

FACTSHEET

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Medical Play

The importance of play

Play is how children explore, interact, and come to understand the world around them. Play helps children to learn and gives them an outlet to express themselves. It is essential to the ongoing physical, emotional, cognitive and social development of children. The use of play in hospitals sustains development, normalises the environment and has been shown to be an effective therapeutic tool for the reduction of anxiety in paediatric patients. Allied Health Professionals use various types of play to help children through their healthcare experiences.

What is Medical Play?

Medical Play is supported play, involving the use of real and/or toy medical equipment. It gives children the chance to explore and become familiar with medical tools in their own time and in a non-threatening situation. Research suggests that children benefit more from medical play when given an adequate time frame to engage, explore the items, and process any emotional responses related to the items.

Why do we use medical play with children?

Medical play can assist children to:

- discover the uses for particular tools, so they do not seem as frightening
- become familiar with and more comfortable around medical equipment (desensitisation)

- be in control of medical items and feel more confident around these
- play out feelings or anxieties around their own or a sibling's healthcare experiences
- feel better prepared for upcoming examinations or procedures (when done in advance, with adequate time to process the information)

How to set up medical play:

Medical play is usually supervised and supported by an adult. When choosing resources consider what is developmentally appropriate for the child or children involved.

Medical play may be:

- explorative
- educational
- incidental
- directive
- non-directive

The resources provided might be more directed, to prepare or educate children about specific procedures and experiences. It may also be less directive and more creative. Medical Play can also be incidental eg. a doctor or nurse allowing the child to press a button on the blood pressure machine or giving the child an opportunity to use a stethoscope on teddy before it is used on the child.

Suggested Resources

Toy doctor's kits, dress-ups, stethoscopes, blood pressure cuffs, band aids, bandages, tape, tongue depressors, plastic syringes, cotton balls, dolls, teddies and story books about going to the doctors or hospital. Basic art and craft items to make pictures, collages or sculptures using medical supplies. Pencils and paper to draw, write stories or make plans.

Additional Resources

Your hospital's Child Life Therapy Department may have access to more specialised resources such as Medikin dolls, medical equipment, photos specific to types of treatment, models of scanners etc.

What can I do to help during and after?

- Allow the child time to explore the resources.
- Let them lead the play and discussion.
- Listen to the child's self-talk to help you assess their understanding and perceptions.
- Repeat the child's comments to validate feelings or reinforce their accurate understanding.
- Offer honest answers to questions even if the answer is "I don't know", "What do you think?" or "How could we find out?"
- Join in and use play rather than words to demonstrate or educate about the use of different items.
- Intervene if the child's actions may result in harm to themselves or others.
- Acknowledge the child's feelings and redirect them to a safer means of expressing that feeling – using dolls instead of people, play dough, pillows etc.
- Be patient and offer a range of experiences and types of play. Children with a long history of hospitalisation may take longer to feel confident in touching or exploring medical equipment. Reading hospital related books or DVDs may be an alternative means of engaging them.

References

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If your child requires frequent procedures, and experiences anxiety you can contact the Child Life Therapy Departments at:

- Sydney Children's Hospital - 93826984
- The Children's Hospital at Westmead - 98453717
- John Hunter Children's Hospital – (02)49855410