The Power of Play: Enhancing Play Opportunities on a Pediatric Inpatient Unit

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Abstract

Play is a fundamental part of child development, supporting cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth. However, hospitalization presents significant barriers to play, as it can limit children's opportunities to engage in meaningful activities. While play may not always be the top priority in a hospital setting, it can serve as a powerful tool for recovery. Research highlights the therapeutic benefits of play in reducing stress, improving emotional well-being, and promoting developmental progress in the hospital environment (Dhas et al., 2022; Koukourikos et al., 2015).

This capstone experience focused on enhancing play opportunities within a pediatric inpatient setting by developing a structured toy library and resource guide for volunteers. A needs assessment was conducted to evaluate existing play resources, identify barriers to engagement, and gather stakeholder feedback. Findings revealed gaps in toy accessibility, inconsistent volunteer education, and a lack of organization in play materials. In response, a toy library with a detailed organization system was implemented, alongside a resource guide to support volunteers in selecting and utilizing toys effectively. Pre- and post-implementation surveys assessed the effectiveness of these interventions, revealing improvements in volunteer confidence, accessibility of play materials, and engagement in play.

Through this project, I gained valuable experience in program development, interprofessional collaboration, and advocacy for play in pediatric healthcare. As I transition into professional practice, this experience has strengthened my commitment to integrating play-based interventions in pediatric occupational therapy to support developmental progress and improve the overall hospital experience for children.

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Introduction

Play is the foundation of a child's development. Through play, children build cognitive, physical, language, social, and emotional skills, which shape their understanding of the world around them (Dhas et al., 2022; Zosh et al., 2017). However, pediatric hospitalization creates significant barriers to play. Children are often separated from their families, familiar belongings, and their daily routines are disrupted. Compared to peers in typical developmental settings such as home or school, hospitalized children generally have fewer opportunities to engage in play (Jones, 2018). When a child is admitted to the hospital, the primary focus is typically on addressing the symptoms of their condition and alleviating distress. As a result, play is often overlooked or viewed as less important.

Despite the challenges pediatric hospitalization presents for play, its value becomes even more significant as it promotes emotional well-being, alleviates stress and contributes to a more positive hospital experience for children (Koukourikos et al., 2015). This evidence highlights the need for initiatives that prioritize play and activity engagement in the hospital environment. While there is extensive information supporting the benefits of play, hospitals may lack the resources needed to promote play among patients. Recognizing this gap, I partnered with Ranken Jordan Pediatric Bridge Hospital for my Doctoral Capstone Experience (DCE) to develop a toy library and resource guide designed to enhance play opportunities for pediatric patients on the inpatient unit. Through this project, my goal was to expand play opportunities to help children maintain developmental milestones, improve emotional well-being, and experience a sense of normalcy during their hospital stay.

Needs Assessment

To address the strengths, limitations, and gaps in play opportunities at Ranken Jordan Pediatric Bridge Hospital, a comprehensive needs assessment was conducted. This process included gathering stakeholder feedback, taking inventory of existing play resources, and performing a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis. The primary objectives were to: (1) identify the strengths and limitations of current play resources; (2) identify barriers to engagement in play; and (3) develop a sustainable solution for enhancing play opportunities for children receiving inpatient care.

The assessment involved direct observation, informal conversations with staff and volunteers, and a review of existing literature on pediatric play in healthcare settings. Key findings revealed that while play is recognized as essential for pediatric development, barriers such as limited access to beneficial toys and a lack of structured guidance for volunteers hindered engagement. Additionally, stakeholder feedback indicated a need for a more organized system to select developmentally appropriate play materials.

Key themes from the needs assessment included: (1) limited access to engaging and developmentally beneficial play materials; (2) a lack of structured resources to guide volunteers in facilitating meaningful play experiences; and (3) the opportunity to enhance patient engagement through the creation of a toy library. These insights, along with the hospital's commitment to play in pediatric rehabilitation, directly informed my DCE. The main barriers identified were the disorganization of play materials, which made it challenging for volunteers to locate and use appropriate toys and activities. Additionally, volunteers often lacked guidance on how to choose play materials that aligned with each patient's unique needs. Without a structured system and clear guidance, play opportunities were inconsistent and did not fully support patients' therapeutic and developmental needs. To address these challenges, this capstone project

focused on creating an organized toy library and providing a comprehensive resource guide to help volunteers facilitate purposeful play experiences with patients.

