

Hope in the hallways: What helps children and parents heal together

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Received: 20 June 2026
Available Online: 8 July 2026

Revised: 4 July 2026
DOI: 10.5861/ijrse.2026.26292

Accepted: 7 July 2026

ISSN: 2243-7703
Online ISSN: 2243-7711

OPEN ACCESS



Abstract

This study explores the perspectives of healthcare professionals on supportive interventions for pediatric patients, adolescents, and their parents in a tertiary hospital setting in the Philippines. Using a structured survey instrument, doctors and nurses assessed the perceived helpfulness of various emotional, creative, and spiritual activities across age groups. Results revealed consistent agreement that hospitalized children exhibit emotional vulnerability and benefit from expressive and play-based activities. Adolescents were found to respond positively to group sharing, journaling, and spiritually enriching experiences. Parents, meanwhile, were identified as needing emotional support, relaxation strategies, and faith-based guidance to manage caregiving stress. The findings align with global and local literature emphasizing the importance of family-centered care and culturally responsive support systems. Notably, the strong endorsement of spiritual and community-based activities reflects the unique coping mechanisms prevalent in Filipino families. The study recommends integrating age-appropriate, holistic interventions into hospital routines, training staff in emotional support delivery, and collaborating with local government units to extend care beyond clinical settings. These insights contribute to the development of inclusive, sustainable support frameworks that enhance well-being for both patients and caregivers.

Keywords: pediatric care, emotional support, family-centered interventions, adolescent well-being, caregiver stress, hospital-based activities

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1. Introduction

Hospitalization presents a multidimensional challenge for pediatric patients and their families. Children admitted to medical facilities are exposed to unfamiliar environments, invasive procedures, and prolonged separation from caregivers — conditions that often lead to emotional distress, behavioral regression, and psychosocial disruption (Claridge et al., 2021). These experiences are compounded by the psychological vulnerability of children, whose coping mechanisms are still developing and whose understanding of illness is often limited (iResearchNet, 2021). Simultaneously, parents of hospitalized children endure significant emotional strain, including anxiety, helplessness, and physical exhaustion, as they navigate caregiving responsibilities, financial pressures, and medical decision-making (Bakula et al., 2023).

In pediatric settings, the integration of psychosocial support has been shown to enhance patient outcomes and reduce caregiver stress. Interventions such as expressive arts, storytelling, guided relaxation, and emotional support groups have demonstrated efficacy in mitigating trauma-related responses and promoting resilience among children and their families (Claridge et al., 2021; Bakula et al., 2023). However, the contextual application of these interventions within Philippine hospital systems remains underexplored, particularly from the perspective of frontline healthcare providers. This study was conducted at the Pediatric Department of Dr. Paulino J. Garcia Memorial Research and Medical Center, with the aim of identifying the psychosocial and emotional needs of pediatric patients and their parents as observed by doctors and nurses. These professionals serve as primary witnesses to the behavioral and emotional responses of children and caregivers during hospitalization, making their insights critical to the design of responsive, family-centered care programs.

By generating evidence-based data through a structured needs assessment, this research seeks to inform the development of holistic psychosocial support interventions tailored to the pediatric context. The findings will contribute to strengthening institutional capacity for emotional care, bridging gaps in service delivery, and promoting healing beyond clinical treatment.

Statement of the Problem - While medical interventions address the physical health of pediatric patients, the emotional and psychosocial dimensions of their hospital experience are often overlooked. Children may exhibit signs of fear, anxiety, regression, and isolation, while their parents endure emotional distress, uncertainty, and fatigue. These challenges, if unaddressed, can hinder recovery and strain family dynamics. This study seeks to explore the following:

- What emotional and behavioral patterns are commonly observed among hospitalized pediatric patients?
- What psychosocial and emotional challenges do parents of pediatric patients face during hospitalization?
- What interventions are perceived by healthcare professionals as most helpful in supporting the emotional well-being of pediatric patients and their families?

