

23. PLAY PROGRAMMING

This chapter provides an overview of play programming for integration of all children.

Play opportunities should provide challenging experiences for all children in safe, healthy, stimulating, and accessible environments. Creating a fully integrated community recreation program is difficult, but not impossible to achieve if the public agency makes a commitment to implement such a program.

23.1 Case Study Program

From 1980 to 1989, PLAE, Inc., of Berkeley, California, developed a prototype program as an action-research effort to discover how to integrate children with disabilities in a program serving over 2000 children, one-third with developmental, physical, emotional, or learning disabilities. The ages of the children ranged from six to sixteen. Several conclusions were reached as a result of this experience (Iacofano et al., 1985):

- a. The greater the range of outdoor settings the wider the assortment of programmed activities that can be supported.
- b. A broad range of activities allows more children of different ages and ability levels to participate at the same time.
- c. A programmatic base in the community arts, instead of sports, offers many opportunities for participation by all children.
- d. A thematic approach to workshop activities, in combination with skilled play leadership, provides a structure which allows children to work together through dramatic play. It also helps adults relate positively to the program and to better understand its value.
- e. The "play value" of play settings is highly dependent on how they are programmed and managed, especially for the integration of children with and without disabilities.

23.2 Play Programming Criteria for All Children

Based on the above findings, PLAE has developed a management model for providing direct community recreation services to all children. The model takes into consideration the range of settings, the program of activities, play leadership, and the physical setting.

- a. **Environmental Diversity.** A variety of physical settings must be provided to support varied programming and to accommodate different leader abilities and skills.
- b. **Environmental Control.** Both children and staff must have control over their environment. Lockable storage, use of restroom facilities, large trash receptacles, electricity, and water are necessary.
- c. **Defensible Space.** For leaders to feel free enough to take risks and be adventurous in programming, the environment must be easily supervised. Play leaders need to see who is entering or leaving the activity area and be able to locate children easily. However, this does not mean that the environment must be totally open or without walls, buffers, and other subdivisions.
- d. **Adaptability/Flexibility.** Programs must remain open to changing situations and the individual needs of participants within a structural framework.
- e. **Arts-based Programming.** Programming that is based in the arts provides a context for innovation, creativity, and discovery of one's relationship to the world.
- f. **Choice of activities.** A variety of activities are required to engage and capture children's imaginations:
 - 1) Activities that make everyone a star.
 - 2) Trust-building activities.
 - 3) Risk-taking activities.
 - 4) Activities that promote sharing and cooperation.
 - 5) Activities that allow for creative expression.
 - 6) Activities that are fun!
 - 7) Group problem solving.
 - 8) Construction activities.
 - 9) Activities that are "larger than life."

- g. **Dramatic Play.** Dramatic play stimulates imagination and creativity. The conscious incorporation of dramatic play into a program supports and nourishes children's natural abilities.
- h. **Spontaneity.** Providing play props, loose parts, and a variety of scrap materials that can be transformed into something else allows children to take an activity initiated by the play leader and expand on it. For example, with simple building materials, children can create structures around which elaborate fantasy dramas may unfold.
- i. **Product.** Products are an important part of the play experience. They show accomplishment. Products can be ends in themselves or they can become parts of a larger group project, such as a circus performance.
- j. **Cooperation.** A team approach to projects helps children work together. By assigning individual responsibility for parts of a project, children have an individual accomplishment which leads to a group product. A balance is struck between encouraging the development of self-potential and fostering community awareness and positive social interaction.
- k. **A Creative Atmosphere.** The play environment is a place to experiment, take risks, and make mistakes.
- l. **Play Leadership.** Play leaders and animators are the backbone of any play program. They are highly skilled professionals trained in the use of creative arts and physical settings to create play events that are stimulating and challenging for a wide variety of children. Animators create a context for fantasy and dramatic play by introducing activity scores, scripts, props, and loose parts that help involve children and facilitate use of the environment to its fullest potential. Animators can provide a positive role model for all children, demonstrating qualities such as autonomy, practical skills, cooperation, flexibility, willingness to listen, and the desire to change and grow.
- m. **Openness.** Integration of all children is promoted as disabled children and non-disabled children are involved in the same program. Accommodations for children with a variety of disabilities should be present or readily available by adapting a tool or an activity on the spot.

- n. **Empowerment.** Play programs can empower children to utilize their full capabilities and to learn how to participate in the making of decisions that affect them.
- o. **Behavior Management.** An organized program structure is important to children's safe play experiences. Positive limits can be set and children can participate in solving problems and taking responsibility for their own behavior.
- p. **Communication.** Staff that works well together and communicates openly contributes to making an environment where children feel safe. Children benefit from seeing positive interactions between staff.
- q. **Parent/Staff Interaction.** A healthy relationship between parents and staff is essential for supporting child development.
- r. **Setting, Program and Leadership.** Physical environment, program and leadership must be managed as a system: the environment sets the stage and context in which structured yet flexible program activities can be executed and brought to life by creative play leaders. This interaction of physical setting, program and leadership is the heart of the management model.