

Belonging Matters' Podcast

Transcript

Episode 14: Recreation and leisure: Lessons from people with developmental disabilities

Deb Rouget

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Welcome to Belonging Matters podcast series. Now available on Apple podcasts, Google podcasts, Spotify, and www.belongingmatters.org. You can email Belonging Matters on info@belongingmatters.org. Episode Fourteen, "Recreation and leisure: Lessons from people with developmental disabilities." Deb Rouget has been involved with people with a disability and their families for over 30 years. In 2003, Deb was integral in the development of Belonging Matters, which sprung to life as a catalyst to prevent the exclusion of people with a disability from their communities, and enable individuals to enjoy a fulfilling life that is well embedded in community relationship and citizenship. Since that time, she has been the CEO of Belonging Matters. Deb has also been keen to foster advances that leave people who have a disability and their families with greater control over their lives. The following

podcasts involves insightful lessons from people with developmental disabilities, around recreation and leisure.

As human beings we all seem to need downtime from our work and busy lives. Although a secondary adjunct to our lives, leisure and recreation is a way to escape routine, enjoy ourselves and have fun. However, our hobbies and recreation can go much deeper than this, as suggested by Judith McGill in 1996. Our leisure and recreation can help form our identity. It can provide rich and fertile soil to discover who we are. For example, Michael is club champion at his local bowls club, it forms a significant part of his identity. Through recreation and leisure, we can also escape the routine nature of our lives, learn skills and competencies, gain knowledge, meet people and develop long term and lasting friendships. We can also contribute to the lives of others and in some instances, it can lead to employment. Without leisure and recreation, life can be boring and stagnant. In this article, I have drawn lessons from people with developmental disabilities about the importance of recreation and leisure opportunities in relationship to identity, relationships, role development, and inclusion.

Interests, passions and gifts.

What we pursue as recreation or leisure is sparked by an interest, passion or gift. This might be something that our family have always been involved with. For example, Lauren's family of football fanatics, this laid the foundation for Lauren's interest very early in life. Maddie's dad is a Formula One fan, and this triggered Maddie's love for everything motor sports. Hannah's

family have always encouraged her to follow her dreams and try different activities. As a child she would put on plays with her siblings loving to be front and centre. Her mum Jackie jumped at the chance for her to join a new drama group in the community when she was just five years of age. She has now played many parts in school and community productions. Our interests could have been sparked through a suggestion made by a friend or something we've seen read or heard about. For some people, they give us a sole source of enjoyment and fulfilment, for example, hospitality or music. If you're a Melburnian, AFL football is a passion shared by many and connects people, even if they don't play the game. This can be seen through Lauren and Emily's stories. Emily loves the Melbourne football club isn't and is a member of the band making group. interests can be varied and diverse. For example from collecting clocks, making craft, caring for the environment, sports, music, gardening, cooking, film, rock climbing or fishing. Therefore, the discovering and harnessing of what people love, show an interest in or, what you can never drag them away from or, what grabs people's attention is a solid clue to developing recreation and leisure pursuits, identities and roles. The sharing of common interests is also a good strategy for people who may have difficulty in communicating. Often sharing an interest doesn't rely on verbal communication, but an expression of joy and understanding. Morgan uses technology to communicate. However her love and passion for horses is a great connector.

Trying and tasting.

Our interest in a particular recreation or leisure activity might be fleeting, we might try something and think, that's really not for me. This is part of last life tasting. And we do this throughout our lives. Our interest might be spasmodic, or might be an ongoing and significant part of our lives. By chance, Michael tried lawn balls 10 years ago and he is now become a valued member of the club competing in pennant and club championships. Morgan first rode a horse when she was two years of age on her aunties' farm. She is now a member of an equestrian club and competes in various writing competitions, nationally and internationally. Some of our interests might be age related. For example, young children might show an interest in certain toys. Young adults who are fit, love to play sport, other people might show an interest in knitting or yoga. Thus, it's important to think about a person's age when trying and tasting. However, the more repetition we have enhances our competence, confidence and presence, one person at a time. Human beings are very unique and have very unique interests. Even when we share an interest with someone else, the way or manner we enjoy it will be different from others. Thus, we really need to focus on people as individuals to discover their unique interests, passions and gifts. Often Human Services assist groups of people with a disability to access recreation and leisure, turning what could have been an opportunity to meet a range of people interested in the same passion into a program that isolates people from the rest of the community and makes them look different. Just a word of caution. Once a club, workplace or Association has had some success with including a person with a disability, their natural instinct seems to want to be to do more. Often they will

think it's a good idea to create a special group for people with a disability. It's important to be able to explain the risks of congregating people and the benefits to all members when people with disabilities are seen as individuals with unique talents and contributions to make.

Community rather than special.

If we want people with a disability to be accepted and included in the community, then we need to cease creating special recreational groups for people with a disability and assist people to join the 1000s of recreation and leisure based groups that already exist in community. We cannot expect the community to accept and get to know people with a disability if we keep them apart. We have seen many stories of people with disabilities pursuing their interests and making friendships and associations in the community. This in turn creates welcome diverse communities where people can become well known and appreciated. As Tilda Hanna's film director said about the 12 year old actors in the community drama club, "They all put their differences aside and formed their own tribe."

