

New approach to recreation planning gives youth at risk a greater say

April 9 2018, by Nicole Graham



Engaging at-risk youth at every stage of program planning can help them build leadership and relationship skills, says a UAlberta researcher. Credit: University of Alberta

At-risk youth will soon have a greater say in the types of recreational activities they participate in thanks to a University of Alberta research

project that spawned a new bottom-up planning model focused on developing important life skills that many of us take for granted.

The majority of recreation and [leisure](#) planning for [youth](#) at risk follows a top-down approach with little input from the youth that recreation programmers are working with, according to a recent U of A study.

"For so many youth at risk, an hour spent participating in [recreational activities](#) is the only hour in the entire day they get to escape the challenges they are dealing with," said Tristan Hopper, a Ph.D. candidate in the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation. "Incorporating their input during the planning process can go a long way in making that hour a meaningful experience for these youth—something they don't necessarily get anywhere else."

Hopper said the academic literature is clear: engaging youth in all processes of leisure program planning not only creates a meaningful experience for both the youth and the programmer, but also helps youth develop skills like leadership, teamwork and organization.

For his study, Hopper interviewed Edmonton-based youth aged 16 to 24 who are experiencing various types of marginalization, including insecure housing, homelessness, substance abuse, mental health issues or being new to Canada.

He found that recreation programmers regularly created a schedule of activities with little input from the youth they were working with, and developed programming that lacked meaningful experiences.

Hopper explained that while developing leadership, teamwork and organizational skills is part and parcel of growing up for most people, youths faced with marginalization aren't always afforded the same opportunities.

"One young man said to me, 'Ever since I was 12, I have been in and out of foster care and group homes, and I never really had parents. You don't know what it's like to be out all night and not have anyone in the world that cares about where you are.'

"He was right, I don't know what that's like."

Based on his findings, Hopper created a conceptual bottom-up planning model.

He explained the model incorporates sharing of experiences between youth and practitioners to help the two groups find common interests to shape leisure activities, engage youth from the beginning of the planning process and help practitioners focus on the meanings leisure activities can promote for the youth.

Youth-led engagement is a positive, constructive way for young people to develop strength-based skills, which can potentially have effects that trickle into their daily lives, he added.

"By engaging youth and building on skills such as leadership, teamwork and organization, they can perhaps transfer these skills into their lives in order to help them find secure housing or create and maintain healthier, more meaningful relationships."

One of the underlying themes he found throughout his interviews was the lack of healthy relationships the youth had in their lives—mostly with adults. Hopper said he believes the collaboration between youths and adults his model promotes can be instrumental in showing youths what healthy relationships with adults can look like and that they're attainable.

"This approach isn't an easy way to go about recreation, sport and leisure

programming," he said. "It takes a lot of hard work and patience to involve youth in the planning process, and since most practitioners are either volunteering with or working for non-profit agencies, resources are often quite limited."

Hopper also noted that because at-risk youth can be transient, maintaining contact and engagement with an individual or group of youths can be difficult, adding to the challenges practitioners face with this style of approach.

Regardless, Hopper is confident his proposed model is an effective method of creating meaningful leisure experiences for youth at risk.

His next [research project](#) will focus on working with a local addictions and mental health community-linking program called Challenge by Choice, which employs a bottom-up approach, to try and demonstrate that this approach is possible.

"These young people are dealing with a gamut of challenges. If engaging them in recreation, sport and leisure planning can make even the smallest bit of difference in their lives, then I think it's important that organizations and practitioners at least try this approach," he said.

More information: Tristan D. Hopper et al. Engagement of 'At-Risk' Youth Through Meaningful Leisure, *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* (2017). [DOI: 10.18666/JPra-2017-V35-I1-7289](https://doi.org/10.18666/JPra-2017-V35-I1-7289)

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