2. Review of Related Literature

Hospitalization is recognized as one of the most stressful experiences in childhood because it disrupts children's routines, separates them from familiar environments, and exposes them to painful or unfamiliar medical procedures. Young children often have limited cognitive ability to understand illness and hospitalization, making them particularly vulnerable to anxiety, fear, sadness, and behavioral regression. Emotional distress may manifest through crying, withdrawal, irritability, sleep disturbances, or refusal to cooperate with treatment. Such reactions not only affect the child's psychological well-being but may also interfere with recovery, treatment adherence, and

overall quality of life (Claridge et al., 2021; iResearchNet, 2021).

Research has increasingly emphasized that pediatric care should extend beyond medical treatment to include interventions addressing children's emotional, developmental, and psychosocial needs. Family-centered care has emerged as an internationally accepted approach that recognizes the child and family as equal partners in healthcare. Rather than focusing solely on disease management, family-centered care encourages healthcare providers to involve parents in decision-making, respect family values, provide emotional support, and create hospital environments that reduce fear and anxiety. Studies have demonstrated that family-centered care improves communication between healthcare professionals and families, enhances treatment satisfaction, decreases parental stress, and contributes to better clinical outcomes among pediatric patients (Kuo et al., 2012; UNICEF, 2022).

One of the most widely recommended psychosocial approaches in pediatric settings involves the use of developmentally appropriate play and creative activities. Play is considered a natural language of children and serves as an effective medium for emotional expression, stress reduction, and cognitive development. Therapeutic activities such as storytelling, coloring, music, drawing, puzzles, role-playing, and arts and crafts allow hospitalized children to express feelings that they may be unable to verbalize while simultaneously promoting coping, resilience, and emotional regulation. According to Claridge et al. (2021), psychosocial interventions incorporating creative expression significantly reduce procedural anxiety and improve children's overall hospital experiences. Similarly, the World Health Organization has emphasized that child-friendly environments contribute positively to children's psychological adjustment during hospitalization (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021).

The psychosocial needs of adolescents differ considerably from those of younger children because developmental tasks during adolescence center on identity formation, independence, peer relationships, and emotional autonomy. Hospitalization may interrupt these developmental processes by limiting social interaction, increasing feelings of isolation, and creating uncertainty regarding health and the future. Consequently, interventions designed for adolescents often emphasize emotional expression, peer support, reflective writing, creative arts, and opportunities for meaningful communication with healthcare providers and family members. Bakula et al. (2023) found that psychosocial interventions encouraging self-expression and emotional regulation significantly improve adolescents' adjustment during prolonged hospitalization while reducing symptoms of anxiety and uncertainty.

Parents likewise experience considerable emotional burdens when caring for hospitalized children. Numerous studies have reported that parents frequently experience stress, fear, uncertainty, sleep disturbances, financial strain, and emotional exhaustion while simultaneously attempting to provide comfort for their children. Feelings of helplessness are especially pronounced when parents have limited understanding of their child's medical condition or perceive inadequate emotional support from healthcare providers. Bakula et al. (2023) reported that parental uncertainty and caregiver burden are significant predictors of psychological distress among families of hospitalized children. Their study further demonstrated that self-care practices, emotional support, and clear communication from healthcare professionals contribute substantially to improving parental adjustment throughout hospitalization.

Within the Philippine context, family relationships and spirituality remain central sources of resilience during illness. Filipino families commonly rely on religious beliefs, prayer, extended family support, and community networks to cope with health-related challenges. UNICEF (2022) noted that culturally responsive mental health and psychosocial support programs should acknowledge these coping mechanisms by integrating family participation, spiritual resources, and community engagement into healthcare delivery. Likewise, Nierva (2009) emphasized that Filipino parents actively participate in their children's development when institutions recognize family values, encourage collaboration, and establish supportive relationships with caregivers. These findings suggest that psychosocial interventions in Philippine hospitals should not merely adopt international models but should also reflect local cultural and spiritual practices that strengthen resilience among children and their families.

