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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Toy Library in an Outpatient Setting: The Importance of Play in the Waiting Room

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Health promotion, Humanization of assistance, Ambulatory care.

Abstract

Introduction: Playing is a way for children to express their feelings. It helps them process unfamiliar and unpleasant experiences. Healthcare services are often crowded with users, presenting examination rooms and instruments that are unfamiliar and frightening to children. The playroom contributes to the continuous stimulation of their development and promotes more humanized care, helping them process unfamiliar and unpleasant experiences. **Objective:** To assess the contribution of implementing a playroom as a waiting room in a pediatric outpatient clinic for promoting childrens health. **Method:** Qualitative research using content analysis of data obtained from interviews with mothers of children who attended an outpatient playroom. **Results and Discussion:** Thirty mothers of children aged 2 to 6 years were interviewed. Their responses were grouped into three categories: The importance of the playroom; The playroom as a resource for better acceptance of pediatric consultation; The playroom as a space for interaction. Most of the accompanying persons had a favorable perception of the playroom and recognized its importance as a factor in reducing anxiety and the childs suffering while waiting for a pediatric consultation, in addition to promoting their development. **Conclusion:** The outpatient playroom offers significant benefits for both children and their companions. It helps alleviate the childs anxiety and fear during the waiting period for medical consultation. It also aids in interactions between children and companions and between children and healthcare professionals.

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INTRODUCTION

Childhood is a stage of life marked by intense physical activity, which is essential for children to explore and understand their surroundings, thereby supporting their overall development. It is characterized by the acquisition of physical, cognitive, and social skills necessary for interaction in various contexts.

The main factor contributing to the holistic development of children is play. Through play, the child observes, learns about the world, expresses reality, creates and recreates experiences, and builds a world that meets their needs. For this to occur, children must enjoy full health.[1]

However, along this journey, children may experience periods of illness that disrupt their daily routines as they seek medical care for recovery. This interruption can prevent them from performing daily activities, such as playing and attending school—especially in cases requiring hospitalization—thereby restricting their development.

To minimize the negative effects on the development, life, and behavior of children facing such situations, Federal Law No. 11,104 of March 21, 2005 establishes the mandatory installation of playrooms (*brinquedotecas*) in healthcare units that provide pediatric inpatient care.[2]

A playroom is a space equipped with toys and educational games designed to stimulate children and their caregivers to play. In this environment, the child learns in an enjoyable and cooperative way, developing various motor and cognitive skills. It is a setting that naturally fosters attitudes of sharing, cooperation, and fair competition, negotiated through play, providing opportunities for socialization among children and their parents.

Play is a form of expression through which children communicate their feelings, preferences, fears, and habits. It facilitates the elaboration of unfamiliar or unpleasant experiences by mediating between the familiar world and new, threatening situations—transcending time and space limits and thus minimizing suffering caused by illness and hospitalization, bringing them closer to their everyday reality.[3,4]

By playing, the child imagines, creates, and processes experiences, externalizes negative situations, learns to cope with illness, and finds meaning in painful experiences—reducing anxiety and the feeling of exclusion from social activities they previously participated in.[5]

Through sharing toys, experiences, and emotions; caring for the physical environment and furnishings; and following fair play rules, playrooms offer opportunities for children to acquire notions of democracy and social rights, contributing to the formation of citizenship.[6,7,8]

This strategy is fundamental for proper physical, psychological, and social development, providing a therapeutic environment that helps children successfully face new and often frightening experiences.[9]

Even when a child's health condition does not require hospitalization, the mere interruption of their routine for outpatient care can cause tension and discomfort due to the procedures necessary for disease control.

Moreover, outpatient healthcare settings are often overcrowded, filled with examination rooms and unfamiliar, intimidating instruments. In this context, the playroom plays an important role in supporting children's recovery and well-being, as it not only contributes to continuous developmental stimulation but also promotes more humanized care.[5]

In order to ensure comprehensive pediatric healthcare in the outpatient context—beyond diagnostic and therapeutic interventions—it is essential to create environments that foster experimentation and emotional elaboration of experiences in this setting.