Literature Review

Emotional Well-being

Play is effective in alleviating children's anxiety and fears from the time of hospital admission to discharge (Koukourikos et al., 2015). Koukourikos et al. (2015) found that play fosters self-expression, enhances cooperation during medical procedures, and helps children cope with the challenging emotions associated with being in the hospital. Play also serves as a form of communication for children, allowing them to share their feelings and experiences with family members and medical staff (Koukourikos et al., 2015). Additionally, research shows that regular participation in play helps reduce anxiety in children, improving their overall hospital experience (Al-Yateem & Rossiter, 2017; Burns-Nader & Hernandez-Reif, 2016). A randomized control trial revealed that children 7-11 years old showed lower cortisol levels after engaging in play activities, highlighting its effectiveness in reducing stress even in high-pressure environments such as hospitals (Potasz et al., 2012).

Physical and Cognitive Development

Play is a natural way for children to develop cognitive and physical skills that support lifelong learning (Dag, 2020). Pretend play, such as using dolls, toy animals, and objects, encourages language development by allowing children to create narratives, express emotions, and imitate real-life situations (Healey, 2019). Engaging in problem-solving activities, such as playing with blocks and puzzles, supports cognitive growth, enhances fine motor skills, and contributes to spatial and early mathematical abilities (Healey, 2019). Physical play, such as ball

games, promotes gross motor development, self-regulation, and social interaction with peers (Healey, 2019). Movement-based play, like running, jumping, crawling, and swinging, strengthens muscles and improves coordination (Dag, 2020), while fine motor activities like grasping small objects, cutting with scissors, and playing with dough refine dexterity and hand control (Dag, 2020). Additionally, games involving physical activity foster healthy movement habits and develop both physical strength and social skills such as cooperation, problem-solving, and sharing (Dag, 2020). Overall, through play, children build cognitive and physical skills that support their growth and well-being.

Normalcy During Hospitalization

Play is more than just a distraction during hospitalization; it helps children maintain their identify and sense of normalcy. Nijhof et al. (2018) emphasized that play should not be put on hold during hospitalization, as it helps children stay connected to life outside the hospital. Through play, children can gain a sense of control and autonomy in an environment where many decisions are made for them (Koukourikos et al., 2015). Providing opportunities for choice and self-determination during play is important for fostering a child's sense of agency, especially in settings where choices are limited (Stoecklin & Fattore, 2018). Additionally, play is a crucial component of care as it provides children with an outlet to express their emotions and regain a sense of competence which is often lost during illness and hospitalization (Jessee & Gaynard, 2009). When children engage in play on their own terms, they can embrace being a child first, rather than being defined primarily as a patient. Ultimately, play offers a sense of normalcy in the hospital by allowing children to participate in familiar and enjoyable activities that connect them to their everyday routines.

Selecting Toys

When selecting toys for children with complex medical conditions, it is important to choose those that align with their developmental abilities and support further skill development (Dag, 2020). The best toys are those that not only match the child's current abilities but also offer opportunities for growth as the child's skills advance over time. Some toys are versatile enough to "grow" with the child, allowing for different uses as they reach new developmental milestones. For example, a child as young as 18 months might use blocks simply by stacking them, while a 2-year-old might engage in more complex play, such as using the same blocks to build a bridge (Dag, 2020). For children with developmental delays or disabilities, toy selection can be more challenging, as they may face obstacles in play due to their unique needs (Dag, 2020). In these cases, toy recommendations often rely on age-based guidelines, which may not accurately reflect the child's developmental level. Caregivers of children with a disability may benefit from additional guidance from professionals, such as occupational therapists, to help identify the most suitable toys and activities that promote growth and mastery of skills (Dag, 2020). By carefully selecting appropriate toys, caregivers can support the child's development and ensure engaging, meaningful play experiences.