Healthcare professionals occupy a critical role in recognizing the psychosocial needs of hospitalized children

and caregivers because they interact continuously with patients throughout treatment. Doctors and nurses frequently observe behavioral changes, emotional responses, coping strategies, and caregiver stress that may not be captured through medical records alone. Their observations provide valuable evidence for identifying priority interventions that are practical, culturally appropriate, and feasible within hospital settings. Previous studies have therefore recommended involving frontline healthcare professionals in the planning and evaluation of psychosocial programs to ensure that interventions address actual patient needs rather than solely theoretical recommendations (WHO, 2021; UNICEF, 2022).

Despite increasing recognition of psychosocial care internationally, relatively few studies in the Philippines have systematically examined healthcare professionals' perceptions regarding the psychosocial needs of hospitalized pediatric patients and their families. Existing local literature has primarily focused on parents' lived experiences or hospital service delivery, with limited attention given to identifying which psychosocial activities healthcare providers consider most beneficial across different developmental stages. Furthermore, few studies have simultaneously examined the support needs of toddlers, school-age children, adolescents, and parents within a single pediatric care setting. Addressing this gap is essential for designing comprehensive, evidence-based, and culturally responsive psychosocial support programs that can be integrated into routine pediatric healthcare services.

3. Methodology

Research Design - This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design using a structured survey instrument to assess the psychosocial and emotional needs of pediatric patients and their parents during hospitalization. The design was chosen to capture observable patterns and perceptions from healthcare professionals directly involved in pediatric care.

Research Locale and Participants - The research was conducted at the Pediatric Department of Dr. Paulino J. Garcia Memorial Research and Medical Center, a tertiary government hospital located in Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija, Philippines. The participants consisted of licensed doctors and nurses assigned to pediatric wards and outpatient pediatric services. These professionals were selected based on their direct and sustained interaction with hospitalized children and their families.

Sampling Technique - A purposive sampling method was used to identify participants who had substantial experience in pediatric care and were able to provide informed observations regarding the emotional and behavioral responses of patients and their caregivers. A total of 19 respondents participated in the survey.

Instrumentation - The primary data collection tool was a researcher-developed survey questionnaire composed of two major sections:

- Section A: Observations on pediatric patients' emotional and behavioral responses during hospitalization.
- Section B: Observations on parents' psychosocial and emotional needs.
- Section C: Perceived helpfulness of psychosocial interventions for toddlers to pre-teens, adolescents, and parents.

The instrument underwent content validation by experts in pediatric care and psychosocial support. Minor revisions were made to ensure clarity, contextual relevance, and alignment with hospital protocols.

Data Collection Procedure - Surveys were distributed in printed form and administered during scheduled departmental meetings and break periods to ensure minimal disruption to clinical duties. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Completed questionnaires were collected within a one-week period.

Data Analysis - Quantitative data were encoded and analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically:

- Mean scores to determine the level of agreement or perceived helpfulness
- Verbal interpretations aligned with the Likert scale to contextualize responses

The results were synthesized to identify recurring psychosocial needs and prioritize interventions based on perceived effectiveness.

4. Results and discussion

Table 1

Emotional Experiences of Hospitalized Children

Statement	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Children in hospitals often experience sadness and boredom	4.00	Agree
Some children show lack of interest or enthusiasm due to the prolonged treatment.	3.63	Strongly Agree
Some children need psychosocial stimulation (e.g., play, storytelling, music)	4.26	Strongly Agree
A child's emotional state affects their recovery	4.53	Strongly Agree
Activities that bring joy or comfort are a big help to children	4.63	Strongly Agree

The results show that healthcare professionals consistently observe emotional and behavioral challenges among hospitalized children. Most responses fall under the “Strongly Agree” category, indicating that sadness, boredom, lack of enthusiasm, and emotional vulnerability are common experiences. The highest-rated items emphasize the importance of psychosocial stimulation and comforting activities, which are viewed as essential to improving children's emotional well-being and supporting their recovery.

