Relieving Anxiety in Pediatric Patients

A Literature Review by Jennifer Nguyen Chew
Recognizing the Issue

- It isn’t much of a surprise to hear that more often than not, children are filled with fear and anxiety when it comes to going to the doctor. During my rotation in a pediatric ER, I found this to be truer than ever. Kids simply do not cope well when it comes to vaccines, laceration repairs, chest tubes, and certainly not surgery. Even the idea of a tongue depressor down their throat or an otoscope in their ear is absolutely horrifying. From a very young age they begin to associate negative emotions with healthcare experiences and each subsequent experience is layered upon the previous one. Children may walk away from these experiences fearful of medical environments which can later breed non-compliance and a continued negative perception of healthcare as an adult.
What’s the Solution?

- Extensive studies across both general pediatrics and multiple subspecialties such as anesthesiology and oncology have found that there are various effective techniques for enhancing a child’s healthcare experience. These interventions were studied using randomized clinical trials and used subjective measures of anxiety as well as objective measures including heart rate, blood pressure, and other physiologic parameters of stress.
I argue that a multitude of therapies including parental presence, behavioral preparation programs, music therapy, art therapy, pet therapy, handheld electronics, hypnosis, acupuncture, desensitization methods used by the healthcare provider, the ease of a hospital setting in terms of look and feel, the utility of clowns to ease anxiety, and recent new modalities that decrease pain such as needle-free injections can all be used to effectively relieve anxiety in pediatric patients, particularly in the procedural setting. These therapies can be tailored to the individual pediatric patient and setting and provide overall benefit to both patient and parent well-being.
Discussion

- Pediatricians and all healthcare providers who care for children may benefit from better understanding how children perceive their world. By better comprehending exactly why children are fearful and what contributes to their anxiety, medical staff can tailor their approaches accordingly. Pain in itself can be due to multiple causes such as the disease process itself, acute injury, or iatrogenic from a procedure. The latter type of pain is one that healthcare providers can have direct control over and therefore more research and innovation is needed so that every opportunity to reduce pain and anxiety in children can be taken.

- Even though research and innovation to date has unveiled multiple methods that have been discussed, it is still the responsibility of the healthcare provider to utilize these resources and apply them to their patients. There must be a level of compassion and a true dedication and concern for their pediatric patients in order for these measures to be taken. It is clearly easier and less time-consuming for a healthcare provider to provide standard of care without worrying about how to relieve their patient’s anxiety. For instance, the desensitization technique employed by Dr. Krauss from Children’s Hospital of Boston obviously requires dedication and time. Had he simply walked straight into the patient’s room and sutured her laceration, he would have been done with her in five minutes as opposed to the forty minutes it took to desensitize her to his touch and presence. It is of no surprise that these techniques require extra time on the part of the physician, however, despite this, it must remain a great priority of healthcare providers to instill a positive, non-traumatic experience for these children. The next generation of physicians should be trained not only in standard of care but in recognizing fear and anxiety and how to mediate these situations with all of the different methods that are available.
Conclusions

- A combined literature review have shown the following benefits: lower anxiety level in both patient and parents, less sensitivity of patient to stressors, improved communication and problem solving skills, reduced pain perception, improved mood and comfort, and increased trust in healthcare professionals.

- In conclusion, there is a multitude of modalities by which pediatric healthcare providers can relieve fear, anxiety, and pain. Whether this anxiousness is in the outpatient, inpatient, or emergency department setting, there are measures such as parental presence, behavioral preparation programs, music, art, and pet therapy, handheld electronics, hypnosis, acupuncture, desensitization techniques, optimized environmental settings, the use of professional clowns, and pain-free medical devices that can be taken in order to increase the comfort of these patients as well as improve their emotional-mental state. This area of interest demands more research and innovation in order to find more easily implemented techniques in everyday healthcare. Pediatric healthcare providers are called to recognize their patients’ emotional and mental needs as well as that of their parents and to prioritize this distress when making their plan of care.