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## CLINICS AND PRACTICE

# Trajectory and challenges of the Leisure Service: The first 25 years

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### Abstract

Whenever there are new challenges it is important to stop to consider their priorities. This year the Leisure Service of the Catalan Down's Syndrome Foundation celebrates its first 25 years. Thus, a short review of the history of the Service will be presented and what this leisure concept means. It will also comment on how the individuals and those around them feel when the former want to start enjoying their free time, and what the professional propose to do as a response. The challenges and new concepts of the Service will be presented at the end of this article.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Ocio;  
Síndrome de Down;  
Discapacidad intelectual;  
Inclusión;  
Calidad de vida;  
Relación social

### Trayectoria y retos del Servicio de Ocio: Los primeros 25 años

### Resumen

Con tal de plantear nuevos retos es importante detenerse y conocer su precedencia. El Servicio de Ocio de la Fundación Catalana Síndrome de Down este año cumple sus primeros 25 años. Por lo tanto, se hará un breve repaso de la historia del Servicio y de cómo este entiende el concepto ocio. Además, se comentará cómo se siente la persona y su entorno cuando esta quiere empezar a disfrutar de su tiempo libre y qué fórmula proponen los profesionales como respuesta. Los retos y los nuevos proyectos del Servicio ocuparán el final de este artículo.

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The Leisure Service of the Catalan Down's Syndrome Foundation will be 25 years old this year. The Young Independence Program pilot project (*Programa de Autonomia Joven [PAJ]*) set the standards. The young people who took part were those who asked for time to be able to discuss, propose, organise, and prepare leisure activities. That is to say, they wanted leisure time, without commitments or responsibilities, in order to be able to relate with, choose and enjoy the activity carried out.

The healthcare professionals started to introduce the Young Persons Space in 1989, a meeting point for the 12 young people of the program. Three Friends Groups were already formed in 1992, and in 1996, they made their first summer trips.

At the moment, the number of people interested in becoming part of the Friends Groups and in travelling has not stopped increasing. There are currently 125 people active in the Leisure Service. Each one of them goes out at the weekend with their Friends Group to carry out activities chosen amongst them. They also have the option of going out for a weekend with the whole group, and when it comes to holiday time, they can have meetings to decide when and where to go.

The Service has also taken part in many congresses, conferences, meetings, chats and training sessions, where the theoretical perspective adopted has been presented, as well as how it has been updated over the years.

Of the many existing definitions of *leisure*, the Service has opted for the one proposed by Trilla (1991), who stated that "leisure, regardless of what the activity is, is a useful way of using free time by means of a chosen task, carried out freely and with a purpose, and by doing it when there is satisfaction and pleasure for the individual".

Guirao and Vega (2012) completed this definition by stating that leisure plays such an essential role in our lives that we cannot imagine being without it because: 1) it is a basic human right that helps the individual to develop; 2) it gives quality of life to these individuals so that they can live in a positive and rewarding way, as it leads to both physical and emotional well-being; and 3) it is an essential human experience to be engaged in leisure activities influences all walks of life, on being in touch with very personal questions such as interests, hobbies, desires, etc.

Thus, leisure has been identified as an essential component of quality of life and, as such, we understand it in the same context of leisure in the life of people without a disability.

When individuals with Down's syndrome first show an interest in enjoying their free time, we must be aware of the feelings and emotions that it awakens, both in the individuals themselves and in their surroundings.

It opens up a new world for the individuals, full of unknown experiences and sensations: to go out, meet with friends, carry out activities that they like... And all the effort and responsibility that this brings: to have to arrive at the agreed time and to call if they are going to be late, or not going, to be responsible for money and personal documents, etc.

It also opens a completely new way of life for the family, since they must provide the necessary support for the individual, but without invading their space. To know about the

activity that they will be carrying out that weekend by talking to their family and not the reference group, to advise them and guide them in decisions as regards trips and activities, but not decide for them, to give them power over decisions so that, gradually, they will be more independent individuals. These are some of the examples that the family have to adjust to, so that they continue growing up and asking for their own space.

To confront these new situations associated with leisure time, is necessary and welcome since, as has been mentioned before, it is a time for connecting with other environments of life and is directly related with the quality of life of the individual.

The Leisure Service team are currently using a formula that includes the family and the individuals themselves to experience this entire process as an enriching one.

This formula consists of creating a comfort zone. This means that the person feels part of a group, which may be reflected in the other and feels accepted. This feeling will increase their enthusiasm and motivation to take part in the activities. Also, the fact of having a reference, a support person, who is seen as a model for both the group and the family will help to eliminate a large part of the suffering and the risk that the families and the participants themselves may feel.

The formula is rounded off with continuous communication and the alliance required by the three parties and with the constant message that the people responsible for choosing the activities are those who will enjoy them, thus generating real pleasure and satisfaction to take part in them.

The stability of always forming part of a group, of the organisation, and of the methodology used has led to the continuity of the Leisure Service for all these years. Now is the time to expand the formula to offer more possibilities at an individual level and, above all, to involve society.

The view of the Service is gradually transforming to face new challenges. If the same experiences and situations set the route to follow 25 years ago, it is the same now, together with the concept promoted by Guirao y Vega (2012): inclusive leisure, which is no more than including people with disabilities in the leisure, cultural, sport and recreation services of the community like the citizens that they are.

The proposal of these authors is a challenge for everyone. A challenge that must be promoted every day and needs preliminary work by all the parties involved.

The Leisure Service currently offers two programs: that of the Friends Group and that of tourism. In the first, there are a total of 13 groups, of which 11 meet every weekend, and the other two, which are the "young people's spaces", meet every two weeks. These groups are organised by age and interests. In the second program, trips are offered during holiday periods: summer and, this year, also Christmas. There is also the option of going out for a weekend.

Therefore, the individuals always carry out the activity and/or the trip in a group. The preliminary work for an inclusive leisure is to take more note of the point of view of the individuals, that is, to actively listen to their interests, not only that of the whole group, and to help them to make it a reality.

The idea is to regularly in the program of group of friends offer the individual the possibility of choosing the activity

independently from the group, in accordance with their motivations and interest. Furthermore, they will share this leisure space with individuals from other groups who will also be motivated with expectations to enjoy their choice.

This is a project that will be started in the next few months, and is compatible with the rest of it, since to set it in motion does not involve leaving everything else that is being done. It involves expanding the formula and introducing other variables. It involves increasing the comfort and safety zone, both for the family and the individual. It involves everyone.

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