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Distraction Interventions & Play Therapy: Decreasing Fear and Anxiety in Hospitalized Patients Less than 12 Years

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Introduction

Hospitalization can be a frightening experience for pediatric patients. Addressing these negative emotions greatly impacts their experience, wellbeing, and recovery process. It is crucial to understand and implement strategies that alleviate these negative emotions and promote healing during hospitalization. This research will review two safe, effective, and reliable methods of alleviating fear and anxiety in hospitalized children under 12 years old; distraction techniques and play therapy.

PICO Question

- P** - Children less than 12 who are hospitalized
- I** - Effectiveness of play therapy and distraction techniques
- C** - Compared to no intervention
- O** - Reduce anxiety and improve coping?

Methods

- Search databases: CINAHL, PubMed
- Search Terms: *Child, youth, kid, play therapy, therapeutic play, anxiety disorders, generalized anxiety, hospital, acute setting, inpatient, distraction*
- Inclusion Criteria:
 - Must address anxiety, children, and hospitalization
 - Must address therapeutic play or distraction
 - Peer Reviewed
 - Published 2018-2024
- Exclusion Criteria:
 - Did not discuss the effectiveness of play therapy or distraction in decreasing anxiety in children less than 12
- **Total number of articles: 14**

References

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Gjerde, L. K., Hybschmann, J., Dybdal, D., Topperzer, M. K., Schröder, M. A., Gibson, J. L., Ramchandani, P., Ginsberg, E. I., Ottesen, B., Frandsen, T. L., & Sorensen, J. L. (2021). Play interventions for pediatric patients in hospital: A scoping review. *BMC open*, 11(7), e051957. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-051957>

Results

Techniques/advantages of distraction:

- An effective non-pharmacological strategy to relieve treatment related pain that is easy to implement at low cost.
- Techniques vary widely and are broken down into the senses stimulated with each intervention.
- Visual distractions: cards, books, virtual reality, and guided imagery.
- Multi-sensory distractions: age-appropriate animations with sound such as disney movies.
- Tactile distraction: balloons, balls, parent directed distraction, and vibrating devices.
- Evidence suggests these techniques reduce pain, fear, stress, and anxiety in hospitalized children.

Techniques/advantages of play therapy:

- Therapeutic play using fake toy medical equipment improves adaptation, acceptance of the treatment, and reduces anxiety.
- Evidence supports play in reducing pain and moderate certainty for music and pet therapies.
- Playing with distraction cards decreased anxiety and fear in chronically ill children to a greater extent, as compared to music therapy.
- Sandplay therapy can reduce anxiety, withdrawal, and social behavioural problems in school age children with chronic diseases.

