



## **Strategies Utilized by Parents in Order to Negotiate Constraints Acting upon their Children's Sport and Recreation Activity Involvement**

### *Stratégies parentales pour surmonter les difficultés qui empêchent leurs enfants de s'adonner à des activités récréatives et sportives*

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#### **Abstract**

Many parents have encountered constraints with regard to maintaining recreational opportunities for their children during a climate of economic uncertainty. The purpose of this study was to investigate how parents negotiated perceived financial constraints so that their children could begin or maintain participation in various recreational activities as well as their motivations for negotiating these constraints. Eleven parents of children who were enrolled in organized recreational activities participated in semi-structured interviews. Parents utilized negotiation strategies such as improving finances, permitting participation in cheaper activities, and lending expertise for discounts in order to provide and/or preserve engagement opportunities for their children. Parents utilized those strategies because they perceived active engagement in recreational activities would strengthen family cohesion and help their children develop interpersonal relationships. Parents also negotiated constraints in order to provide their children with physical activity benefits and to help them avoid idleness.

#### **Résumé**

*En cette période économique incertaine, les parents qui désirent que leurs enfants s'adonnent à des activités récréatives se heurtent souvent à des difficultés. Cette étude examinait les mesures engagées par les parents pour surmonter leurs difficultés financières perçues afin de donner la chance à leur enfant de s'adonner ou de continuer de s'adonner à diverses activités récréatives. Elle s'intéressait aussi aux motifs qui incitent les parents à contrer ces obstacles. Onze parents d'enfants inscrits à divers programmes récréatifs structurés ont participé à des entrevues semi-dirigées. Il en ressort que les parents ont recours à maintes stratégies pour surmonter leurs difficultés, dont l'amélioration de la situation financière, l'inscription des enfants à des activités moins coûteuses et le don de leurs services experts en échange d'un rabais pour permettre à leur enfant de s'inscrire à un programme d'activités ou d'y demeurer. Les parents font appel à ces stratégies parce qu'ils croient que la participation active de leur enfant à des activités récréatives favorise la cohésion familiale et aide l'enfant à nouer des relations interpersonnelles.*

*L'étude a aussi révélé que les parents cherchent à surmonter des difficultés pour que leur enfant puisse profiter des bienfaits associés à l'activité physique et pour contrer les effets de l'inactivité.*

### **Introduction**

Many families consider engagement in recreational activities an important part of their lives. Parents consciously and deliberately plan and facilitate recreational activities in order to provide potentially beneficial outcomes for their children (Shaw & Dawson, 2001). Beneficial outcomes include enhancing children's health through opportunities to be physically active (Wiersma, 2000). When children are provided opportunities to participate in recreational activities, psychological benefits such as development of self-confidence and acquisition of moral values could be gained (Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997).

Engagement in common interests such as recreational activities could benefit the family structure. Development of family cohesiveness, improvement in communication between family members, and a higher quality of family relationships are among the benefits that family involvement in recreational activities could provide (Orthner & Mancini, 1991). Engagement in recreational activities could also help family members become more proficient in conflict resolution and problem solving (Wells, Widmer, & McCoy, 2004).

In addition, engagement in recreational activities could provide social integration opportunities for family members. Participation could help new residents assimilate into a new community. As a result, new social opportunities with non-family group members could develop (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003). These new social opportunities could develop for both parents as well as their children.

Despite the many benefits that could be gained from engagement in recreational activities, many families have faced obstacles with regard to maintaining their involvement in recent times. Because recreational activity opportunities are frequently tied to the availability of disposable income, many families have been challenged to maintain these activities in light of a reduction to or disappearance of disposable income. Within the United States, for example, the recession that began in 2008 has significantly impacted the availability of disposable income among many families. According to the United States Department of Labor, the unemployment rate for April 2011 was 9.0% (U. S. Department of Labor, 2011). In addition to people included in this percentage, many more who have exhausted their unemployment benefits or have not been looking for work are not. Lastly, an untold number of people who are currently employed face uncertainty in their employment status. As a result of unemployment or underemployment, families from many socioeconomic backgrounds face financial constraints that limit recreation activity engagement.

