The art of integrating play into rural paediatrics

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Research has shown that children who require acute health services may experience anxiety, distress or psychological trauma. Vicariously, family members and health care professionals may also experience similar responses. One way to alleviate the impact of distress is by integrating play therapy skills and techniques into rural paediatrics.

Play has been identified as a children’s nursing competency yet it has been given little attention throughout Australia. Play is represented in the literature as the child’s way of communicating. Thus, it is through this medium that adults must use developmentally appropriate language for the child to understand and comprehend their health care service. It is not appropriate for the child to be expected to communicate at an adult level.

As a paediatric qualified registered nurse and play therapist, I plan to share my experience and demonstrate to health care professionals working in rural areas some practical skills and techniques that could be integrated. For example, when a child is required to have a peripheral venous cannulation, offering ‘the magic glove’ technique may help the child cope with the fear of, and in doing so minimise, pain associated with the procedure. Additionally, when a child is required to undergo a specific procedure, personalising a calico doll may be used as an age-appropriate educational opportunity. Sensory play can be used as an expressive play technique to facilitate relaxation when a child may be distressed. These play experiences may include textures such as clay, play doh, slime, squishy squishy toys, paint, sand, and water to experience tactile sensations and could be made available for integration into the health care experience. Projective symbolic play can give health care professionals insights into the child’s thoughts and feelings about their present emotional state.

Play is a state, a mindset that is fun, creative and imaginative. You can integrate the art of play into rural paediatrics by maintaining an attitude of playfulness.