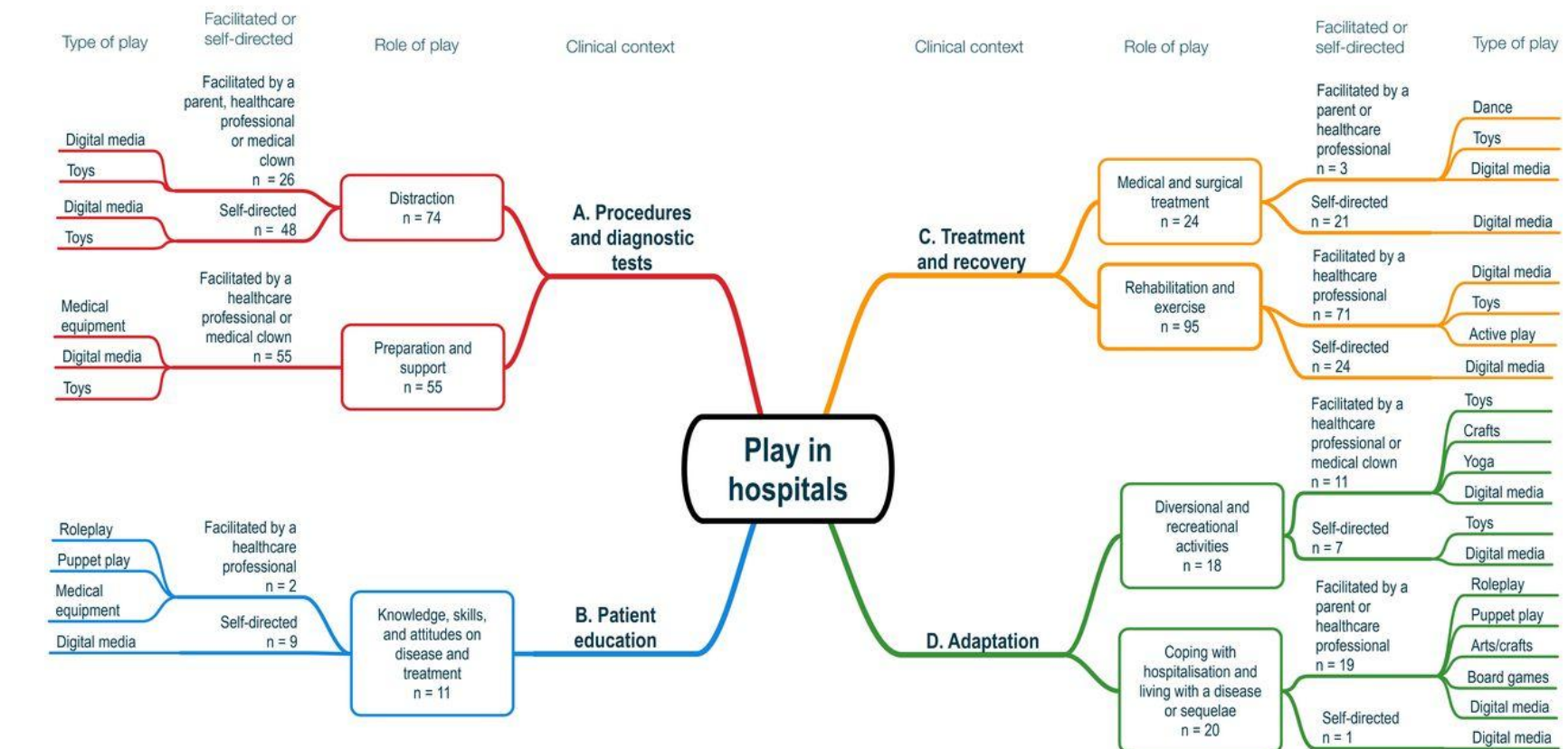


Figure 3
Conceptual model developed with a thematic approach mapping 'play in hospitals' by context, role of play, facilitated/self-directed and type of play.
Gjerde, L. K., Hybschmann, J., Dybdal, D., Topperzer, M. K., Schröder, M. A., Gibson, J. L., Ramchandani, P., Ginsberg, E. I., Ottesen, B., Frandsen, T. L., & Sorensen, J. L. (2021). Play interventions for pediatric patients in hospital: A scoping review. *BMC open*, 11(7), e051957. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-051957>

