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**How do nurses communicate with children?**

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**Commentary on:** Sabetsarvestani R, Geckil E. A meta-synthesis of the experience of paediatric nurses in communication with children. *J Adv* *Nurs* 2024;00:1-16. doi: 10.1111/jan.16072

**Implications for practice and research**

* Paediatric nurses stressed the need for the need for a multimodal approach to communication with children, supplementing verbal interaction with appropriate facial expression, gesture and tone and use of play.
* Nurses identified the need to balance communication involving a child and their parents (triadic) and communicating with the child without parents (dyadic) in order to ascertain the child’s understanding and concerns directly rather than solely relying on parental reporting.
* Parents were described as both aiding nurse communication with children, but also, in some cases, hindering this.
* Further communication training for nurses has the potential to improve quality of care and job satisfaction.

**Context**

The importance of good communication with patients and their families is widely acknowledged –with communication problems associated with a higher rate of medical errors1 and often cited in official complaints. However, relatively little is understood about how paediatric nurses approach this issue. Obviously the physical, emotional and legal dependence of a child on parents for its wellbeing has implications for healthcare professionals treating a child, in that parents need to be kept fully informed about their care plans. But it is important also to develop ways to engage a child directly in order to reassure them in what may be a potentially traumatising situation2, to build trust and cooperation and to identify potential safeguarding issues.

**Methods**

In this study, the findings from 14 qualitative studies, published since 1990, were examined using thematic analysis3. Studies were selected on the basis of pre-determined criteria and assessed for quality. Results were synthesised to produce an integrated summary of what paediatric nurses describe as important to their ability to communicate with children and what they saw as the main facilitators and barriers in their clinical practice.

**Findings**

Nurses stressed the importance of being able to supplement verbal communication with a number of non-verbal approaches. These included the use of gestures, facial expressions, play and humour and paying attention to their body position and tone of voice. They also identified the need to interact flexibly at several levels – with the child, (dyadic), with the parent and with both together (triadic) - in order to build rapport and establish how the child was coping and how much they understood about their condition.

In addition, nurses reported that experience, training in communication and child development and support from peers and mentors helped them communicate better with children. Barriers identified included staff shortages, lack of time and occasionally, inappropriate parental intervention such as overprotection or unwitting reinforcement of pain behaviour.

**Commentary**

In an adult setting a patient is presumed to have capacity in relation to treatment decisions and can opt not to have information about their medical status shared with relatives. In paediatric settings, however, most patients have no right to consent or refuse treatment so communication with parents/guardians is an essential part of the nurse’s role. In this sense the child and their caregiver are an ‘inseparable dyad’4, but it is important also to communicate directly with the child in recognition of the research that parents do not always accurately perceive how their child is feeling5. Furthermore, there is a need for clear, developmentally appropriate communication with children across all ages in paediatrics, from those with no language or understanding of what is happening to them to those with a full grasp of their situation.

This study highlights the need for flexibility and creativity in nurse communication in paediatric settings. Although the importance of non-verbal communication is acknowledged across age groups, there is a particular need for paediatric nurses to develop a variety of these communication skills, in the best interests of this developmentally heterogenous group of patients.

This synthesis is a welcome addition to the literature in that it clarifies key considerations for nurses working with children and argues for greater attention to communication skills in their training. The authors suggest that future research could build on existing research6 by examining the impact of child-centred and family-centred communication training both on staff morale and confidence, and on patient quality and safety outcomes.

**References**

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**Competing interests**: None declared