The impact of constraints is widespread as Jackson (2000) stated, "no subgroup of the population is entirely free from constraints" (p. 64). Constraints limit participation opportunities for people of all ages, various socioeconomic groups, and geographic locations. Constraints are increasingly noticed when equipment must be acquired and/or admission fees must be paid. As a result, these conditions could serve to further limit family members' engagement in recreational activities (Rosma & Hoffman, 1980; Searle & Jackson, 1985; Shaw, Bonen, & McCabe, 1991).

Although financial constraints could limit participation or result in nonparticipation, they do not necessarily result in these outcomes. Constraint negotiation refers to strategies people use to overcome constraints that impact their recreational activity opportunities. It has been offered as an explanation as to why constraints that affect families are not always insurmountable (Kay & Jackson, 1991; Shaw et al., 1991). Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, (1993) stated, "Participation is dependent not on the absence of constraints (although this may be true for some people) but on negotiation through them" (p. 4). As a result, participation could commence and/or continue if efforts are made to negotiate constraints. Successful negotiation of constraints could be achieved through the use of behavioral strategies. Examples of strategies that have assisted individuals facing constraints include saving money in order to participate, improvising with equipment, and finding the cheapest participation opportunities available (Kay & Jackson, 1991; White, 2008; Stanis, Schneider, & Anderson, 2009).

In summation, there are many benefits that result from engagement in recreational activities. However, economic conditions have threatened to constrain those opportunities. Constraints influence participation opportunities among people of various ages and from various socioeconomic groups. Although constraints oftentimes threaten participation opportunities, negotiation strategies could be utilized in order to mitigate the constraint.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study focused upon parents' negotiation of constraints in order to enable their children's engagement in various recreational activities. An examination of how and why parents negotiated constraints on behalf of their children occurred. The conceptual framework for this study was influenced by Hubbard and Mannell's (2001) constraints-effects-mitigation model and Zabriskie and McCormick's (2001) core and balance model of family leisure functioning.

According to Hubbard and Mannell (2001), a person employs negotiation strategies in order to mitigate the negative impact of constraints upon participation. They stated, "The constraint-effects-mitigation model is based on the hypothesis that encounters with constraints trigger greater efforts to negotiate" (p. 149). Although constraints negatively influence participation opportunities, they also encourage the use of negotiation strategies. Subsequently, the use of negotiation strategies mitigates the negative effects of constraints upon participation.

Motivation is a key component in constraint negotiation. Motivation not only has a positive influence upon one's desire to participate, but it also has a positive influence upon one's desire to negotiate constraints so that participation might take place (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Son, Mowen, & Kerstetter, 2008). The influence of motivation upon the use of negotiation strategies was a significant aspect of Hubbard and Mannell's (2001) model. They stated:

The strength of the negative effects of constraint itself is important. Also, the mitigation model identifies motivation as an important factor. People who are more highly motivated to participate expend greater effort on negotiating and are more successful at starting, maintaining, or increasing their level of participation. (p. 158)

Previous work focused upon the effect of constraints and negotiation upon

one's own participation. It has not, however, focused upon why parents negotiate constraints on behalf of their children. Zabriskie and McCormick's (2001) core and balance model of family leisure functioning does not specifically identify constraint negotiation; however, it is useful in explaining why parents might negotiate constraints on behalf of their children.

Zabriskie and McCormick identified two basic categories of family leisure: core and balance. Core leisure includes low-cost, relatively accessible activities that families engage in frequently. Balance leisure includes activities are oftentimes not home-based and require some element of advance planning before engagement takes place. In this study, recreational activities that participants and their children engaged in have both core and balance elements. These activities possessed elements of core activities because they are engaged in on a fairly routine basis. Furthermore, the activities required minimal registration fees (e.g., \$15-\$25 per season). These activities also include elements of balance activities because these activities were not engaged in at home and advance planning prior to starting participation in these activities was needed.

Engagement in core and balance type recreational activities could benefit families in various ways. The benefits that families receive through engagement in these activities could explain why parents are motivated to negotiate constraints they might encounter so that the entire family unit might benefit. Their efforts to negotiate constraints are made because these activities "address a family's need for familiarity and stability by regularly providing predictable family leisure experiences that foster personal relatedness and feelings of family closeness" (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, p. 283).

