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An OT Approach to Play for Pediatric Cancer Patients

Michelle Erika Dytan, OTS; Karen Park, OTD, OTR/L, BCP

BACKGROUND

Play as an occupation provides children with ways to explore the world around them, while learning skills to improve critical thinking, creativity, and positive self-esteem (Guirguis, 2018). Despite its various benefits, children also simply play for fun (Yanof, 2019).

Children with cancer face barriers that limit their ability to engage in play, with negative consequences to their social, cognitive, and emotional development (Nijhof et al., 2018). The negative side effects of cancer may take a toll on a child's occupational performance in daily activities (Frygner-Holm et al., 2020).

PROBLEM

Children with cancer often do not engage in play as an occupation, particularly in a community-based setting. This may limit their personal development, social skills, and leave a negative impact on their mental health outcomes (Frygner-Holm et al., 2020).

As families play a vital role in a child's continuum of care, there is often a lack of social engagement and psychosocial support for caregivers (Jones et al. 2022).

PURPOSE

To develop a program for children with cancer to increase play opportunities to improve social participation and mental health outcomes while providing support for caregivers in a community-based setting.

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METHODS

Literature Review

- Play preferences according to developmental stages
- Pediatric cancer play interventions
- Psychosocial impact of cancer
- Impact of pediatric cancer on families
- Role of OT with pediatric cancer patients

Needs Assessment

- Clinical observations
- Informal interviews with pediatric cancer patients, respective caregivers, and staff
- Review of other material: podcasts, webinars, support groups

Program Evaluation

- Informal interviews
- Occupational profiles
- OT survey caregiver questionnaires

Theoretical Framework

- Ecology of Human Performance Model
- Social Participation Frame of Reference

ANALYSIS

- Barriers to occupational performance as a result of cancer include hospital stays, effects of cancer treatments, and transitioning to new environments
- Limited play opportunities for children with cancer outside the hospital
- Limited caregiver resources to facilitate play with children outside the hospital
- Lack of awareness of caregiver support resources within the community
- Cultural considerations and preferences

PROGRAM

Program Goals

- To implement meaningful and client-centered opportunities for pediatric cancer patients to engage in play while providing caregiver education within the community.
- To develop groups and resources to improve social participation and mental health outcomes with pediatric cancer patients and respective caregivers.

Program Groups

- The House Playgroup
- Care for Caregivers Group
- Practicing Applications of Life Skills (PALS) Group

Deliverables and Resources

- Play handouts
- Caregiver support handouts
- The House Friendship Box
- Play considerations for children with cancer
- Mental health resources
- Socializing with other families and support groups list
- Play curriculum for FW students



Program Implementation

- Established weekly groups to promote play activities, caregiver support, and life skills
- Advocated for the role of OT in pediatric cancer
- Provided play and wellness resources to bridge the gap with hospital stays and the community

IMPLICATIONS FOR OT

Occupational therapists provide a valuable, client-centered role in supporting children with cancer and their caregivers as they transition to a community-based setting to promote meaningful activities to develop skills needed for their daily life (Mohammadi et al., 2021).

Supporting children with cancer by implementing play activities can benefit their development, while simply having fun and being a child (Arriaga et al., 2020; Nijhof et al., 2018). Incorporating resources and support for caregivers empowers them in their role to support themselves and their child (Carrion-Plaza et al., 2020).

REFERENCES