Perhaps in the beginning, people's competence might need enhancing, but by joining a beginner's group, or obtaining some extra assistance or coaching, the person could join the club like any other member. It's interesting though, when Michael first joined the lawn bowling club, he joined through a one so special group that no longer exists at the club. Michael's interest and passion drove his membership, and he has been an ordinary member of the club participating in club championship, pennants, and social events for many years.

The special group could be replaced with our come and try day, which could incorporate all beginners. Most significant is Morgan's inclusion in a community equestrian centre. With the right support, well trained horse people, adaptations and a wonderful coach that believes in her abilities, Morgan challenges the notion that people with a significant disability require special riding clubs.

You don't have to do the sport to be involved.

Sometimes people would dampen a person's interest by thinking they could never play sport at an elite level. For example, the person doesn't have the stamina or competence to play football. For example, Emily is a member of the Melbourne football club cheer squad and every Thursday night together with the Melbourne football club fans they gathered to make the banner for the players to run through on game day. Lauren's passion for football led her to taking on an assistance role on training nights handing out water bottles to team members.

Anchoring into valued roles.

When people are a part of the community and take up valued roles within our society, they become accepted for who they are and what they contribute, rather than being viewed as dependent, needing care or requiring charity. When a person with a disability takes up a valued role in a club, association or workplace, many of the negative assumptions about people with disabilities fade away and the person's abilities shine. In his podcast Owen suggests that clubs and associations like his bowling club depend on volunteer efforts from the members for

all sorts of roles and indeed, the club relies upon the contributions of members for its very survival and function. Owen lists all of the roles Michael has besides playing lawn balls. These include being a member of the bowls committee, offering hospitality at private functions, volunteering on the green when the public visit for barefoot bowls, unofficial spokesperson, public relations officer, working-bee volunteer, school car park attendant, BBQ chef, and all round welcoming guru. This is an impressive list and it raises expectations about what Michael can do, enhances his contribution skills and knowledge and embeds him in the culture of the club. He is a respected and integral part of the bowling Club's operations. I'm sure Michael is missed if he's not there. Even though Maddie has been going to the Grand Prix and Formula One with his dad for many years, his circle of support was encouraged to think about how his interest and knowledge in motor sport could be converted to a role beyond spectator. This eventuated into a volunteer role in the marshals tent at the Formula One in Melbourne. As Maddie describes, this was a dream come true. It led him to meeting organisers and has led to other roles. For example at the Moto GP at Phillip Island.

Raising expectations.

Being a member in a community club raises expectations about what people with a disability can do. Matt is also seen as having a valued role with some authority as he volunteers in the martial tent at the Formula One. Hannah is also seen by the other children in her drama group for her strengths and abilities. And as her director Tilda said, "Hannah's very creative

and beautifully honest, and her unique point of view was integral to the creative process and final outcome of the film.”

The context for friendships to develop and flourish.

Through our recreation and leisure roles in the community, particularly through club membership, we set the context for a relationship to emerge and flourish. For example, Michael often goes out for dinner with other club members. Being a volunteer at Formula One Maddie met new like minded friends who share his passion for motor sport. He says, “They are my people.” Through her drama class Hannah meets other 12 year old girls. Emily feels her friends at banner making have almost become like another family. They have fun together, provide practical experience by giving her a lift home, and even support when she's feeling down. Morgan has made friends through the horse riding community, she has even travelled with her equestrian coach to various international competitions. Friendship can take some intentionality to foster and should not be left to chance, we should look for opportunities to invite and nurture friendships. A great example of this is Lauren asking football players to her birthday celebration. The notion of assisting one person at a time to pursue a unique interest or passion also makes it more conducive to building genuine reciprocal relationships with other citizens. The community has great potential to welcome individuals if encouraged and supported in their efforts, once people get to know each other. As people who share common interests and passions, preconceived judgement fades and relationship has the chance to grow a pathway to employment. For some individuals, their recreation and leisure roles have turned into

employment. This is awesome because when you're interested in something, you're highly motivated, stick with it and build competencies. Thus it can be a perfect pathway to employment, if considered creatively. For example, by being a long term member of a drama group, Hannah now sees acting as a possible career pathway. She states, "When I grow up, I'd like to be an actress, but I also love writing scripts and creating characters and stories." Lauren's passion for football, landed her a job in the Carlton football club shop. So in conclusion, relationships and leisure is a great way to pursue our interests, it can lead to opportunities for growth and development of our identity. And it's an ideal way for people to connect and to get to know each other. We need to encourage people with developmental disabilities to pursue their interest in typical and ordinary ways in the community so they too can enjoy the many benefits it has to offer, but can also offer their strengths and gifts to the community. This is the way we will break down barriers and shift attitude. As Owen says at the end of his podcast, he's still to determine whether the club has added more value to Michael's life, or the reverse.

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