Additional beneficial outcomes as a result of these efforts exist as well. For example, families who regularly participate in various core and balance types of family leisure activities report higher levels of family cohesion than families who do not participate (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003). In addition, improvement in interpersonal communication that results from family members' engagement in various routine as well as non-routine activities can further contribute to family cohesion (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003).

When parents negotiate constraints in order to support their children's participation, the children could benefit in several ways. For example, Siegenthaler and Gonzalez (1997) stated, "Many parents believe that sports are important to character-building and prepare children for adult life" (p. 300). Through participation, children learn skills and values that could serve them well as they proceed through future life stages (Brustad, 1992; Averill & Power, 1995; Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997; Diacin, 2009). In addition, enhancement of social skills, such as learning to get along with one's peers, might result. Lastly, the development of a strong work ethic and sense of responsibility might occur (Brustad, 1992; Averill & Power, 1995).

Opportunities for children to engage in recreational activities are contingent upon their parents' financial support (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford, Jackson & Godbey, 1991). Their financial support is evident when they pay for their children's registration fees, travel expenses, equipment, and/or uniforms (Howard & Madrigal, 1990; Cote, 1999; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006). Because parents play such a crucial role in the provision of their children's recreational activity opportunities, they were the focus of this study. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate how parents negotiated perceived financial

constraints so that their children could begin or maintain participation in various recreational activities as well as their motivations for negotiating these constraints. Activities that were focused on in this study consisted of both core and balance elements. Sport-specific activities such as basketball, soccer, and baseball were among the activities participants' children engaged in. These activities were offered in municipal, public non-profit, and private for profit settings.

## Method

### *Participants*

Eleven parents participated in this study. Of the 11, seven were female (four self-identified as Caucasian and three as African American) and four were male (each self-identified as Caucasian). Their ages ranged from 30-44 years. All of the male participants were married to their wives. Five of the female participants were married to their husbands. Two of the female participants were single parents. The size of the participants' families varied as the number of children each participant had ranged from one to six.

Annual household income levels among these participants varied. Three reported household incomes in excess of \$60,000 annually. Two participants indicated annual household incomes in each of the following ranges: \$50,000-\$55,000, \$40,000-\$45,000, \$35,000-\$40,000, and \$25,000-\$30,000.

Nine participants worked in a variety of occupations outside of the home. Two female participants worked inside the home as homemakers. Of those who worked outside the home, two male participants were ministers at local churches. One male participant was a government employee. One female participant was the entrepreneur of her own business. The remaining participants worked in managerial capacities in financial-based and technical-based fields.

As previously mentioned, Jackson (2000) stated that constraints to participation could affect people from various socioeconomic groups. The purpose of this study, which was to investigate how parents negotiated financial constraints on behalf of their children, was developed from this statement. Within this purpose of investigating parental constraint negotiation, regardless of the parents' income levels, an attempt was made to select settings where parents from various income levels could have children enrolled in various recreational programs. The rationale for selecting these settings was to gain insight into whether or not strategies utilized by parents in order to negotiate constraints on behalf of their children differed as a result of the parents' socioeconomic status. In this study, participants were solicited through an elementary school and a YMCA in the Southeastern United States.

The first location where participants were solicited was a branch of the YMCA. Six of the participants had at least one child who was enrolled in programs offered at this branch. This setting was selected because the YMCA attempts to accommodate families from various socioeconomic groups. The YMCA offers assistance to families who are not able to afford the regular membership rates through the "strong kids" campaign (YMCA, 2011).

The income levels of the participants from this branch were not very diverse. Of the six participants, five reported household incomes from the two highest ranges (\$50,000-\$55,000 and \$60,000 and above). Because of the homogeneity in the income levels among the participants at the YMCA, an additional location

was sought. Five participants had a child who was enrolled at the elementary school that was selected for this study. Ninety-two percent of the children enrolled in this school were classified by the school district as “economically disadvantaged.” The school district defined economically disadvantaged children as those who qualified for free or reduced lunches. In order to qualify, a family of four would need to earn less than \$41,000 annually. Since the majority of the students at this school were classified as economically disadvantaged, the possibility of speaking with parents who would be faced with financial constraints seemed likely. The four participants from the lowest income ranges (\$25,000-\$30,000 and \$35,000-\$40,000) had children enrolled at this school.