Thus, the playroom represents an alternative for humanizing pediatric services, combining technical quality with sensitivity, respect, and solidarity toward children and their families in a safe and welcoming environment.[10]

There is a significant lack of spaces that enable play for children in outpatient follow-up. To address this gap and recognize the importance of play, a playroom was established at the PROMOVE Clinic-School (Center for Health Promotion, Rehabilitation, and Social Integration) of the Centro Universitário São Camilo, with the purpose of humanizing pediatric care. It provides a playful, joyful, and comfortable environment for patients and caregivers during waiting periods, helping to reduce the disruption of children's daily experiences.

The opportunity to experience an outpatient playroom can be a key factor in improving the quality of life for children waiting for pediatric consultations and, therefore, an important ally in promoting their health.

OBJECTIVE

To assess the contribution of implementing a playroom as a waiting area in a pediatric outpatient clinic for promoting children's health.

METHOD

This is a clinical, observational, qualitative study aimed at examining, from the caregivers' perspective,

the importance of an outpatient playroom in promoting children's health.

The study was conducted from January to December 2023 in a philanthropic teaching pediatric outpatient clinic located in the southeastern region of São Paulo city.

This service provides daily consultations for children and adolescents through scheduled appointments in general pediatrics and pediatric specialties.

In routine practice, children and their caregivers, after admission, were directed to the playroom, which functioned as a waiting area until the time of their consultation.

The playroom, located inside the institution, is designed for children aged 0 to under 10 years and their caregivers. Equipped with toys, games, and drawing materials displayed on shelves and tables within reach, it provides an opportunity for children to play in a comfortable and calm environment while waiting for care.

Children usually remain in this space for a minimum of 15 minutes before being called for consultation, always accompanied by their caregivers to ensure supervision and safety against accidents.

It is a free space where the child can choose their toy and decide whether to play alone, with another child, or with their caregiver if they wish.

When called for consultation, the child has the option of taking a toy from the playroom to the doctor's office, allowing the continuation of play during the visit.

Consultations are conducted by ninth-semester medical students under the supervision of attending physicians.

After the consultation, the child and caregiver return to the playroom while the clinical discussion takes place among the students and preceptors. They then return to the office for guidance and medical prescription, thus completing the appointment. At this stage, the child is instructed to return the toy they brought to the playroom before leaving the clinic.

Inclusion criteria for participation in the study were caregivers aged 18 years or older, responsible for a child receiving pediatric outpatient care, and who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. The child had to be in the preschool age range (2 to 6 years), a period during which children tend to resist medical consultation procedures.

The evaluation of the benefits and opinions regarding the implementation of the outpatient playroom was conducted through a semi-structured interview with the child's caregiver immediately after the medical consultation.

The interview topics included sociodemographic characteristics of the study population, caregivers' perceptions of the playroom, evaluation of the space and services provided, and suggestions for improvement.

Participants were intentionally selected, and the sample size was determined by data saturation—i.e., the study concluded when no new elements emerged from the interviews, and additional information was deemed unnecessary, as it would not change the understanding of the phenomenon studied.

Data from the interviews were analyzed using the Content Analysis Method (Bardin, 2008).[11]

The responses varied widely among participants. To enable proper analysis, the answers were organized and grouped into categories based on common themes identified across participants' statements.

The research project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CAAE: 67467523.9.0000.0062), and data collection was carried out only after receiving approval from this committee.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 30 caregivers of children aged 2 to 6 years who attended the playroom were interviewed, consisting of 29 mothers and one maternal grandmother.

Among the children, 16 (53.3%) were female and 14 (46.6%) were male. Graph 1 shows the distribution of the children according to age group.

Most caregivers learned about the existence of the playroom from a reception staff member after being admitted to the service, while only two caregivers reported receiving this information from a healthcare professional.

Only eight caregivers (26.6%) stated that they had previously accessed an outpatient playroom in other healthcare facilities.

Regarding the educational level of the interviewees, the majority (63.3%) reported having completed high school (Graph 2).

