

St. John's expands its child life program

St. John's child life specialists help prepare children and their families for hospitalization, surgery and other procedures by using a variety of educational, medical and distraction tools. These specially trained individuals help ease some of the anxiety associated with the hospital.

"For many children, coming to the hospital is a new experience," Pediatric Child Life Specialist Rachael McClellan explains. "We try to meet their special needs."

To complement the care provided by the child life specialists in Pediatrics and Surgery, St. John's recently added child life specialists in the Radiology and Emergency Departments. These individuals provide:

Social, emotional & developmental support

Child life specialists plan activities, in the play areas and at the bedside to meet each child's individual needs. They encourage children to continue normal play through activities and materials provided during their time in the hospital.

Medical play & education

By using medical equipment, specially designed dolls, books and videos, child life specialists help children and teens become familiar with medical procedures and hospital routines. Medical play allows children to work through their anxiety, help clear up misconceptions and become better prepared for procedures.

"Children may do medical play, such as touching or playing with actual medical equipment, to help them understand and cope with procedures," according to

Surgery Child Life Specialist Susan Spears. "It helps them gain a sense of control."

Procedural support

Child life specialists help nursing staff by providing support to the child and family during a potentially painful procedure or test, such as an IV start or a blood draw.

Jessica Wiederholt, Emergency Department Child Life Specialist, says this support involves educating the child before the procedure in an age-appropriate manner and helping to both relax and distract the child during the procedure. "We blow bubbles, squeeze stress balls or magic pillows, use magic wands, puppets, sing and count out loud to distract the children."

To make sure our pediatric patients feel their hospital room is a safe haven, a specially designed Pediatric Procedure Room opened in the summer of 2004. Any time pediatric patients need shots, IV starts and other treatments that may be painful, they go to this room.

Infant stimulation

Child life specialists can provide stimulation and materials for even our littlest patients by developing daily developmental stimulation sessions for infants who are hospitalized for a long period. Mobiles, music and rattles also are available for parents to use.

(continued)



Dylan Fleek, 2, plays in the new pedi pre-surgical area before undergoing surgery while Surgery Child Life Specialist Susan Spears and his mom, Brodi, look on.

Shadow Buddies/ Homemade dolls

Shadow Buddies are special dolls used to help children learn about their illness or injury and its treatment. They were created with the idea that children undergoing serious surgery or treatment need a "friend" that is just like them. Buddies have various diagnoses, such as asthma, diabetes and cancer. The boy and girl dolls are available in three skin tones and four hair colors.

Homemade dolls, stitched, sewn and stuffed by a group of St. John's Samaritans, can be individualized by each child with washable markers. "These dolls help staff understand where the child is emotionally before surgery," Spears adds. "They also are a great way to distract the child and do medical play."

Sibling support

As a part of the family-centered care offered at St. John's, the child life program includes services to siblings and family members. Child life

specialists can spend time with other children in the family to help them understand why their sister or brother is in the hospital. She can also arrange a visit when a brother or sister is hospitalized in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit.

Siblings of patients are provided opportunities to express emotions using developmentally appropriate equipment and books, therapeutic art activities and use of hospital play areas.

Individual pre-operative tours

Because hospitalization and/or surgery can be a stressful and frightening experience, Spears conducts pre-operative tours of the surgery areas. These sessions give children and their family an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the hospital and medical equipment that may be used during the child's hospital stay. Children and family members are encouraged to ask any questions they may have about the "surgery day."

Bereavement support

Child life specialists also support family members when a child dies at the hospital. Wiederholt says St. John's makes sure families receive the support they need during this difficult time. "We supply memory materials, such as a special box to hold a lock of hair, emotional support and continue to follow-up with our bereaved families to help them work through their grief. We also hold an annual pediatric memorial service in St. John's Chapel."

Another important component is the Healing Hearts support group. Healing Hearts provides support and resources for families who have experienced loss through the death of a family member or close friend.

Conducted in a casual atmosphere

with a facilitator, this support group holds three separate meetings: for kids, ages 6-12; teens, ages 13-18; and parents/caregivers.

Special events

The Pet Therapy Program was developed in 2001 to take advantage of the positive effect animals have on children. Only specially trained and veterinarian-approved adult dogs are used for pet therapy.

Other special programs are planned throughout the year to provide entertainment, as well as distraction, from the daily hospital routine. These special programs are often held in the play areas, or may be brought to each child's hospital room. Holiday celebrations and performances by magicians, clowns and other special visitors are among the special events held at St. John's.

Building trust

"We want children and their families to leave St. John's with a positive hospital experience," Radiology Child Life Specialist Jackie Watson concludes. "So future healthcare experiences will be less stressful." ■



Ashley Cain, 8, plays with a Shadow Buddy® before she undergoes an outpatient surgical procedure.