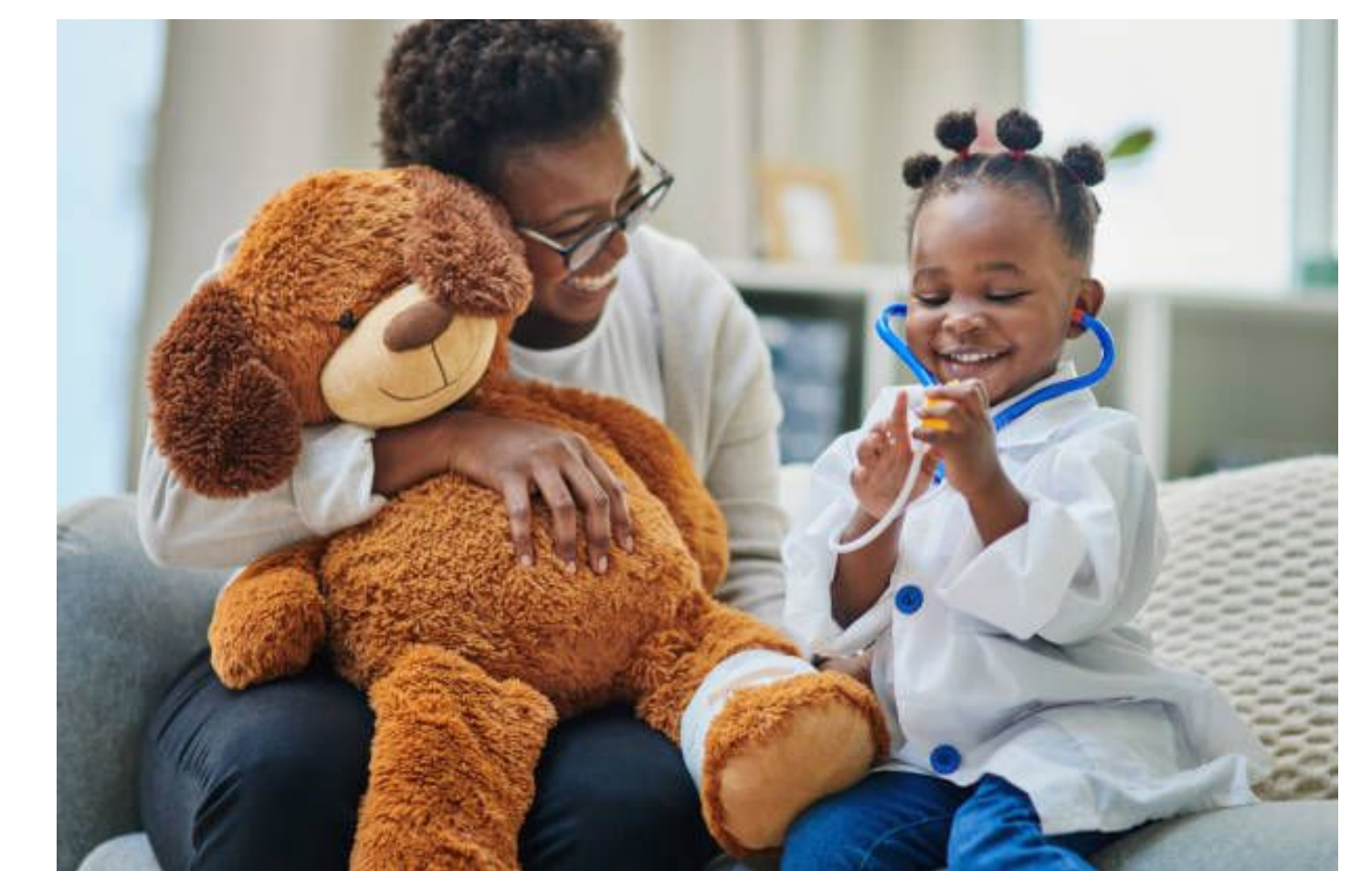


Photo by LaylaBird on iStockphoto.com
LaylaBird (2021, July 11). Shot of an adorable little girl and her mother playing with a microscope in the waiting room of a doctor's office stock photo. <https://www.iStockphoto.com/photos/shot-of-an-adorable-little-girl-and-her-mother-playing-with-a-microscope-in-the-waiting-room-of-a-doctor-s-office-stock-photo>

Conclusion

The literature review indicated that distraction interventions and play therapy decrease levels of anxiety and stress in pediatric patients in the hospital setting. They experience a newfound sense of control over their environment while engaging their senses which reduces negative feelings. These interventions are most effective when done by a trained professional such as a therapist who uses judgement and guidance to enhance the therapeutic relationship and experience.

Further Research:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of combining distraction and play therapy with additional psychosocial and pharmacological interventions to achieve the most successful outcome.
- Conduct research to evaluate the effectiveness of specific distraction and play interventions implemented on pediatric patients with different barriers (developmental stages, cognitive challenges, absence of parental support, physical limitations, cultural considerations, and environmental challenges).