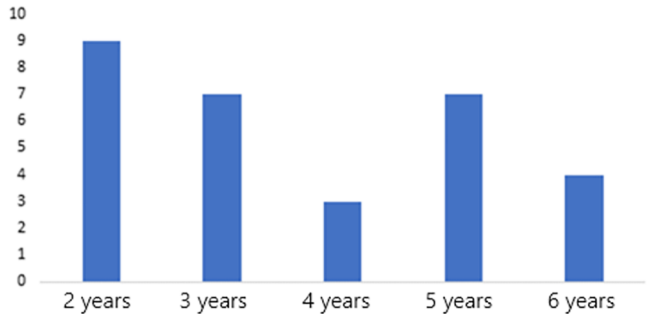
The average duration of the patients' stay in the service, from admission to the end of the consultation, was approximately three hours.

In the analysis of the narrative data from the interviews, recurring themes were grouped into three categories:

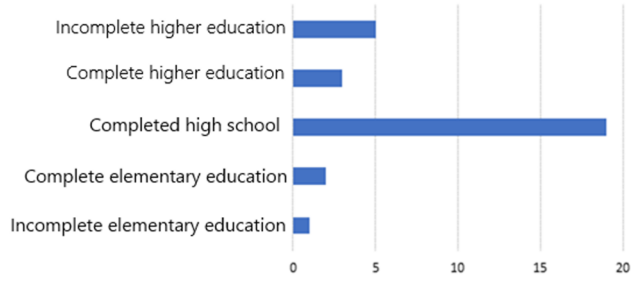
The importance of the playroom;

The playroom as a resource for better acceptance of the pediatric consultation;

The playroom as a space for interaction between caregivers and children, as shown in Table 1.



Graph 1. Distribution of children who attended the playroom according to age group.



Graph 2. Educational level of the interviewees.

Most of the caregivers had a favorable perception of the playroom and recognized the importance of this environment as a factor in reducing the child's anxiety and distress while waiting for the pediatric consultation, in addition to promoting their development.

From birth, children are exposed in healthcare settings to situations that differ from their daily routine, facing, for example, visits to vaccination rooms, routine medical consultations with sometimes uncomfortable physical examination maneuvers, unpleasant-tasting oral medications, or extremely painful injections — aspects that become more intense during illness throughout their growth.

These situations negatively impact children's lives. As they grow, they come to associate medical appointments with unpleasant experiences based on what they have previously lived through.

Delays in medical care can be stressful for young patients, but the presence of a playroom makes this waiting time more pleasant and bearable, providing distraction and entertainment while awaiting their consultation.

Before the implementation of this space, mothers were often anxious about the long waiting period in the waiting room and medical office, since, as this is a teaching outpatient clinic run by medical students under preceptor supervision, patients and their caregivers frequently remained for at least two hours in the service until the completion of care, generating great discomfort for both parents and children.

The transformation of the playroom into the pediatric outpatient waiting room considerably reduced complaints about waiting time.

Creating a welcoming environment in waiting rooms improves quality of life and well-being during treatment, allowing children to play and move joyfully, thereby reducing fear, anxiety, and irritability caused by idle waiting time before the medical consultation. Playing in a healthcare environment enables part of the child's routine to be preserved, recreates and restructures the lived reality, giving new meaning to experiences, and allows for the continued integral development of the child.[5,12]

Caregivers reported a change in their children's perception of medical visits since they began attending the playroom, which contributed positively to the acceptance of pediatric consultations.

The playroom is an environment where children can temporarily forget about medical procedures and the complications related to illness. The presence of toys and other activities provides a welcome distraction, allowing children to engage in enjoyable activities and feel more comfortable in the clinical environment. This contributes to greater receptiveness to treatment and a more positive experience in the medical office.