Relevance to Occupational Therapy

Play is a fundamental component of occupational therapy, particularly in pediatric practice, as it plays an important role in a child's development. Occupational therapists take a holistic approach to play by considering the child (Person), the environment (Environment), and the activity itself (Occupation), which all impact the child's ability to engage meaningfully in play. The Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model emphasizes the interaction between these elements, highlighting how external factors like toys, playgrounds, and social interactions influence play participation (Kuhaneck, 2024). According to the American Occupational Therapy

Association (AOTA, 2020), play is defined as an activity that is intrinsically motivated, internally controlled, and freely chosen, fostering creativity and imagination. Occupational therapists advocate for play in various settings, including schools, hospitals, and communities, ensuring that children's right to engage in play is supported in every environment (Kuhaneck, 2024). By promoting play, occupational therapists help children, especially those with disabilities, grow across all areas of development.

In the context of this capstone project, the PEO model serves as the guiding theory to enhance the hospital environment and better support children's play. This approach focuses on the interaction between the child, their surroundings, and the activities they engage in, all of which influence meaningful participation in play. By applying the PEO model, this project ensures that play opportunities are tailored to meet the child's developmental needs, ultimately benefiting the patient's overall well-being.

Capstone Plan

Capstone Experience Design

The focus of this capstone project is program development, driven by the need to enhance pediatric patient engagement through a structured toy library and comprehensive toy guide.

Site and Mentor

The completion of this capstone project took place at Ranken Jordan Pediatric Bridge Hospital in Maryland Heights, MO. Ranken Jordan specializes in caring for children and families with complex medical conditions, illnesses, and injuries and bridging the gap between hospital and home (Ranken Jordan, 2025). They utilize a "Care Beyond the Bedside" approach which

emphasizes the power of play in the recovery process which aligns closely with the goals of this capstone project.

I was mentored by Sarah Garman, MS, CCC-SLP, the inpatient therapy manager at Ranken Jordan. Sarah is an experienced speech-language pathologist who has been with Ranken Jordan for 20 years, bringing a vast amount of knowledge and expertise to her role. In addition, I worked closely with Daniel Chitwood, the nursing manager of the inpatient unit. Both Sarah and Daniel provided valuable insights that furthered my understanding of the importance of play, interprofessional collaboration, and the unique needs of children with complex medical conditions. Their combined expertise guided the development of this project, allowing me to create resources that enhance patient engagement and support volunteer involvement within the inpatient unit they work on.

Procedures

This capstone project was completed through a fourteen-week experience with Ranken Jordan Pediatric Bridge Hospital. The initial step involved conducting a needs assessment by surveying staff and volunteers to understand their perspectives on current play resources, identifying gaps in play opportunities, and gathering input on the unit's specific needs (See Appendix A). Nursing staff and volunteers were selected to participate in the survey as they interact with patients most frequently and are often the ones facilitating play. The survey was administered via Microsoft Forms and distributed through both an online platform and physical flyers containing a QR code for easy access. The results from this survey were used to guide the creation of the toy library and resource guide.

A review of the current toy inventory was completed to assess whether the available play materials met the needs of the pediatric population. The inventory was organized by age group and developmental skills. This comprehensive assessment identified gaps in the existing toy collection. Based on findings from the survey and inventory analysis, a detailed list of toy recommendations was created for the specific needs of the inpatient unit. The selected toys and games were chosen to target a variety of age groups and developmental areas, including fine motor, gross motor, sensory, and cognitive skills. The toy list was reviewed and approved by Ranken Jordan, and the selected items were purchased to begin the implementation of the toy library.

The next phase of the project involved setting up and organizing the toy library. The toy library was set up in a designated area within the inpatient unit, making it easily accessible for staff and volunteers. Toys were arranged in the cabinet based on a color-coded system. Each patient was assigned a specific color group to help match toys to their developmental age (See Appendix B). Additionally, toys were categorized by developmental areas such as fine motor, gross motor, sensory, and cognitive skills. This system provides volunteers and staff easy access and clear guidance for choosing toys that match each patient’s goals.

In parallel, a resource binder was created to help volunteers confidently select appropriate toys for patients (See Appendix C). The binder mirrors the color-coded system used in the toy library, serving as a clear guide to help volunteers match toys to patients' developmental needs. The binder further categorizes toys by key skill areas of fine motor, gross motor, sensory, and cognitive skills. Volunteers can easily navigate the binder to explore the toy library inventory. Each page includes a picture of the toy, guidance on how to use it, and strategies to adapt the activity to best support the child’s needs. This resource aims to empower volunteers by giving

them the knowledge to use toys effectively, creating more targeted and meaningful play experiences.

