

Many Hands Working Together: The Impact of an Adaptive Care Hospital Program to Enhance Social Support for Autistic Children's Mental Health

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PURPOSE: Hospitals pose a threat to autistic children's mental health, and parents debate if their child's medical issue is critical enough to undergo the stress of going to the hospital. Occupational therapy practitioners can work with other professionals to adapt the hospital physical and social environment to address this issue. The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of an interprofessional program to enhance social support for autistic children's mental health.

DESIGN: Pretest/posttest quasi-experimental design at a large, urban pediatric hospital. Occupational therapists and other professionals developed and implemented the Adaptive Care program that consisted of training and resources for hospital staff to adapt care to the needs of autistic children. Nursing staff with direct patient care experience were recruited before and after initial program implementation. Approximately 300 nursing staff received training through the program, and 107 completed pre and/or posttest program evaluation surveys.

METHOD: The outcome measure was a researcher-developed, pilot-tested survey to assess perceived effectiveness, confidence, and strategies staff used caring for autistic children in the hospital. Analysis involved descriptive and comparison statistics.

RESULTS: Respondents had increased effectiveness and confidence working with autistic children in the hospital after training. Respondents also reported significantly more strategies to care for autistic children after program implementation.

CONCLUSION: Interprofessional collaboration and programming can positively impact social environments in the hospital by enhancing nursing staff's self-efficacy, confidence, and strategies to support autistic children's mental health.

IMPACT: The Adaptive Care program is an example of occupational therapists and other interprofessional team members creating systemic change within a hospital to address this problem in autistic children's lives.

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