Developing Resilience through Medical Play

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All young children require medical intervention in the early years

• Developmental or dental check ups
• Immunization against infectious diseases
• Accidents (scalding, fractures, poisons)
• Temporary illness (colds, tonsillitis, sores)
• Ongoing medical conditions (asthma, eczema, cystic fibrosis)
Children will need to attend a medical facility

• Nursing station
• Medical clinic
• Doctor’s surgery
• Hospital

Depending on context, will travel by foot, car, public transport, ambulance or flying doctor service.
Medical intervention often results in anxiety  
• Separation from parents and friends  
• Confronted with strange people, smells, sounds, sights and equipment  

Result can be:  
• Interaction and relationship difficulties  
• Erratic control of bodily functions  
• Eating and sleeping disorders (Wright, 1995)
This project enables young children to:-

• Develop knowledge of common medical equipment/procedures
• Engage in self-directed/exploratory play
• Explore medical materials, equipment, roles and procedures.
This empowers young children to:

- Gain mastery over the equipment/procedures
- Reduce anxiety over the unknown
- Develop resiliency over medical intervention
- Transfer this resiliency to other life challenges
This project enhances the components of:-

- **Competence** by gaining knowledge, internalising concepts, trying out roles/procedures
- **Confidence** by reducing anxiety about the unknown
- **Connection** to family, friends, school and community by identifying those who can help and building friendships and relationships
- **Character** through communication, decision-making, negotiation and compromise
- **Contribution** of ideas, taking turns, sharing materials/roles.
- **Coping** with stress in relation to painful invasive procedures/absence
- **Control** Children decide the who, what, direction and duration of medical play.
MATERIALS

- Authentic medical equipment borrowed, donated or made
  - Stethoscope
  - Thermometer
  - Oxygen mask
  - Blood pressure cuff
  - Syringes
  - Drip
  - Swabs
  - Bandages
  - Splint
  - Surgical caps/shoes
  - Masks
  - Hearing aid
  - Plaster casts
  - Crutches
  - Wheelchair
  - Pill boxes
  - Medicine jars
  - Glasses and eye chart

- Uniforms (doctor, surgeon, nurse, ambulance officer)
- Persona doll reflecting ethnicity and diversity of children
- Medical play clinic/surgery/hospital set up by teacher/carer/children
- Posters of body systems and charts made by teachers/children
PROCEDURE

• Introductory interactive discussion
• Children share where and how they receive medical attention
• Items of medical equipment and purpose introduced by adult
• Children demonstrate equipment on one another or persona doll
• Children assist teacher/carer to set up medical play area
• Children dress up, negotiate roles, explore equipment and carry out medical play scenarios.
ADULT’S ROLE

• Observe children at play, taking particular note of individual children’s emotional state
• Ask judicious questions to tease out children’s feelings or move the play on
• Clarify any misconceptions
• Respect the integrity of the play

N.B. The children are now in control, initiating actions and manipulating their surroundings (eg. Being doctor rather than patient).
Play enhances resilience

- By holding, feeling, examining intensely and manipulating unknown objects in self-directed play, essential properties are learned (Bruner, 1972) and any associated anxiety reduced (Santen & Feldman, 1994).

- Children are able to construct meaning, express emotions and reduce fears or anxieties while trying out various medical roles and developing a sense of power and control over medical intervention (Butterworth & Mathiasen, 2002).
These resiliency skills transferred to other situations

- Confidence in expressing their views and making their voices heard;
- Competence in performing assigned tasks independently;
- A sense of child rights;
- Compassion towards school friends;
- Taking control of conflict situations; and
- Solving problems by using dialogue and attentive listening.
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