Following the implementation of these resources, a post-survey was conducted to assess the toy library and its impact on patient engagement and developmental skills. The survey included a combination of Likert-scale, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions to gather feedback from staff and volunteers (See Appendix D). Participants evaluated the organization of the toy library, the usefulness of the color-coded system, and the resource binder's role in selecting appropriate toys. The survey also measured how confident participants felt in choosing toys that align with patients' developmental needs and gave them an opportunity to share suggestions for further improvements. This feedback was essential in ensuring the new toy resources effectively supported meaningful play and addressed the needs of patients on the inpatient unit.

Project Evaluation, Outcomes, and Results

The evaluation of this project focused on assessing how effectively the toy library and resource guide enhanced play opportunities on the inpatient unit. Pre- and post-implementation surveys were conducted to gather feedback on the organization of the toy library and its impact on promoting play. To analyze the data, I compared pre- and post- survey responses. For example, the pre-survey asked participants to rate how effective the current toy and play resources were in promoting patient engagement and development. In comparison, the post-survey showed an increase in how effective the new toy library was perceived to be. In addition, pre-survey responses highlighted challenges including a lack of materials and uncertainty about how to engage with patients. These challenges were addressed by the improvements made in toy organization and the creation of the resource guide. The post-survey responses showed that

participants felt more confident in selecting developmentally appropriate toys after the toy library was implemented. The comparison of pre- and post- survey results revealed significant improvements in the overall effectiveness of the play resources. These results indicate that the toy library and resource guide helped enhance play experiences for pediatric patients.

Deliverables

The key deliverables of this capstone project include a toy library, a resource guide, and a PowerPoint presentation. The toy library features new and updated toys organized by developmental areas and a color-coded system to help staff and volunteers easily select toys. The resource guide offers detailed information on each toy and suggestions for using them. Lastly, the recorded PowerPoint presentation explains the toy library's organization and guides staff and volunteers on how to effectively use the new resources to benefit the patients.

Sustainability

To ensure the project's sustainability, the toy library and resource guide will be incorporated into the daily routines and care practices of the inpatient unit. The recreational therapist assigned to each patient will be responsible for placing patients in the appropriate color group, ensuring the organization system remains in use after the capstone project ends. Additionally, the PowerPoint presentation, which was designed to educate staff and volunteers on how to use the toy library, has been recorded and uploaded to the Ranken Jordan database, allowing for ongoing access and use. This approach ensures that the resources will continue to support meaningful play for pediatric patients beyond the project's duration.

Discussion

Impact

This capstone project has made a positive impact on the staff, volunteers, and patients at Ranken Jordan Pediatric Bridge Hospital. The toy library and resource guide have created a more efficient system, helping staff and volunteers quickly find toys that match each patient's developmental needs. With a better variety of toys available, patients now have more opportunities to engage in play. Volunteers feel more confident in selecting toys and interacting with patients, knowing they have the right tools to support therapeutic play.

Limitations

One limitation of this project was the time restriction of 14 weeks, which limited the ability to assess the long-term impact of the implemented resources. While pre- and post-implementation surveys provided insight into immediate outcomes, such as improved volunteer confidence and accessibility of play materials, I was unable to evaluate whether these changes were sustained over time. Another challenge was the feasibility of conducting in-person volunteer education sessions. Due to the large number of volunteers and their varied schedules, coordinating a formal training session for all participants was not practical. To address this, I created a PowerPoint resource that volunteers could access at their convenience. However, this format may not be as effective as an interactive, hands-on training session. Future research could explore alternative methods for delivering volunteer education, such as recorded demonstrations or small-group training sessions, to enhance learning and support the implementation of play-based strategies.

Conclusion

This capstone project highlighted the significant role of play in pediatric healthcare and its potential to positively impact children who are in the hospital. By developing a toy library and

providing volunteers with the necessary tools to facilitate play, the project aimed to enhance play opportunities on the inpatient unit, making play more accessible and meaningful for children. The implementation of a user-friendly organization system empowered volunteers to engage more effectively with patients, supporting their growth and recovery. Although time constraints limited a long-term evaluation, the resources created have been integrated into the hospital's daily routines, ensuring lasting benefits. Ultimately, this project emphasizes that play is an essential therapeutic component of pediatric care that should be prioritized in hospital environments to enhance children's emotional well-being, development, and overall recovery.

