

Hollie Young, a child life specialist, uses stuffed animals to show young patients what a hospital procedure will be like



Treating with Teddy Bears

Child Life Specialist Helps Fort Bend Kids Have a Happy Hospital Experience

Written by Jen Petty

Few people like going to a doctor's office. Doctor appointments sometimes result in pain, but perhaps more than that, the thing that causes the most anxiety is often the uncertainty that accompanies such a visit. For children, this anxiety is usually increased because of their lack of experience and knowledge about the health field.

Hollie Young, a child life specialist at Memorial Hermann Sugar Land Hospital, knows better than most what is going through a child's mind when they come to the hospital. Her job is to make their experience a positive one. "My job is to reduce stress and anxiety for children in the hospital environment by providing support during medical procedures," she says.

A Spoonful of Sugar and Smiles

Young's day-to-day activities vary as much as her patients' injuries and illnesses. She may be helping a 3-year-old as he prepares to get tubes in his ears or supporting a 12-year-old as she gets some blood drawn in preparation for testing. Young uses medical equipment, medical dolls, and pictures to explain hospital procedures to children. She also brings them toys, games, and cartoons, so they are more relaxed. "I try to create a normal environment by finding toys that are similar to what they have at home," shares Young. "This is especially true for infants and toddlers who aren't able to comprehend everything or communicate with us."



Young has always loved working with children



Young makes sure to give children a "job" to do, so they focus on something positive



Seeing children relaxed and happy is the most rewarding part of Young's day



Young still remembers the child life specialist who helped her through a minor surgery when she was 6




Creating a comfortable environment helps children have a positive experience


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As an example of what she may encounter, Young remembers the 4-year-old who had come into the emergency room needing some stitches in his head. "He was terrified," she says. "He'd never been to the hospital before and he was very anxious." Young gave him a stuffed animal and talked to him about what the doctors and nurses would do. She showed him on the stuffed animal what the stitches would look like, told him that the anesthesia would sting a little, and answered his questions.

Rx for a Relaxing Experience

"A lot of the time, giving the child a 'job' is really important," she says. For this young boy, his job was to hold really still. Young told him it was okay if he cried or said it hurt. During the procedure, the boy did his 'job' and even comforted his mom by saying, "Here comes the sting part, but then it will go away, Mom."

Experiences like this are what make Young love her job. "Really seeing the evidence that I made a difference is rewarding," she says. "I don't need that for myself, but to be able to see that child smiling and know that they have had a positive experience is satisfying. I've heard kids say things like, 'This place is awesome! It's like a hotel! I want to come back and have another surgery!'"

All Work and Child's Play

At times, Young's job may seem like just playing, but her training and experience make her a professional. Specialists must know about child psychology, child development, and personality differences, so they can tailor their intervention to each individual patient. Child life specialists must have a bachelor's degree in a related field and then complete a 520-hour clinical. Certification comes after an extensive exam.

Young still remembers having a minor surgery when she was 6 and the child life specialist who helped her through the experience. "I've always been very passionate about children and about making a difference in their lives," she says. "I liked the medical field and teaching and wanted to find something to combine them." In high school, Young did some shadowing and volunteering that solidified her decision.

She says her most difficult times are when she can't seem to connect with the patient. "It's disappointing when I've tried every trick in the trade and I've done everything I can and it isn't helping," she shares. "Sometimes, there are kids who have a really difficult time handling the experience and no matter what I try, they aren't coping well."

Happy to Help

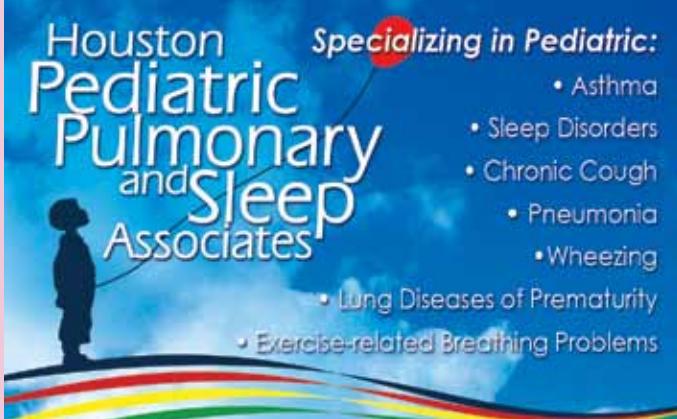

Fortunately, most patients she sees respond well to her efforts, and seeing that is the most rewarding part. Young explains, "When I see the child relaxed, playing, and having a good time and the change from how they were when they first came to the hospital, that's all the satisfaction I need, because I know that I've made a difference." SLM

JEN PETTY is the editor of Sugar Land Magazine, and also tries to be a play-at-home mom to her three preschoolers.


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“I’ve always been very passionate about children and about making a difference in their lives. I liked the medical field and teaching and wanted to find something to combine them.”

– Hollie Young

ExpertAdvice

Tips to help your sweetie cope with a hospital visit

Child life specialist, Hollie Young, offers parents a few tips

- Bring familiar toys, stuffed animals, or a blanket to the hospital.
- Stay calm. Even if you are anxious and nervous, be positive and upbeat.
- Allow your child to express emotion. If something hurts, it’s okay for them to cry or express how they feel.
- Encourage your sweetie throughout the procedure. Give them a simple job to do, like staying still, and praise them for doing it.
- Request a child life specialist. Services are free and available at most hospitals.



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