### *Data Collection*

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval as well as approval from the principal of the elementary school and general manager of the YMCA, the process of recruiting participants began. A letter of introduction was sent to parents of the elementary school children. The letter explained the purpose of the study and criteria needed for inclusion into the study. At the YMCA, a verbal announcement was made to parents prior to youth basketball games.

Criterion sampling is a form of purposeful sampling that was utilized for this study. Within criterion sampling, all cases must meet some pre-determined criterion of importance (Patton, 1990). Because this study focused upon ways in which parents negotiated constraints in order to provide participation opportunities for their children, participants needed to have at least one child who was active in at least one recreational activity that took place outside of the home. The ages of the participants’ children were between 5-13 years.

Data was collected through two measures. First, participants were given surveys in order to collect various details with regard to their demographics. Survey items focused upon participant’s age, education level, ethnicity, household income, and occupation.

With the exception of gaining participants’ demographic information through a survey, data focusing upon how participants negotiated constraints on behalf of their children as well as why they negotiated those constraints were collected through qualitative measures. In order to better understand why parents engaged in various measures in order to provide opportunities for their children, a methodology that would allow for the acquisition of detailed information was needed. Therefore, qualitative inquiry was utilized in order to obtain descriptive data that would allow for a better understanding as to why participants negotiated constraints on behalf of their children.

The primary data collection method in this study was a semi-structured interview. This approach was utilized in order to ensure the topic of constraint negotiation was addressed; however, providing participants the opportunity to shape the content of the interview was also desired. Participants were interviewed individually. The interview began with a series of pre-formatted, closed-end questions. Examples of closed-end questions included: “How many children do you have participating in recreational activities?” and “What fees and other costs are associated with their activities?” Questions that inquired into measures that were taken to negotiate these constraints were asked as well. For example, participants were asked, “What sacrifices or adjustments did you make in order to accommodate your child’s interests?”

As the interview progressed, the researcher encouraged the participant to elaborate on the constraints they experienced as well as their motivations behind negotiating those constraints on behalf of their children. Throughout the interview, probing questions were asked in order to obtain further detail from the participants. The goal associated with asking these questions was to gain insight into constraints that were acting upon the participants as well as how and why they went about negotiating these constraints on behalf of their children. For example, the researcher would say, "Tell me more" or "Please give me an example" in order to obtain additional detail from the participants.

Interviews were audio taped, lasted between 45-60 minutes each, and were conducted at a time and place of each participant's choice. Upon completion of the interview, participants were asked debriefing questions. In addition, they chose a pseudonym. All names used in this study were pseudonyms selected by the participants.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Analytic induction was the approach that was utilized in this study in order to analyze interview data. The process of analytic induction is employed when some specific problem, question, or issue becomes the focus of research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The primary focus of this research was to gain insight into how and why parents negotiated constraints that acting upon their children's recreation activity opportunities. As the data was collected, it was analyzed against the research questions.

Codes were established in order to sort the data into categories. Coding categories are a means of sorting descriptive data that has been collected so that it may be more easily referenced and retrievable at a later time (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). As the interview data was examined, certain words, phrases, patterns of behavior, and events stood out. These words and phrases created the coding categories. Three coding categories emerged from examining the transcripts.

The first coding category was event codes. Event codes "are directed at units of data that are related to specific activities that occur in the setting or in the lives of the subjects you are interviewing" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 165). In this study, events that constrained the recreation activity opportunities of participants' children included changes to the participants' employment status or the employment status of his/her spouse. As a result, event codes such as "employment" were created.

Strategy codes were the second type of codes that emerged. Strategies refer to the "tactics, methods, techniques, maneuvers, ploys, and other conscious ways people accomplish various things" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 165). Participants' strategies to negotiate constraints were identified and codes such as "work" and "limit activities" were established.