Playing is not merely a recreational activity but also a valuable opportunity for children to express their feelings and fears and face challenging situations. It provides a safe and natural means for them to process their emotions and develop coping and decision-making skills when faced with difficult and challenging circumstances, such as medical treatment. It becomes a true catalyst in the relationship between the child and the healthcare team.[5]

Playful activities, by promoting decision-making and autonomy, transform the healthcare environment into a more predictable and controllable space for the child, one that closely resembles their everyday reality, thus facilitating the interaction between the child and the healthcare team.[3]

Therefore, the playroom is not only a space for fun and entertainment but also a therapeutic environment where children can find comfort, understanding, and emotional support while facing challenges — a recreational and welcoming space that provides additional motivation for children to feel more engaged and less anxious about medical appointments, transforming the experience into something more positive and less intimidating.[13]

The playroom as an environment that fosters interaction between children and parents was emphasized by the interviewees.

In this space, children appear cheerful and enthusiastic about playing, transmitting these feelings to each other and to their caregivers.

By sharing experiences with other children facing similar situations, a child realizes they are not alone in this journey.

Table 1. Analytical categories related to the content of interviews with children's caregivers.

The importance of the playroom
· It distracts children until it's time to call for an appointment.
· The child is more relaxed. They don't come to the doctor anxiously. They play and have fun.
· They don't get anxious waiting for the appointment.
· They're already developing. There are toys here that they don't have at home.
· Whenever I take them to appointments, they're afraid of injections. This place calms the childa.
The playroom as a resource for better acceptance of pediatric appointments
· They (the child) already feel at home.
· They're usually afraid of the doctor. The playroom takes away that fear
· They're not afraid. They find it more fun. They explain things better to the doctor after playing.
· The child is happy. They forget they're in a clinic.
· They feel more relaxed and less shy.
· She feels calmer. She even brought a toy there (the doctor's office), so she could play with it while the appointment was taking place.
· They (the child) already feel at home.
The playroom as a space for interaction
· She meets other children and interacts with the toys.
· Parents interact with the child and don't get tense waiting for the appointment.
· Distract the child. Avoid using cell phones. She is very attached to her cell phone.
· Parents talk and exchange ideas.

This provides emotional support, comfort, and encouragement to develop strategies and solutions for challenges during the medical care process.[14]

The possibility of interacting and sharing experiences with other families who attend the playroom creates a sense of community and solidarity among participants, strengthens social bonds, and provides an environment of mutual support, contributing to the emotional and social well-being of both children and caregivers, while promoting a more humanized approach to care.

CONCLUSION

The outpatient playroom offers significant benefits for both children and their caregivers. In addition to providing fun and well-being, this space offers a more humanized perspective in the medical care process, helping to ease the waiting time before a consultation and transforming the negative image that this environment usually conveys, since play is a way to pass the time, helping the child fill their mind with activities that are distant from illness and pain.

It helps to reduce the child's anxiety and fear during the waiting period for the medical consultation and contributes to promoting their well-being when facing outpatient procedures.

Furthermore, it supports the interrelationships between children and caregivers, as well as between children and healthcare professionals, since this environment allows the use of play in health education, enabling professionals to investigate, assess, and/or intervene in different situations such as the adaptation of the child and family to the institution, accident and disease prevention, and the monitoring of physical and emotional development.

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Outpatient Playroom: The Importance of Play in the Waiting Room

Interview Script

1. dentification:

Initials of the interviewee's name:
Age:
Occupation:
Education level:
Degree of kinship with the child attending the outpatient clinic:
Age of the child attending the outpatient clinic:
Sex of the child attending the outpatient clinic:

2. Have you ever known of any outpatient playroom before?

Yes ( ) Where? No ( )

3. How did you find out about the existence of the playroom at PROMOVE?

4. Do you think it is important for your child to attend the outpatient playroom while waiting for the pediatric appointment?

Yes ( ) No ( ) Why?

5. Does your child's attendance at the playroom encourage them to stay in the health service?

Yes ( ) No ( ) Why?

6. Does your child ask to go to the playroom when coming for medical appointments?

Yes ( ) No ( ) Why?

7. Does the playroom help your child to better accept the medical consultation?

Yes ( ) No ( ) Why?

8. Are the physical space and the toys in the playroom adequate?

Yes ( ) No ( ) Why?

9. In your opinion, what are the positive aspects of the outpatient playroom?

10. In your opinion, what is missing from the outpatient playroom?