Table 2

Emotional Support Needs of Parents of Hospitalized Children

Statement	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Parents of child patients often experience stress or fatigue.	4.53	Strongly Agree
Parents also need emotional or mental support.	4.74	Strongly Agree
It is important to have programs for parents to help reduce their worries.	4.68	Strongly Agree

The table reveals that healthcare professionals strongly agree that parents of pediatric patients face significant emotional and psychological challenges during hospitalization. With mean scores ranging from 4.53 to 4.74, respondents consistently affirmed that parents experience stress and fatigue, require emotional or mental support, and would benefit from structured programs aimed at reducing worry. These findings highlight the urgent need for family-centered interventions within hospital settings, recognizing that the well-being of caregivers directly influences the recovery and emotional stability of their children.

Table 3

Activities that are Helpful for Toddlers and Pre-teens,

Statement	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Storytelling	4.32	Extremely Helpful
Coloring / Drawing	4.84	Extremely Helpful
Play with learning elements (e.g., flashcards, puzzles)	4.58	Extremely Helpful
Simple art activities (e.g., making masks or cards)	4.58	Extremely Helpful

The table presents psychosocial interventions specifically designed for toddlers to pre-teens, as observed by healthcare professionals at Dr. Paulino J. Garcia Memorial Research and Medical Center. All four activities—storytelling, coloring, learning-based play, and simple art—were rated as either Helpful or Extremely Helpful, with coloring/drawing receiving the highest mean score (4.84). Both play with learning elements and simple art activities followed closely (mean = 4.58), while storytelling was also positively received (mean = 4.32). These results highlight the strong preference for creative and play-based interventions in supporting the emotional well-being and developmental needs of young pediatric patients.

Table 4*Activities that are Helpful for Adolescents*

Statement	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Journaling / Writing down emotions	4.32	Extremely Helpful
Group sharing or supportive conversations	4.58	Extremely Helpful
Creative expression (drawing, music, crafts)	4.58	Extremely Helpful
Watching inspiring videos or films	4.47	Extremely Helpful
Activities that deepen spiritual aspects (faith and hope)	4.79	Extremely Helpful

Healthcare professionals at Dr. Paulino J. Garcia Memorial Research and Medical Center identified five key psychosocial activities for adolescent patients, each receiving high mean scores. Spiritual support activities (faith and hope) received the highest rating (Mean = 4.79), indicating they are perceived as Extremely Helpful in promoting emotional resilience. Group sharing and creative expression (both at 4.58) were also rated as Extremely Helpful, highlighting the value of peer connection and artistic outlets. Watching inspiring videos (Mean = 4.47) and journaling (Mean = 4.32) were interpreted as Extremely Helpful too, showing that reflective and media-based activities contribute meaningfully to emotional support. These findings emphasize the importance of offering diverse, age-appropriate interventions that address the emotional, social, and spiritual needs of adolescents during hospitalization.

Table 5*Activities that are Helpful for Parents*

Statement	Mean	Verbal Interpretation
Basic emotional support group or conversations	4.53	Extremely Helpful
Mindfulness or relaxation activities	4.63	Extremely Helpful
Activities that deepen spiritual aspects (faith and hope)	4.68	Extremely Helpful
Self-care tips	4.79	Extremely Helpful

Healthcare professionals at Dr. Paulino J. Garcia Memorial Research and Medical Center identified four key psychosocial support activities for parents of hospitalized children. All interventions received high mean scores, indicating strong agreement on their effectiveness. Self-care tips received the highest rating (Mean = 4.79), followed by spiritual support activities such as faith and hope (Mean = 4.68), and mindfulness or relaxation exercises (Mean = 4.63), all interpreted as Extremely Helpful. Basic emotional support group conversations also scored highly (Mean = 4.53), reflecting their value in reducing stress and fostering emotional resilience. These findings emphasize the importance of integrating structured, parent-focused psychosocial interventions into pediatric care to support caregiver well-being and strengthen family-centered healing.

