

Intended for healthcare professionals



Student Life

Teddy bear hospital: where clinical gets cuddly

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Teddy bear hospital helps children learn about health

“Doctor, doctor my teddy’s got no brain,” is just one of the challenging presentations facing doctors at the Teddy Bear Hospital.

Teddy Bear Hospital is a place where young children can bring their sick teddy bears to see a teddy bear doctor, and where they can use stethoscopes, sphygmomanometers, and syringes (of course, without needles) to help the doctors diagnose and treat sick teddies. Along the way they learn about healthy eating, exercise, and common childhood illnesses.

The teddy bear doctors are really medical students, and the various scenarios the sick teddies go through simulate a typical hospital visit for a child. This simple role play aims to make children feel comfortable with hospitals and doctors and also improve medical students’ communication skills with children.

Teddy Bear Hospital is a public health project aimed at 3-7 year old children. It is an official project of the European Medical Students Association (EMSA), the International Federation of Medical Students Association (IFMSA), and Medsin. The project initially started in Norway in 2000. Following its success, the scheme was adapted across several countries, including Slovenia, the Netherlands, Germany, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom. It is run entirely by medical students, although it is widely supported by many doctors as well as parents and school teachers, who accompany the children.

How do the children benefit?

Children can feel intimidated and anxious when they see a doctor, which can lead to a debilitating fear of hospitals and hospital staff. Being surrounded by strangers, and having to undergo examinations and investigations, combined with an unfamiliar hospital environment, can be a very traumatic experience for young children. As a result, both the child’s experience and the consultation suffer.¹² If a child’s first hospital experience

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child is in control and not actually ill, can make the hospital environment less scary.³

Children's most intense fears about hospitals are of separation from the family; having injections and blood tests; staying in the hospital for a long time; and being given "bad news" about their health.⁴ Although we cannot hide the reality that hospitalisation can be unpleasant, Teddy Bear Hospital is an opportunity to prevent some of these anxieties, for example by reassuring the children that parents can stay with them. Teddy Bear Hospital lowers short term anxiety related to hospitalisation in children aged 3-6.5 years.³

How do medical students benefit?

For medical students, Teddy Bear Hospital provides an opportunity to learn communication skills with children. We have little exposure to younger patients during our medical school training, and working with ill children can be daunting.

A consultation with an adult patient is very different from one with a child. Working in a setting that is informal for medical students and the children can be a highly effective way to practise different communication skills and learn simple techniques such as kneeling down to a child's level and using clear language.

Dr Ed Abrahamson, a consultant paediatrician at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, says Teddy Bear Hospital "enhances so many vital skills about being a doctor, skills which are not perhaps so well taught formally. These include team working, leadership and organisational skills, and perhaps most importantly of all, communication with patients."

What are the down sides?

Unfortunately, the long term effectiveness is unknown. It is possible that a bad experience in hospital would undo all the positive effects gained from Teddy Bear Hospital. Of course, by the age of 7 or 8, some children will already have experience of hospitals; for these children Teddy Bear Hospital might be too late. It is also important that hospitalisation is not trivialised, for example the children are taught how to call an ambulance, but a disadvantage to this is that they may call ambulances unnecessarily.

How to set up your own Teddy Bear Hospital

Each medical school runs their Teddy Bear Hospital slightly differently depending on the exact approach they find successful, but these are a few general tips on how to go about setting up Teddy Bear Hospital at your university.

Organise your committee

Possible roles include treasurer, secretary, sponsorship, publicity, and someone to deal with recruitment and equipment.

Fundraising and sponsorship

These are needed to pay for equipment, refreshments on the day, uniforms for the teddy bear doctors, and transport. As a rough guide, at Imperial College London we have budgeted £1200 for an event involving 60 medical students and 120 children.

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comfortable in a hospital environment. Theoretically, holding the event in a public area means more children can attend, but it entails more safety and logistical difficulties. If the event will take place in a hospital try to find an area that is pleasant and where the children will not be exposed to infections and possibly upsetting scenes.

Recruitment of schools and medical students

Write to schools directly or approach your local education authority and ask them to forward your recruitment letter to all the primary schools in the area. Participating medical students must have an enhanced Criminal Record Bureau disclosure so it is usually easier to recruit clinical students only.

Get paediatricians at your teaching hospital on board

Their support can be very helpful in obtaining equipment and the support of other staff at the hospital.

Inform the press

Send a press release to local and national press, and let your university newspapers or magazines know about the event.

Order uniforms for the teddy bear doctors

Colourful scrubs are a great alternative to scary white coats, but still allow the children to identify the medical students as teddy bear doctors.

Organise your training day for the teddy bear doctors

This is a crucial part in ensuring your teddy bear doctors are fully prepared. Possible topics to cover include:

- How Teddy Bear Hospital runs, and station allocations
- Communication skills specific to working with children
- Asking a child psychologist or play specialist to talk about how to deal with difficult situations such as abuse.

Teddy Bear Hospital day

Stations that we have found successful at Imperial College London are:

- Consultation—Take the history and examine the teddy. The children can use the stethoscopes and sphygmomanometers on themselves. Together, the teddy bear doctors and the children diagnose the teddy
- Ambulance—Explain why and how to call an ambulance and what might happen in an ambulance
- Accident and emergency or ward—Children “take blood” from their teddies using syringes and give injections (all with no needles). Plasters and bandages are also used to treat the teddy
- X ray—Explain what it is in simple terms and show examples of x rays
- Plaster—Messy, but the children love it. Plaster their little finger and use stickers and glitter to decorate
- Surgery—Let the children dress up in masks and gowns. Put a zip in an old teddy bear and use it to simulate an operation

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The children also visit education stations, such as healthy eating, exercise, and childhood illnesses. A play station is a great opportunity to get some feedback by asking children to write or draw pictures about their day.

Make sure refreshments, such as fruits and juice, are available for the children and medical students on the day.

Debrief and feedback

Feedback forms for the medical students to rate and comment on the training day and various aspects of the event itself are invaluable to improve your next Teddy Bear Hospital. The opinions of teachers or parents accompanying the children can also be helpful.

Find out more

For more information contact the European Medical Students Association (tbh@emsa-europe.org), the International Federation of Medical Students Association (www.ifmsa.org), or Medsin (tbh@medsin.org).

Teddy Bear Hospital—www.teddybearhospital.co.uk

Notes

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Footnotes

- Competing interests: Sasha Thambapillai is co-director of Teddy Bear Hospital at Imperial College London.
- Provenance and peer review: Not commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.
- See “Teddy bear hospital” (*Student BMJ* 2004;12:248-9, <http://archive.student.bmj.com/issues/04/06/life/248.php>).

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