



LESSONS

 **Family Leisure**

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Dr. Raymond Poff

A UNIVERSITY COURSE CATALOG AND A LOVE OF KAYAKING HELPED STEER RAYMOND POFF TO A LIFE OF LEISURE — WELL, IF NOT EXACTLY A LIFE OF EASE, THEN A LIFE OF EXAMINING LEISURE AND ITS IMPACT ON HUMAN BEHAVIOR.

Shortly after starting college at Brigham Young University, Dr. Poff knew that school was where he was supposed to be, but he did not know what he was supposed to be studying. An assignment to research two possible majors led him to read through the entire course catalog. "I literally started in the front and went through it page by page. When I came to Recreation Management/Youth Leadership, like several students here on Western's campus, I was surprised: 'You can major in that?'"

A course catalog led Poff to his Bachelor's and Master's degrees, but kayaking and canoeing led him to his doctoral dissertation. "I was finishing up my MS at Indiana University, and I was thinking, 'I'm done. No more tests. No more classes.' Then I got a job running the BYU Outdoors Unlimited program through their student center. But within a short period of time, I found myself asking research questions: 'I wonder why people do this?' or 'It would be interesting to study that.'" Poff's questions led him back to Indiana, where he received his Ph.D. in Leisure Behavior. Today he is an associate professor in the Department of Physical Education and Recreation at Western Kentucky University.

Although questions about degree and career are now settled, for Dr. Poff, serious questions remain about the role of leisure; in particular, he has been examining its possible impact on family life. Poff's interest in this area is a natural one: he and his wife, Sandee, have four children, the oldest of whom he is now introducing to both fly fishing and Scouting. (Poff himself is an Eagle Scout.)

While at Indiana University, a fellow doctoral student and friend, Ramon Zabriskie, developed instrumentation for measuring family involvement: The Family Leisure Activities Profile (FLAP). When using FLAP, researchers focus on "core" and "balance" activities. "Core activities are what we do with our families everyday," explains Dr. Poff. "It could be shooting hoops together, having dinner together, playing a board game, hanging out and watching a movie; every family is going to be different. Balance activities are atypical. I don't want to say that they're unusual, but we don't do them as often. For instance, my wife and I went to Brazil to visit her parents who are there on a two-year mission for their church. We had never been to Brazil before; this was exceptional for us and would be considered a 'balance' activity. Again, these activities will vary with each family. Going on a camping trip may be a balance activity for those who rarely camp. Or if my family doesn't go bowling on a regular basis, then bowling can be a balance activity," continued Poff.



“Now, if all you ever did was go on family vacations, you would probably end up with some issues. If everything was balance, those fundamental skills that you build in your everyday activities would be missing. Without those skills and relationships and fundamentals that you’ve built in core activities, you’re probably not equipped to function well in your balance activities. Dr. Zabriskie’s FLAP is based on a theoretical model that would suggest that a healthy family needs core and balance.”

With help from WKU, Dr. Poff has been able to help bring a national — and international — reach to the FLAP. “In the back of my mind, I’ve always had an interest in doing research in the family leisure area. And so I applied for and received a Faculty Fellowship here at Western. I saw this grant as the means to do something.” Poff then contacted Zabriskie. “The idea was to take the instrumentation that he had developed, and some work other researchers were doing, and for the first time do a nationwide study to see if what they were finding with these smaller samples would hold true nationally.”

But how does one determine the relationship between football in the backyard, trips to Yosemite, and the health of a family? “When I was researching my dissertation, I used Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which allows us to look at multiple constructs, or ideas, at the same time, and analyze the relationship between those ideas. If I were looking at the relationship between outside temperature and mood, I could measure the temperature directly with a thermometer — that’s quantifiable. But I would have to use some other instrumentation to determine the person’s mood because, unlike outside temperature, mood is a ‘latent construct.’ A ‘latent construct’ is an idea or concept that we’re trying to measure, but we can’t measure directly. With SEM we can take multiple concepts (such as family leisure involvement, family communication, and satisfaction with family life) and identify



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what, if any, relationships exist between them.”

Previous studies used smaller samples and looked at a more narrow range of issues. But Poff and Zabriskie’s nationwide study allows for a larger number of connections to be made. “They’ve done this piece and that piece of the puzzle. But SEM allows us to bring the pieces together in a survey using a national sample.” And the results of their research? “Generally speaking, the findings of this study and the model we developed match the work previously done by others. Because this study was not experimental in design, we cannot currently say that family leisure functioning causes satisfaction with family life. But we can say that there is a statistical relationship between satisfaction with family life, family leisure involvement, and these other pieces. Dr. Zabriskie and I are very excited with the outcome.”

While Poff and his co-author have presented their work at one of the most prestigious research symposiums in the field, they have also broadened the scope of their inquiry by beginning to investigate family leisure in other English-

speaking countries. With grants provided by the Faculty Scholarship Council and the College of Health and Human Services at WKU, along with help from Brigham Young University (BYU), Poff and his fellow researchers have gone global. “Using the same idea, we’ve taken the study on the road.”

Poff and Zabriskie have recently carried out countrywide surveys in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. “Initially we thought funding would limit us to a pilot study, which would have restricted the kind of analysis we could have done. Thanks to some additional, unexpected financial support from BYU’s College of Health and Human Performance, what started off to be a pilot study turned into a full-fledged international study with around 500 families in New Zealand, 900 in the United Kingdom, just over a 1,000 in Australia, and around 1,200 in Canada. This is great because we were originally thinking we would only be able to survey a couple hundred in those countries. Now we have more than enough data.”

Poff hopes that this research will not stay limited to just the English-

speaking world. “If our model and instrumentation seem to hold up, and we get consistent findings from other English-speaking countries, then we’ve got the world.” Of course, this phase would bring with it new challenges. “One of the early questions we’re going to have to ask is, ‘What does family leisure mean in different cultures?’ As we expand this to different languages and societies, we will end up, in some ways, almost starting over with each culture because we will have to go back and say, ‘Okay, are we even talking about the same things?’”

But while Poff wants the study to go forward into the world, he also wants to go backwards. “In the core and balance theory, I suspect that there’s at least one other piece to this new model that is an influencing factor. I want to investigate what precedes family leisure involvement. What precipitates it? Why does one family participate in core/balance activities? And why don’t others? What is it that precedes and lays the groundwork for family leisure involvement?”

While Dr. Poff continues to raise questions, he believes that the results so far have great potential benefit for society and families. “I think this could help those who are making decisions about what recreational opportunities are available for families. But I think the biggest benefit is that this work will help people to start having a clearer understanding of leisure’s importance. It is not a waste of time; it definitely appears to have a relationship to essentials such as communication, family functioning, and satisfaction with family life.”

Poff affirmed, “Having fun with your family brings with it some seriously good fringe benefits. And personally speaking, as a parent of four, that’s a good thing for me to remember.” ■