The third category of codes that was utilized was perspective codes. In this category, participants identify what is important to them as well as their general points of view (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Participants indicated that their reasons for negotiating were because they perceived participation would be beneficial for their children in some way. As a result, codes such as "friendships" and "health benefits" were established.

An important component of qualitative inquiry includes establishing trustworthiness (Glesne, 2006). This process entails utilizing various procedures

in order to convince the reader that measures were taken to ensure the material s/he is reading is consistent with what the participants actually said and experienced (Patton, 1990). Trustworthiness can be accomplished through a number of techniques. The techniques of external auditing, peer debriefing, and member checking were utilized in order to establish trustworthiness of the findings (Lather, 1986; Sparkes, 1998). An outside person who examines field notes and coding schemes used by the researcher conducts an external audit (Glesne, 2006). A colleague experienced in qualitative inquiry conducted the audit. Peer debriefing includes external reflection and input into the researcher's work. Four colleagues experienced in qualitative inquiry examined the transcripts as well as the manuscript and subsequently provided critical commentary with regard to the methods and findings. These individuals confirmed that the content in the manuscript was an accurate representation of the content in the interview transcripts. The process of member checking allows participants to confirm their statements were reported accurately (Glesne, 2006). Each participant was provided with a copy of the transcript and manuscript. Participants were requested to analyze the documents in order to ensure their statements were reported accurately. Nine of the eleven participants responded to a request for feedback. All nine indicated their statements in the transcript and manuscript were recorded accurately.

### **Results**

Parents perceived value in their children's recreational activity involvement and negotiated constraints by utilizing several strategies in order to provide various opportunities for their children. Strategies parents utilized in order to provide these opportunities included improving finances, limiting participation to less expensive activities, and making additional arrangements in order to enable participation. For instance, participants worked extra hours at their place of employment in order to improve their finances. In families with several children, participants accommodated all of their children's activity interests by encouraging participation in activities that were not especially expensive. Lastly, participants lent their expertise in an activity in exchange for reductions to their children's participation fees.

Participants utilized these strategies because they perceived benefits for the family could be obtained when opportunities to engage in recreational activities with core and balance elements were made available. Three themes emerged from statements participants made during their interviews. These themes were benefits parents perceived could occur if they negotiated constraints on behalf of their children. The first perceived benefit was that participation in recreational activities served as a source of family cohesion. Participation served as a common interest between parents and their children and the engagement provided families with an opportunity to spend time and interact with each other. The second benefit was that engagement in the activities served as an opportunity for parents and their children to develop interpersonal relationships outside the family. The third benefit associated was that participation would provide desired outcomes in the way of establishing healthy habits, learning valuable life lessons, and avoiding undesirable circumstances. Specifically, undesirable circumstances were expressed as children getting into difficulty due to a lack of structure in their daily lives.



*Family Cohesion*

Kay and Jackson (1991) introduced the term of other economies as a way to overcome a constraint to participation. In this study, an example of other economies included lending one's expertise in order to offset participation related expenses. Patricia lent her expertise in karate so that her children would have an opportunity to participate. Patricia was a homemaker in a four-person household earning an annual income of approximately \$30,000. Her two children, in her opinion, were very sports-oriented and enjoyed participating in a range of activities. Although her children had many interests, financial constraints prevented involvement in a greater quantity of activities. She indicated her two children would likely be involved in more activities if financial constraints were not present. She said, "If they really wanted to do something I'd try and find a way for them to do it but it's not real feasible. If money wasn't an issue I'd have them in anything they wanted."

At the time of this interview, Patricia and two of her children were actively involved in karate. The dues at the location where they participated were \$69 a month. With a limited income, Patricia acknowledged that participation would not have been feasible unless she "did something to knock the price down." Lending expertise in exchange for reductions to participation costs was the strategy Patricia utilized in order to overcome this financial constraint and provide a participation opportunity for her children. She coached classes at the location where they took lessons; as a result, she received a significant discount in exchange for lending her expertise. As a result of utilizing this strategy, Patricia had been able to preserve her children's involvement in this activity for roughly three years.

