Creating a Culture of Emotional Safety in the Pediatric PACU

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Abstract Background Information: Emotional Safety is defined as an intentional, interdisciplinary practice to promote resiliency, healing, and trust for pediatric patients and their families during medical experiences. Emotional Safety in pediatrics should be as important as physical safety, yet up to 80% of children and families report traumatic stress after receiving medical treatment for life-threatening illnesses or injuries. Healthcare interventions and the actions or comments of healthcare providers can elicit stress responses that negatively affect a child's daily functioning, treatment adherence, and quality of life. Recognition and mitigation of emotional harm lags behind a focus on physical safety by two decades. In our fast-paced pediatric post anesthesia care unit (PACU), the culture of patient's physical safety is already an embedded practice, however there is and opportunity for growth in emotional safety.

Objectives of Project: We aimed to educate all PACU staff –including nurses, patient care assistants, and unit coordinators- about pediatric emotional safety.

Process of Implementation: In collaboration with Child Life Specialist and nurse scientists, we conducted a literature review of emotional safety in the PACU. Staff training included computer-based didactic instruction, and in-person stimulation. Simulations featured staff role playing as a pediatric patients or caregivers to highlight patient vulnerability, communication barriers, fear, pain, and relational distress. Pre- and post-education surveys assessed staff understanding of emotional safety and the use of emotional safety tools.

Statement of Successful Practice: Following the educational interventions, PACU staff demonstrated increased understanding and confidence in applying pediatric emotional safety practices. Post-education surveys reflected improved awareness and use of emotional safety tools and techniques, contributing to a more supportive post anesthesia environment for pediatric patients. PACU staff expressed increased understanding that patient safety includes both physical and emotional safety.

Implications for Advancing the Practice of Perianesthesia Nursing: Integrating emotional safety into pediatric PACU care enhances nursing practice. By prioritizing emotional well-being alongside physical safety, Perianesthesia nurses can improve patient outcomes, foster trust, and support recovery in vulnerable pediatric populations.