

Dolly needs a blood test

You have just found out that following a few weeks in the hospital, having all of the support around you and your child, who has cancer that you are able to go home. 'Yippee' you both agree that is great news but...It's also very scary knowing that you won't have the team to support you at home. Your child is due back to hospital for several tests; she is needle phobic and is quite scared at the thought of going back to hospital to have more procedures. Your family has been referred to the community play specialist.....

I turn up to your house with my puppet 'cookie'. Children often relate to puppets, they feel 'safe' around them, often they tell the puppet all their fears and anxieties, forgetting that my arm is on the other end! Once all of the necessary paper work is complete I get my medical dolls out and all of my hospital play equipment (using the correct medical instruments) role play is carried out. Dolly has to have a blood test; she is sick and has cancer. She knows it's ok to cry, she knows it's ok to be scared but she must stay still. She has to have the blood test, but she has choices as to how it can be carried out. Choices are given to her and she creates a 'blood plan'. Using the blood plan dolly is able to have some level of control, she sits still and watches as I take the blood test, she cries a little but remains still. Following the procedure dolly carries out her feeling chart (this is a chart she created to help express how that blood test was for her) Dolly's feeling's chart is an animal chart, she chose the 'Cat' as she was still and cosy on her mummies lap, but still made a noise when she felt a tug on her arm! Dolly was given a sticker for her chart.

Often children prefer it if you speak in the '3rd person', they feel safe this way, throughout the session I never mention the fact that your child is scared of needles and has to have future blood tests, but as the play developed she began to relate to what was happening to dolly, "I get scared", "it hurts me" , "I like to sit on my mummies knee" through out the session I act surprised as if this information was new to me and ask them if they too would like to create a chart, they agree and then work begins on getting their confidence to have a blood test and to look at needles without getting scared.

This is taken with her to the hospital during her next visit, along with her own special diversion bag, full of special goodies to help divert her attention through out the procedure. Because this was carried out at home, she was relaxed and not at all worried that someone would come and 'stick' a needle in her, she was also very relaxed in her own environment. Communication between hospital staff was maintained so that everyone was aware of her coping strategies.

Body image and Hickman lines

Often as a teenager, body image throughout cancer treatment can be the biggest issue. Hair loss scars, Hickman lines in the chest, long lines etc... and then there is the hidden body image changes, fertility issues, emotional scars, loss of identity, independence and self esteem. Not to mention every one knowing your business and puberty still flourishing!

As the Community Play Specialist, it is important to address teenagers with respect, they aren't adults, yet they aren't kids either, they are individuals needing support at their level.

I turn up to your house to support your teenager, she is a little anxious as she's due to have a Hickman line, she's been prepared for it in the hospital but has gone home, worried, confused, scared and has a lot of unanswered questions. You are also anxious, this is your little girl and you are entering unknown territory, you need support as to how you can support your daughter.

I introduce myself, speaking to your daughter together with you, before speaking with her alone; often young people will 'open up' more without their parents listening.

I hear from them what they are worried about, how they feel and what questions they have. I explain how a Hickman line works (in basic terms) and show them a working Hickman line on a doll, children are never too old for this demonstration and often request to have a go themselves. With younger children I often take a doll away to hospital and create a doll with a Hickman line for their own personal keeping. Over a period of several sessions we will carry out activities relating to feelings in terms of body image and the Hickman line. Specialized work will also be carried out on the removal of the line as this can be just as traumatic as the insertion!