Patricia was motivated to negotiate the financial constraints she experienced because she valued the opportunity to participate in an activity with her children. She made arrangements to coach classes so that she could not only provide an opportunity for her children but also gain an opportunity to spend quality time with them. She said, "I want to have it (karate lessons) as a family thing that we all can do." Karate was the perfect activity for the family as Patricia said, "You get that togetherness time and you get your own experience, too."

Parents who have faced financial constraints have utilized the strategy of limiting participation to cheaper activities. In addition, they have limited the quantity of activities in which their children could participate (Kay & Jackson, 1991; Stanis et al., 2009). Mark and his wife utilized this strategy. They had six children and his wife was a homemaker. The family's household income was just over \$50,000 annually. Encouraging his children to participate in relatively inexpensive activities and having them decide upon a sport were the methods Mark used to provide opportunities on a limited budget. In order to provide his children with recreational activity opportunities, he enrolled three of his children in recreational basketball leagues at a local branch of the YMCA. He acknowledged that his children have other interests but said, "We told them to pick one sport. We have a large family, six kids, and we don't have the time or money so one is enough." He enrolled them there because the participation costs there fit into the family budget. He also coaches the team of one of his children. He did not receive any financial incentives for coaching. In this case, he did not make these efforts to reduce the expenses associated with participation but rather volunteered because "It's something we can do as a family. From a family

perspective it is nice. I also like coaching because it gives me a chance to be with them.” In his perspective, his involvement as a coach was a worthwhile use of his time because it gave him the opportunity to engage with his children on a regular basis in an activity they enjoyed. Subsequently, he felt his involvement strengthened the bond between family members and helped maintain a healthy relationship between he and his children.

### *Developing Interpersonal Relationships*

A reason why parents commence their children’s involvement in recreational activities is because various social benefits could result from participation (Wiersma, 2000). Developing interpersonal relationships was a memorable aspect of several participants’ recreational activity experiences during their youth. Leigh and her husband had six children. Their annual household income was slightly above \$60,000. Although she wanted to provide the opportunity for her children to gain these social benefits, she indicated that their opportunities were constrained because five of her six children were participating in various recreational activities at the same time. As a result, Leigh gave approval for activities that were not especially expensive. One of her daughters wanted to participate in tae kwon do; however, costs associated with participation were significant. She wanted to provide this opportunity but also had to consider the interests of all her children. Leigh said:

Money-wise if there was something that was very expensive, I had to say no. If it was outside of our budget, I’d say that we couldn’t do that. She [her daughter] wanted to do tae kwon do, which was \$79 a month. To do that takes a certain amount of money out of our family budget. This is a big part of what we can spend for six children. It’s not \$80 a month for everybody, so the expenses with those sports come into play.

Leigh’s daughter was permitted to participate in an activity (soccer) that was less expensive. In addition, each of her other children participated in activities with registration fees that ranged between \$20-\$30 per year.

Denying her daughter the opportunity to participate in tae kwon do was something Leigh did not want to do. Although she struggled with this decision, she believed this action was necessary in order to stay within the family budget and subsequently preserve all of her children’s interests. She was adamant about providing equal opportunities for each of her children because she wanted to give each child a chance to engage with peers outside the family.

Development of interpersonal relationships was a valuable outcome Leigh experienced when she participated in various activities as a youth and adolescent. She stated that the person she considers her best friend was a teammate on several of her youth basketball teams. Subsequently, she wanted to provide her children with opportunities to develop long lasting and meaningful friendships and believed that membership on a youth sports team could provide that.

When Leigh and her husband moved into a new community, she saw engagement in community based recreational activities as a way for her children to connect with other community members. Leigh stated, “I think being in that community setting is important for the long term because you develop the friendships.” With a family her size, it had been difficult to accommodate all of her children’s many interests; however, she valued her children’s participation in some activity and provided opportunities as best she could because she wanted

her children to meet new people in hopes of having them develop long-term friendships.

In addition to improving cohesion between family members, Patricia valued her children's participation in karate because her children could develop relationships with peers. Similar to Leigh, a lasting positive memory of her experience in activities such as karate during her youth was the development of long-term friendships. She said, "I met a lot of my friends through the sports I did so it is a way to meet new people." She took on the coaching responsibilities at the location where her two children participated in karate because she wanted them to meet new people outside of school and subsequently have an opportunity to develop lasting friendships. She indicated that participation has resulted in the development of friendships for each of her two children.

