

Improving the Autism Pathway in a Pediatric Perianesthesia Unit

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Background Information: According to the CDC (2018), 1 in 44 children in the United States has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Nearly a decade ago, our pediatric hospital implemented a special pathway through the perianesthesia continuum to address the unique needs of these patients. This autism pathway aims to individualize the process to decrease stress for this patient population. The Recovery Center Clinical Practice Council (CPC) recently identified an opportunity to update this pathway to better assess and treat pain in patients with communication challenges. Although child life and distraction resources were available in the pre-op area, the post-anesthesia care unit lacked resources.

Objectives of Project: This nurse-led project aimed to enhance the existing perioperative autism care pathway to address individualized pain management. A secondary goal was to create a resource cart with developmentally appropriate distraction tools.

Process of Implementation: The CPC formed an interdisciplinary committee of pre-op and post-anesthesia care nurses, anesthesiologists, and experts in autism care. Partnering with families to optimize care, we implemented an internally created "Ouch Questionnaire" to empower families to share how their child expresses pain and to identify what works best to soothe or distract them from pain. This form follows the patient through the perioperative continuum. Based on feedback from our Family Advisory Committee, the "Ouch Questionnaire" is now given to all families upon admission to perioperative services. Fidget and distraction toys are also available for all patients. Additional distraction resources, including iPads and toys, have been integrated into care through generous donations from our community.

Statement of Successful Practice: The perioperative nurses now have more resources to care for this patient population and other patients with communication challenges. Integration of the Ouch Questionnaire has helped develop a better partnership with our parents to create a less stressful healing environment that is consistent throughout the perianesthesia continuum. This has resulted in positive feedback comments from families.

Implications for Advancing the Practice of Perianesthesia Nursing: Change in daily routines and separation from support people can be stressful for patients with ASD. Partnering with families to create an individualized plan specific to their child's needs can make the situation less stressful for everyone and result in a smoother transition throughout the perianesthesia continuum.