



## A FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF HOSPITALIZATION EFFECTS ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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Hospitalization is a stressful event that may potentially lead to long-term adverse psychological effects both on children and on their parents (Shields, 2001).

An admission to hospital has been portrayed as a negative experience that can bring undesirable emotional effects on children. In fact, the first studies, which aimed to assess the consequences of hospitalization on the adaptation of the child to this environment and the psychological consequences of this period on the development of the child, gave a general negative overview of the hospitalization experience (Spitz, 1946). Today, the nature of those results are attributed not only to the characteristics of the hospital environment itself, but also to the methodology used (Barros, 1999). Firstly, the procedures of hospitalization and hospital treatment were very severe from the point of view of upbringing (separation from family, prolonged duration of stay, need for the children to be in bed and inactive and painful treatments). Secondly, most of these studies used retrospective methodologies, based upon the identification of negative consequences. Today, the view of hospitalization is very different. Recent studies are more complex and far-reaching, and are concerned with both positive and negative consequences, attempting to identify not only perturbing factors but also processes and strategies to cope with the hospitalization (Rutter, 1981; Rutter & Rutter, 1993, Gaughan et al, 2004). In this way, recent research has brought to question a number of early conclusions concerning the effects of hospitalization on children, especially the extent to which the paediatric hospitalization uniformly has adverse effects on children. In the positive aspects the opportunity for psychological development both for child and for the family have become a topic of research recently. The purpose of this study is to improve un-derstanding of child and parents characteristics, attitudes and behaviours associated with the hospitalization process.

### OBJECTIVES

**The main goal is to identify the psychological features of the children and their parents that promote an adaptative and growing experience of the hospitalization process (comparing the period of hospitalization and a period after the hospitalization).**

#### **Concerning the Children (during and after the hospitalization):**

1. to examine the psychological effects of hospitalization in school-aged children (7 to 12 years old).;
2. to analyse the experiences with doctors, illness, hospitalizations, and medical procedures;
3. to examine the obstacles and the strategies used by the children to cope with the experience of hospitalization.

#### **Concerning the Parents (during and after the hospitalization):**

1. to examine the psychological effects of hospitalization in parents (mother and father);
2. to analyse the parents perception of their parental role during and after the hospitalization;
2. to asses the satisfaction of children and parents about quality of life and health care assistance during hospitalization;
3. to analyse the impact of the hospitalization of the child on the integration of familiar and professional roles;
4. to analyse the mediator effect of the parents social characteristics (educational level, economic status) on the experience of the hospitalization.

### METHODS

#### ► **Procedure**

The study involves two phases:

The first gathers qualitative data through exploratory interviews (N=20) in order to identify relevant variables and how to assess them.

The second one will be conducted with 80 families (N=80 families-one child between 7 to 12 years old, mother and father) during the hospitalization (Coimbra Paediatric Hospital) and after the return to the home place. Children will be selected from a group of hospitalized children with more of 48 hours of permanence in the hospital and that the health conditions are not severe.

#### ► **Material**

Children, parents and health-care personnel will fill the questionnaires. Information from nurses and doctors will be collected in order to have a more objective approach to adaptation of the hospital taking the view of the health professionals. The purpose of the research is to gather information about psychosocial conditions of both children and parents involved in the hospitalization.

#### ► **Table 1 – Instruments and assessment domains**

	Questionnaires		
	Healthcare personnel (doctors and nurses)	Parents (mother and father)	Children
Assessment domains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Information about the disease and characteristics of the hospitalization experience;</li> <li>- Perceptions of the child behaviour and attitudes during hospitalization;</li> <li>- Information about the treatment and the medical procedures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Socio-economic characteristics;</li> <li>- Perceptions of their children's behaviour and attitudes during and after hospitalization;</li> <li>- Parent's own attitudes and behaviours towards their child's hospitalization and disease;</li> <li>- Satisfaction about the quality of life and health care assistance during hospitalization;</li> <li>- Parents perception of their parental role during and after hospitalization;</li> <li>- The impact of hospitalization on the management of family and work rules.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Perception of their disease and hospitalization;</li> <li>- Satisfaction about the quality of life and health care assistance during hospitalization;</li> <li>- Strategies used to cope with the disease and the hospitalization;</li> <li>- Emotional responses to hospitalization (anxiety, depression, anger, nervousness, boredom) and worries.</li> </ul>

### IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN THE FUTURE

The project may contribute to design and to implement prevent and intervention programmes to minimize the possible adverse effects of the experience of hospitalization on children and parents. Besides, it can offer an important contribution to the development of psychological health programmes to assist all family members before, during and after hospitalization.

It may also raise awareness about the importance of endeavours to humanise health services and to guarantee the rights of the children and families that use the health services. Overall it will promote more adequate and suitable health policies in this domain. Concerning methodological aspects, particularly the follow-up section, the project can provide important contribution to a change in the public representation of the consequences of hospitalization. It can help to value a more optimistic perspective in a sense that will emphasize the importance of the "so called negative aspects" as a source of personal and familiar development.

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