### *Obtaining Desired Outcomes*

Several participants utilized the negotiation strategy of improving finances in order to overcome constraints to participation (Jackson & Rucks, 1995; White, 2008). Theresa was a single mother who supported two children. Her annual household income was approximately \$30,000. Her daughter was ten years old and played in an American Amateur Union (AAU) league. Although the registration cost was nominal (\$15), additional costs made participation financially challenging. She said, "It was everything else that cost so much. The shoes and bags and the trips. The tournament fee might be \$300 per team." In order to provide this opportunity for her daughter, she made efforts to improve her financial situation. She negotiated the constraint of limited income in the form of working extra hours at her job in order to generate enough disposable income to pay for her daughter's participation expenses.

The efforts Theresa made in order to support her daughter's participation were worthwhile because Theresa benefitted greatly from her participation in this league as a youth. Basketball helped her avoid many problems her peers experienced. She believed providing this opportunity for her daughter would be similarly beneficial because having little unoccupied time would help her daughter in avoid many of the problems today's youth encounter. She said,

It kept me out of trouble. I had friends who didn't have a lot to do get into difficulty. I was shocked at how many of my friends who didn't play sports got into trouble. Early pregnancies, abusive relationships. I didn't know anything about drugs. I wasn't into that.

Theresa wanted to do whatever she could in order to make sure her daughter gained those benefits as well. She said, "I want basketball to keep her out of trouble. She doesn't have time to run the streets and chase after boys because she has things to do." Theresa desired structure for her daughter because she was fearful of the many adverse situations that could occur if her daughter was to have a lack of structure in her life away from school. She remembered how the experience helped her and gladly worked the extra hours in order to provide this opportunity because she perceived involvement in this activity would help ensure her daughter's welfare.

Kevin and his wife had three children who were enrolled in various recreational activities. Although he said his family was doing "OK," he indicated that he and his wife did not possess tremendous amounts of disposable income to pay for recreational activities. Despite this constraint, he was motivated to enroll

his children in their activities because he wanted his children to learn valuable life lessons. For example, he wanted them to understand the importance of being a member of a team and realize they were being counted on to fulfill their responsibilities within that role. He said:

I want them to understand what commitment and loyalty is. I want them to understand people depend on them to be there and perform at a high level to get things accomplished. Everything is about whatever you set your mind to. Nothing is about you. You can't be a self-centered individual in anything you do in life because you won't be successful.

Several of the parents indicated health and fitness benefits associated with living a physically active lifestyle were reasons why they negotiated their constraints in order to provide various activities for their children. Patrick was a father of four children and was a member at a local branch of the YMCA. Two of his sons were in high school and the other was in junior high. His youngest child was a nine-year-old daughter. Providing his children with opportunities to engage in physical activity and develop an appreciation for a healthy lifestyle were significant reasons why Patrick purchased gym memberships for his three sons and enrolled his daughter in a basketball league. Patrick's household income was approximately \$60,000. Although he indicated that the family was not struggling, he indicated that working overtime and occasionally taking on side jobs was needed in order to pay for the costs associated with the gym memberships and basketball league. He did this because he wanted them to realize the benefits of living a physically active lifestyle into his children. He said, "I want them to develop the habits of valuing activity and realize it is healthy and necessary to stay active. I want them to be concerned about their fitness and health." He was concerned that if he did not provide these opportunities for his children, they might not develop an appreciation of physical activity that could enhance their long-term health.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine how and why parents negotiated constraints so that their children could engage in recreational activities. Findings indicated that parents negotiated the constraints they faced by utilizing several strategies. They worked extra hours whenever possible in order to generate disposable income. They limited the quantity of their children's activities and guided their children into cheaper activities. They also put their knowledge and abilities with regard to a particular activity to use in order to provide a participation opportunity for their children.

