

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 a constructive way to express themselves. It is essential to the ongoing physical, emotional, cognitive and social development of children. The use of play in hospitals supports development, normalises the environment and has been shown to reduce anxiety for children in hospital. Allied Health Professionals use different types of play to help children through their healthcare experiences.

What is medical play?

Medical play is play that involves using real and/or toy medical equipment. It gives children the chance to look at and become familiar with medical tools in their own time and in a relaxed situation. Research suggests that children benefit more from medical play when given time to play with the items, and then process any emotional responses related to the items.

Why do we use medical play with children?

Medical play can help children to:

- discover how tools are used, 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 enough time to process the information)

How to set up medical play:

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

Medical play may be:

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

The equipment given to your child might be more directed, to prepare or educate children about specific procedures and experiences. Or it may be less directive and more creative. Medical play can also be incidental eg. a doctor or nurse allowing your child to press a button on the blood pressure machine or giving your child a chance to use a stethoscope on a teddy before it is used on them.

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 more specialised resources such as Medikin dolls, medical equipment, photos of types of treatment, models of scanners etc.

What can I do to help during and after?

- Allow your child time to explore the resources.
- Let them lead the play and discussion.
- Listen to your child's self-talk to help you assess their understanding and perceptions.
- Repeat your child's comments to support their feelings or to reinforce their 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 your child's actions may result in harm to themselves or others.
- Acknowledge your child's feelings and redirect them to a safer way to express 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 touching or exploring medical equipment. Reading hospital related books or DVDs may be another way to engage them.

References

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If your child needs 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