Personal Reflection

Reflecting on my capstone experience, I have grown both personally and professionally. I gained a deeper understanding of the essential role of play in pediatric care and how it supports children's emotional, cognitive, and physical development. It was rewarding to see how small changes, such as organizing a toy library and providing volunteers with resources, can have a valuable impact on creating a more engaging and supportive environment for children. Collaborating with a variety of professionals strengthened my ability to work effectively within a team. On a personal level, this project challenged me to think creatively as I developed practical resources and solutions for a clinical setting. Overall, this experience strengthened my understanding of the power of play as a tool for healing, learning, and growth. I am excited to carry these lessons forward in my career as an occupational therapist.

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Appendix A

Pre-Survey

1. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate the effectiveness of the current toys and play resources in promoting patient engagement and development? (1 = Not Effective, 5 = Very Effective)
    a. 1 = Not Effective
    b. 2 = Slightly Effective
    c. 3 = Moderately Effective
    d. 4 = Effective
    e. 5 = Very Effective

2. Which developmental skills do you feel need the most support during play? (Select all that apply)
    a. Fine Motor
    b. Gross Motor
    c. Sensory Processing
    d. Cognition
    e. Social Interaction
    f. Emotional Regulation
    g. Other (Please specify)

3. What challenges do you face when trying to engage patients in play or activities? (Select all that apply)
    a. Lack of materials
    b. Limited patient interest
    c. Time constraints
    d. Space limitations
    e. Uncertainty about how to engage
    f. Other (Please specify)

4. Are there specific patient populations (e.g., certain age groups or diagnoses) that are harder to engage in play (Select all that apply)
    a. Preschool and Younger (0-5 years)
    b. Early School-Age (6-8 years)
    c. Older School-Age (9-12 years)
    d. Teens (13+ years)
    e. Other (Please specify)

5. How confident do you feel in selecting toys and activities that align with patients' developmental skills and goals? (1 = Not Confident, 5 = Very Confident)
    a. 1 = Not Confident
    b. 2 = Slightly Confident
    c. 3 = Moderately Confident
    d. 4 = Confident
    e. 5 = Very Confident

Appendix B

Toy Library Color-Coded System

Appendix C

Toy Guide Example Pages

Cognition

Egg Matching

Ways to Play

- Have child match the two halves of the egg based on color and shape
- Hide the eggs around the room for an egg hunt!

Memory Matching

Ways to Play

- Lay out the cards face down and take turns flipping over two at a time to find a match
- Simplify by starting with a smaller number of cards and gradually increasing

Fine Motor

Jenga

Ways to Play

- Stack the blocks to build a tower, then take turns removing one block at a time
- Start with a shorter tower to make it easier to handle

Hungry Hungry Hippos

Ways to Play

- Players compete to press their levers quickly and collect the most marbles
- Allow for free play where hippos “eat” the marbles without scoring
- Use fewer marbles to slow down pace of game

Sensory

Scratch Art

Ways to Play

- Use the tool to scratch off the dark surface and reveal vibrant colors underneath
- Allow children to freely explore by creating pictures and patterns

Fidgets

Ways to Play

- Fidget toys provide a variety of sensory experiences that help children with sensory regulation, focus, and stress relief
- Encourage children to explore different textures, sounds, and movements

Appendix D

Post-Survey

1. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate the effectiveness of new toy library in promoting patient engagement and development? (1 = Not Effective, 5 = Very Effective)
    a. 1 = Not Effective
    b. 2 = Slightly Effective
    c. 3 = Moderately Effective
    d. 4 = Effective
    e. 5 = Very Effective

2. The toy library is well-organized, and the cabinet signs make it easy to find the toys I need.
    a. Agree
    b. Neither agree nor disagree
    c. Disagree

3. The toy resource binder is a helpful tool for selecting appropriate toys for children and providing suggestions on how to use each toy.
    a. Agree
    b. Neither agree nor disagree
    c. Disagree

4. On a scale of 1-5, how confident do you feel in selecting toys and activities that align with patients' developmental skills and goals after the implementation of the toy library? (1= Not Confident, 5 = Very Confident)
    a. 1 = Not Confident
    b. 2 = Slightly Confident
    c. 3 = Moderately Confident
    d. 4 = Confident
    e. 5 = Very Confident

5. What suggestions do you have to further improve the toy library?
    a. Type your answer: _____