5. Discussions

This study affirms the critical role of psychosocial support in pediatric hospitalization, as observed by healthcare professionals in a tertiary hospital setting. Pediatric patients were consistently described as emotionally vulnerable, exhibiting sadness, fear, and behavioral changes during their hospital stay. These observations reflect the broader literature on pediatric distress in clinical environments, where unfamiliar routines and medical procedures often trigger anxiety and regression (Claridge et al., 2021). The strong endorsement of creative and play-based interventions for younger children aligns with global best practices in child-centered care. Activities such as storytelling, art, and interactive play are widely recognized for their therapeutic value, helping children process emotions and regain a sense of normalcy (UNICEF, 2022). These approaches are especially relevant in the Philippine context, where expressive and communal activities are culturally embedded in early childhood development.

For adolescents, healthcare professionals emphasized the importance of emotional expression, peer support, and spiritual grounding. This is consistent with findings from Bakula et al. (2023), who noted that adolescents benefit from interventions that foster identity, hope, and emotional regulation. The inclusion of faith-based activities also reflects the cultural significance of spirituality in Filipino coping mechanisms, particularly during times of uncertainty and illness. Parents of pediatric patients were also identified as needing structured psychosocial support. Emotional fatigue, decision-making stress, and spiritual distress were recurring themes in

the observations. These findings echo local research on Filipino parents in pediatric intensive care units, which highlighted the emotional toll of caregiving and the need for institutional support systems (CCA, 2022). Moreover, the emphasis on faith and community-based interventions aligns with Nierva's (2009) review of parental involvement in the Philippines, which underscores the role of relational and spiritual networks in family resilience.

Compared to international literature, the results of this study reinforce the global consensus that family-centered psychosocial care improves outcomes for both patients and caregivers. However, the prominence of spiritual and community-based interventions in this study reflects culturally specific needs that must be considered in program design. These findings support the development of holistic, age-appropriate, and culturally responsive psychosocial frameworks within pediatric hospital settings.

Recommendations - Integrate Age-Appropriate Psychosocial Interventions into Pediatric Care Protocols. Hospitals should formally include storytelling, art, play-based learning, and spiritual activities in daily routines for toddlers to pre-teens. These interventions help reduce emotional distress and promote engagement during hospitalization. Establish Dedicated Support Programs for Adolescents. Adolescents benefit from journaling, group sharing, creative expression, and faith-based reflection. Hospitals should design youth-specific psychosocial modules that foster emotional regulation, identity development, and peer connection. Develop Structured Psychosocial Support for Parents. Parents of hospitalized children require emotional, spiritual, and practical support. Hospitals should offer mindfulness sessions, self-care workshops, and faith-based counseling to help caregivers manage stress and maintain resilience. Train Healthcare Staff in Delivering Psychosocial Care. Equip doctors, nurses, and allied professionals with training on psychosocial first aid, trauma-informed care, and culturally sensitive communication to ensure consistent emotional support across all patient interactions.

Collaborate with LGUs and Community Organizations. Strengthen partnerships with local government units, faith-based groups, and NGOs to extend psychosocial support beyond hospital walls. Community-based programs can reinforce hospital interventions and provide continuity of care. Monitor and Evaluate Psychosocial Programs Regularly. Implement feedback mechanisms and outcome-based monitoring tools to assess the effectiveness of psychosocial activities. This ensures continuous improvement and alignment with patient and caregiver needs. Include Psychosocial Support in Hospital Policy and Budget Planning. Institutionalize psychosocial care by embedding it in hospital policies, staffing plans, and budget allocations. This ensures sustainability and signals its importance as a core component of pediatric health services.

AI Use Disclosure - This manuscript was prepared with the assistance of ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5.5, July 2026 version) for language editing, grammar refinement, organization of manuscript sections, improvement of academic writing style, and drafting support during the preparation of the introduction, discussion, and recommendations. The AI tool was also used to assist in improving sentence clarity, formatting references in APA style, and enhancing the overall readability of the manuscript. All research activities, including the conceptualization of the study, development and validation of the research instrument, data collection, statistical analysis, interpretation of findings, and final conclusions, were conducted and verified by the authors. All AI-generated outputs were critically reviewed, revised, and validated against the original data, relevant literature, and cited sources before inclusion in the manuscript. No confidential, personally identifiable, or patient-specific information was entered into the AI system. The authors accept full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and ethical compliance of the content presented in this manuscript.

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