not when you organise them” (P2). This statement reinforced the notion that communication improved as a result of the programme, in line with other studies (Huff *et al.*, 2003).

### ***Problem-solving***

Single-parent families, like all families, are frequently faced with decisions to be made and problems to be solved. Therefore, the aim of problem-solving during the intervention was to teach divorced single parents and their children the skills to solve their daily problems. The activities required that the single-parent families communicate with each other, to brainstorm ideas, to make decisions and to plan. When asked during the intervention how the families solved the problems, participants answered: “to listen and to plan better and yes ... to test everyone’s plans to see which one worked” (C3); “we got impatient, but at the end it was teamwork” (C1) that led to problem-solving “through communication” (C2) and ““deciding on things together”.

The results of the current study are consistent with those of Sullivan *et al.* (2010) who revealed that families brainstormed possible solutions to problems and looked at the positive and negative consequences of each option. Problem-solving skills did improve during the current intervention programme. Research has indicated that working together and solving problems can lead to building trust within the individual and in others (Huff *et al.*, 2003). In the current

study, this was confirmed when C3 stated “I think I have more trust in my family and in myself”.

### **Trust**

To trust is to rely on the integrity, strength and adaptability of another person (Poole *et al.*, 2007). Trust between parents and children are seen as an important part of relationships (Kerr *et al.*, 1999). Improving trust formed part of the intervention as a means to improve relationships. Participants had to accompany and support each other down a rock-face and they described their day in the mountains as the highlight of the programme. When asked about this activity and what they had learned, they replied: “our lives were literally in their hands” (P1) and “it was a huge responsibility” (P2). P2 said there was “unconditional trust” and learned that “you can rely on your family; they are your anchor in life” (P2). The high levels of trust and support in the current study echoed the results of Huff *et al.* (2003) where children and adults indicated the positive change in their ability to trust and the role of this factor in improving their communication skills. The intervention programme improved trust as all the participants revealed that the main lesson learned was that they could put their trust in their parents and children, no matter what.

### **Respect**

Children respecting parents and parents respecting children are important for building strong relationships, since it denotes willingness to show consideration and appreciation (Hornby, 1998). The theme of respect received attention through the use of a metaphor of nature during the mountain hike. The participants were informed about the natural environment and the responsibility to protect and conserve it.

Enhancing respect and care for nature through outdoor experiences enhances respect and care for the people around us (Mitchell & McCall, 2007). During the facilitation session that followed after the hike, parents and children showed understanding of the meaning of respect in their relationships. The reactions were: “I have learned how they think” (P1) and “they are able to do more than I thought” (C3), which contributed to development of respect (P2). Similar to the study of Schreck (2010), this study also found a lack of literature regarding respect and leisure or recreation. However, respect emerged as a benefit of leisure participation in Schreck’s study. The current participants agreed that respect was enhanced through their participation in the leisure-based programme by saying “yes, I experience it so” (P2).

When both families were asked whether the programme had played a role in changing their family relationships, the answer was “yes” from all the participants. The results of this study and the explanations provided by the families gave strong support for the view that attitudes can be improved through the enhancement of individual self-esteem and motivation. In addition, relationships can be improved through participation in an appropriately designed leisure-based programme that focuses on communication, problem-solving, trust and respect.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The results of this study indicate that outdoor activities do have a positive impact on the improvement of the attitudes and relationships between divorced single-parents and their children. Perspectives from both parents and their children in this small-scale intervention



programme opened the door to further research, especially qualitative research to establish the value of leisure-based programmes for families headed by single mothers and single fathers. It would also be insightful to further investigate the influences of the father on the child/children's leisure time. Additional qualitative research could fruitfully explore the influence of other programme areas in achieving the same results, such as arts and aquatics.

The study had certain limitations, such as that it consisted of a small sample, and as a result the findings cannot be generalised to the entire divorced single-parent family population. The researchers recommend that this study should be repeated with a larger sample of families participating in similar intervention programmes with the aim of confirming these findings.

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATION**

This research shows that the current changes in the family structures of South Africans should encourage leisure specialists to focus more evidence-based practices on family-orientated leisure programmes. Families who have quality relationships experience improved quality of life (Compton & Hoffman, 2013). Consequently, intervention programmes such as this one, which includes 'balanced'-type leisure activities could lead to the improvement of attitudes and relationships between divorced single parents and their children and would improve their quality of life. In addition, the skills gained from participation in the intervention can be applied during the 'core' family leisure activities that take place on a daily basis. It is imperative and also vital to consider the leisure specialists as part of the interdisciplinary health team in building critical skills for healthy relationships, especially with a focus on doing so while enjoying leisure time together.

## **Acknowledgements**

The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are those of the researchers and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF. We wish to thank Professor C. Meyer for playing an advisory, inspirational and professional supervising role while the study was conducted.

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