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# Canadian Disability Participation Project



The CDPP is an alliance of university, public, private and government sector partners working together to enhance community participation among Canadians with physical disabilities. The research team on this project has expertise in occupational therapy, disability and rehabilitation studies, and psychology.

## Recreational Leisure Activities

### Understanding the benefits of participating in Adaptive Leisure Activities

The purpose of this brief is to share the findings from a qualitative study which assessed the impact of adapted recreational activities on the wellbeing, health, and social participation of people with disabilities. This paper was published in the Disability and Health Journal<sup>1</sup> and was a part of a program evaluation conducted with the Disability Foundation, which assessed the impact and effectiveness of adapted recreational leisure activities (RLA). The paper was written by two researchers at the University of British Columbia Dr. Delphine Labbé and Dr. William Miller, and the Executive Director of the Disability Foundation, Ruby Ng. This research was supported by the Canadian Disability Participation Project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Partnership grant.





## Context of the study

The Disability Foundation, formerly known as the Sam Sullivan Disability Foundation, is a Vancouver-based non-profit organization that offers numerous RLA to people with various disabilities. Its six programs support seasonal and year-round activities, including sailing, hiking, paddling (kayaking and paddle boarding), gardening, music, social and informational gatherings, assistive technology creation, and wood-crafting. This study used the Quality of Participation in Parasport Framework (QPPF)<sup>2</sup> to look at the benefits of adaptive leisure. The Framework proposed six dimensions that contribute to quality of participation: autonomy, belongingness, challenge, engagement, mastery, and meaning.

## What did we do?

The team recruited 37 participants who were either working for, volunteering, or participating in one of the Disability Foundation's programs. Dr Labbé conducted interviews and focus groups with these participants. Examples of questions asked include "What does it mean for you to participate in this activity? Why did you first join this activity? What do you like the least?" Participants were also asked about factors that contributed to or limited their involvement in the activities. In addition, participants were observed during the program activities over a six month period to provide emotional and behavioural insight, which is more difficult to obtain through the other two methods. The transcriptions of the interviews and focus group recordings were coded and then the codes were organized into key themes and sub-themes.

## What are the individual benefits of adaptive leisure?

The theme *Personal enrichment encompassed* meaning, growth, control & freedom, and health & wellbeing. RLA allowed the members to return to meaningful activities and pursue their passions. By offering personal meaning, members said that RLA made them feel like everyone else. This study also highlighted how the members learned various skills and gained new knowledge. As Harold, an 86 year-old member said "there's always the opportunity to learn things that I never even dreamed of being able to". Engaging in the activities also enabled autonomy for the members, as they felt empowered to make their own choices and be independent during the activity. Participants described the RLAs as "barrier-free experiences", which gave them a sense of freedom. Participants also perceived physical and psychological health and wellbeing benefits with RLA, such as improved mood and feelings of relaxation. During the observation, member's mood and expressions were often seen to shift from noticeable agitation to a sense of calmness and joy.

## What are the social benefits for the members and their communities?

The second theme, *Collective impact*, showed that RLA contributed to feelings of connectedness, helped raise awareness, and opened new avenues for the members with disabilities. Members felt accepted and respected by their peers, the staff, and the volunteers. During the observations, the participants were continuously chatting and laughing together. Engaging in the activities was perceived to help reduce the social isolation of individuals with disabilities. It was also a great way to have both people living with and without a disability interacting, which in the words of Michael, a volunteer, facilitated "both worlds to intermingle". Some members reported that the programs provided relevant resources and information that would otherwise not be easily accessible. Participants discussed that partaking in adaptive leisure promoted

a positive image of people with disabilities, showing them as active members of their community. The findings suggested that initial participation in adapted leisure inspired members to pursue other kind of activities, such as volunteering or starting their own businesses.

## What are the factors that limit or support participation in adaptive leisure?

The last theme, *Contributors to the RLA experience*, focused on the programs' delivery logistics, volunteers and staff, and the external environmental factors. The low cost, diversity of activities, and availability

of specialized equipment were identified as factors which helped to create a positive experience. The volunteers and staff played a major role in the programs. They focused on member's strengths and needs, and created a safe environment. Members reported that knowing the volunteers were willing to dedicate their free time to help them enjoy RLA was significant, even if it was sometimes difficult to recruit and retain volunteers. Barriers to participation included booking and communication issues, and lack of facility accessibility. One of the main external barriers identified was transportation, as some members had to travel long distances to participate in the activities. Family and friends offered support and encouragement, but were also concerned or not open to adapted RLA, which limited participation.





## In Summary

This paper explored the impact of RLAs on the health, wellbeing, and social participation of people with disabilities, highlighting barriers and facilitators to engaging in the activities. Findings reported individual physical and psychological benefits, such as improved health, confidence, feeling of mastery and autonomy. This study also showed how RLA promoted collective benefits such a sense of community, reducing stereotypes, and acting as a springboard for other activities. These benefits supported the need for implementation of more adaptive leisure activities, to enable people with disabilities to fully participate in their community.

## References

1. Labbé D, Miller WC, Ng R, Participating more, participating better: Health benefits of adaptive leisure for people with disabilities, *Disability and Health Journal*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2018.11.007>.
2. Evans MB, Shirazipour CH, Allan V, et al. Integrating insights from the parasport community to understand optimal experiences: The quality parasport participation framework. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*. 2018;37:79e90.

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