Nemours

Study: Innovative Model Helps Kids on Autism Spectrum Avoid Behavioral Drugs in ER

Analysis of Emergency Visits at Nemours Children's Hospital Shows Need for Medication Was Rare

ORLANDO, Fla. (December 11, 2018) – An innovative care model developed by Nemours Children's Hospital for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in the emergency department (ED) reduces the use of medication administered to kids who are prone to stress and sensory overload in this care setting. Information about this care model was presented today at the Institute for Healthcare Improvement's National Forum.

"Our program was designed to help prevent escalation of anxiety and agitation in children with ASD, therefore leading to the reduced use of sedatives and restraints," said Cara Harwell, ARNP, CPNP, PMHS, lead researcher and a Nurse Practitioner at Nemours Children's Hospital. "Sedative medications do have side effects, and if we can manage kids' stress in other ways, we create a better experience for them and their families."

In their evaluation of the program, Harwell and her colleagues reviewed two years of electronic health records and identified 860 pediatric emergency department visits in which this model, known as the REACH (Respecting Each Awesome Child Here) Program, was used for patients with ASD or similar conditions. With this approach, fewer than six percent of these patients needed an anxiolytic (anxiety medication). None needed an antipsychotic (for aggressive behavior) or an alpha-agonist (for hyperactivity and anxiety). Fewer than one percent needed physical restraints.

There is limited comparative research, but one study, not employing the REACH model, found that sedation or restraints were used in nearly one fourth of ED visits by children and adults with ASD.

Nemours' REACH Program, now in its third year, accommodates children with ASD, sensory disorders, mental health disorders and similar conditions. Staff receive ongoing training regarding ASD, REACH concepts, procedure planning, and recognizing and managing anxiety and agitation. Distraction objects and rewards are placed throughout the ED, which includes a sensory-friendly exam room. Harwell, along with Emily Bradley MA, Certified Child Life Specialist, developed and instituted the program at Nemours Children's Hospital, which was one of the first in the nation to adapt care to the needs of children in the ED.

Beyond the reduced use of restraints and sedatives, patient satisfaction survey results show the program has led to improved patient experiences and a survey of providers found improved comfort and knowledge for treating children with ASD.

"The noise and pace of the ED environment can greatly increase stress for children with ASD, leading to the need for medications or restraints to help manage irritability, anxiety or harmful behavior. Avoiding these stimuli provides better, more positive care experiences for these kids," said Harwell.

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Information about the REACH Program was presented at the Institute for Health Improvement's National Forum on Quality Improvement in Health Care in Orlando.

About Nemours Children's Health System

Nemours is an internationally recognized children's health system that owns and operates the two free-standing hospitals: the Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Del., and Nemours Children's Hospital in Orlando, Fla., along with outpatient facilities in five states, delivering pediatric primary, specialty and urgent care. Nemours also powers the world's most-visited website for information on the health of children and teens, KidsHealth.org, and offers on-demand, online video patient visits through Nemours CareConnect. Nemours ReadingBrightstart.org is a program dedicated to preventing reading failure in young children, grounded in Nemours' understanding that child health and learning are inextricably linked, and that reading level is a strong predictor of adult health.

Established as The Nemours Foundation through the legacy and philanthropy of Alfred I. duPont, Nemours provides pediatric clinical care, research, education, advocacy and prevention programs to families in the communities it serves.

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