The findings indicated participants' motivations for negotiating constraints that could limit their children's participation opportunities were goal oriented and directed toward obtaining various benefits they perceived as important. A goal of these parents who utilized various negotiation strategies was to use recreational activity involvement as a way to increase interaction opportunities among family members in hopes of strengthening family unity for the long-term. Parents not only desired for their children to engage in various activities as a way to strengthen the family unit, but they also wanted to provide their children the opportunities to develop peer relationships. Participants believed participation would teach their children valuable life lessons. Parents perceived the world as an increasingly dangerous place for children. Therefore, they negotiated constraints

because providing structured activities reduced their children's opportunities to be idle and get into difficulty. Lastly, they wanted their children to develop an interest in and appreciation for an active lifestyle.

Findings from this study support Hubbard and Mannell's (2001) constraints-effects-mitigation model because participants who encountered constraints utilized negotiation strategies in order to counteract or mitigate the negative effects of a constraint. Participants who utilized various strategies were motivated to negotiate constraints for various reasons. The reasons why they did so support the underpinnings of the core and balance model of family leisure functioning. Involvement in various activities enhanced family functioning and it also provided several other desired outcomes.

Within this study, an interest in examining differences in constraint negotiation based on family income levels existed. Differences in constraint negotiation based on family income levels, however, did not emerge as the participants utilized strategies that allowed them to commence an/or preserve their children's participation opportunities, regardless of their family's income levels. Although financial constraints are assumed to affect families from lower socioeconomic groups (Jackson, 2000), perceived financial constraints influenced participants' actions, regardless of the amount of household income. For example, Theresa was a single mother who worked extra hours in order to provide participation opportunities for her daughter. Her reported household income of approximately \$30,000 was one of the lowest among this group of participants. On the other hand, Kevin reported a household income in excess of \$60,000. Nevertheless, he also reported working extra hours in order to generate additional income that was used to support his children's sport and recreation participation opportunities.

Constraints and the subsequent negotiation of them is something that affects and is practiced by people with varying levels of income. The participants' statements illustrate various measures that were taken in order to provide participation opportunities for their children, regardless of household income levels. In light of challenging economic conditions and other circumstances (e.g., increase in both parents working outside the home), it is becoming increasingly difficult for parents, even those who are assumed to have sufficient levels of disposable income to support participation opportunities that will not only benefit their children but also the entire family. Because financial constraints could influence the actions of most families, the sustainability of organized sport and recreation programs could be affected.

A population that could certainly benefit from acquiring knowledge of constraints acting upon parents possessing various levels of income and subsequently developing initiatives in order to assist in the negotiation process are owners and operators of recreational programs and facilities in the municipal as well as in private settings. Practitioners would benefit from gaining insight into constraints that affect parents' abilities to support their children's recreational activities. As a result, they could create arrangements that would allow for families to engage in the services they provide. For instance, allowing a parent to lend his/her expertise in a coaching capacity in exchange for a discount could benefit a recreation-based business. This arrangement would allow a family with limited financial means the opportunity to participate. Even if the business did not receive the entire participation fee, it could benefit as a result of ancillary

purchases (e.g., concessions) made by the family. At a time when families are facing reductions to disposable income allocated for recreation, practitioners in recreation-based businesses must be willing to consider creative measures in order to attract and retain as many customers as possible.

In closing, constraints affect different people in different ways. Therefore, additional study on this topic would be useful. A limitation of this study is that it focused upon a small sample of Caucasian and African American families in one geographic location. Future research could focus upon investigating constraints acting upon families who live in different geographic areas. Studying the experiences of families from other ethnic groups might also uncover different types of constraints, negotiation strategies, and motivations behind negotiating those constraints.

In addition, much of the research that has taken place with regard to experiencing constraints and constraint negotiation has been with intact families possessing moderate amounts of disposable income. In this study, two participants from single parent households were interviewed. Although these particular single parents did not indicate experiencing greater constraints than the participants who were not, additional research on this topic would be useful. This population could have significant effects upon owners and operators of recreation focused enterprises because approximately 30% of households in the United States with children are single parent households (U. S. Census Bureau, 2011). If this segment of the population could be reasonably accommodated, parents, their children, and recreation business owners and operators could benefit.

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