



Promoting Coping for Children of Hospitalized Service Members with Combat Injuries through Creative Arts Engagement

Rollins, J., & King, E. (2015). Promoting coping for children of hospitalized service members with combat injuries through creative arts engagement. *Arts and Health: An International Journal for Research, Policy, and Practice*, 7(2), 109-122. doi:10.1080/17533015.2015.1019707

SUMMARY: Children of Service members who have been wounded in combat face many unique experiences that can be stressful and frightening. This study explores the ways in which a program focused on creative arts engagement helped children negotiate those experiences. Findings indicated that the program supported children through an increase in positive visits with the injured parent, and through opportunities for self-expression, distraction and respite, parental engagement, normalization, and empowerment.

KEY FINDINGS

- Children who engaged in the program were able to create something (such as a drawing, song, or dance) that they could present to the injured parent upon entering the hospital room, which artists reported lessened the anxiety children had around the initial encounter with their injured parent.
- The program provided a place for children to experience distraction, respite, and a sense of normalization during their time in the busy and stressful hospital environment, which was also helpful for the non-injured parents, allowing them to focus on the injured parents and important logistics.
- Many children were able to engage with their injured parents in new ways through this program, which allowed the children to focus on the parents' abilities rather than their injuries.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS

Programs could:

- Integrate the use of art in programs for children of Service members, focusing on art as an avenue for self-expression and empowerment
- Develop programs for children of injured Service members with attention to the creation of art that will give the children something concrete to do for and with their parents
- Use art-based activities as opportunities for Service members to actively engage with their children

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES

Policies could:

- Continue to support the implementation of programs for families of injured Service members
- Recommend training for hospital staff regarding the experience of children of injured Service members
- Encourage programs to integrate art-based approaches in work with Service members and their families

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- A program called Allies in the Arts was offered to injured Service members being treated at a Military Treatment Facility in the mid-Atlantic U.S. and their families.
- Data regarding children's experience of the program were collected through evaluation of session notes, observation of sessions, and focus groups with the artists leading the children's activities.
- Researchers coded data to determine themes emerging regarding children's experiences of the program.

PARTICIPANTS

- All participants were children of injured Service members.
- Information from 125-150 child encounters was included in the analysis.
- Specific demographic information of participants was not available, but the program included children from toddlers through teenagers.

LIMITATIONS

- This study did not utilize any type of structured interview or formal assessment of the constructs examined. All results are based on observation and artist opinion or report.
- Researchers did not interact with the participants directly; different themes may have emerged if researchers specifically asked participants about the program.
- No information was included regarding demographics of participants, so it is unclear how generalizable these findings are.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Systematically evaluate the effect of such programs on pertinent child outcomes (such as depression, anxiety, and parent relationship quality) with the use of standardized measures.
- Evaluate whether the program is helpful in different ways for children and youth of different ages (such as toddlers versus teenagers).
- Gather data directly from participants or participants' parents to identify their perception of the helpfulness of such a program.

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