

Valley Children's Eases Hospital Experience for Children with Autism

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A typical hospital environment's bright lights, beeping alarms, and strong disinfectant smells may especially distress a child diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, or ASD, the fastest growing developmental disability in the nation.

"Such an atmosphere can overload the senses," said Shelly Reyes, a registered nurse in the day surgery unit at Valley Children's Hospital located in Central California. "Even a click of a metal door or a baby's cry can seem magnified to a child with ASD."

Reyes should know. Her 9-year-old

son, Jalen, who has ASD is also a Valley Children's patient. When Reyes noticed opportunities to improve the hospital and surgical experience for Jalen and other young patients with the same condition, she decided to do something about it.

With significant support from her supervisor and the hospital, Reyes formed a multidisciplinary team to develop a process to systematically evaluate and address each child's individualized needs based on their history and diagnosis. Named after Valley Children's popular George the Giraffe mascot, the new program called "George's Pass" eases the child's stay through education, personal tours, hands-on activities and more.

"This is the only program of its kind in the region," said LuAnn Joy, Valley Children's director, perioperative services. "There are only a few of these programs in the country and ours is by far the most comprehensive I've seen."

The only dedicated pediatric healthcare network and hospital between Los Angeles and the Bay Area, Valley Children's treats more

than 300 children a year with ASD. George's Pass addresses these children's specialized needs from the moment they enter the hospital until they are discharged.

Specifically, program highlights include the following:

- An icon identifies George's Pass participants in their medical chart and on their hospital room door.
- If a George's Pass child visits the emergency department, he or she moves directly to an exam room to reduce exposure to a busy waiting room.
- After surgery, the child recovers in a private, enclosed room with a door and windows with dark curtains. Parents may be in the room, including prior to when the child awakens from anesthesia. This practice differs from the typical process in which post-surgery patients recover in a room with multiple beds separated by a thin curtain.
- A book called a "Social Story" outlines step-by-step what the child can expect from the surgical and hospital experience. Composed largely of illustrations and written for

a child to easily understand, information includes how the child should prepare the night before surgery; photos of staff members the child is likely to meet in the hospital; what each area of the hospital looks like; where the child will be; what a blood pressure cuff looks like; and more. Parents are encouraged to review this information with their child in the comfort and privacy of their own home.

- Each child and their parents receive a customized tour of the hospital to demonstrate and reinforce firsthand what they learned in the “Social Story.”
- Information is shared and supported through a number of advanced tools such as iPads and interactive toys.

The George’s Pass program is timely. The number of American children diagnosed with ASD has soared about 30 percent since 2012, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The prevalence of ASD has surpassed the rates of childhood cancer, Down syndrome and spina bifida. The data reveals that ASD is almost five times more common among boys than girls, with one in 42 boys estimated to have the disorder, compared with

one in 189 girls.

“This is an incredible example of a completely grassroots effort driven by a mom and nurse to do the right thing for kids,” said Beverly Hayden-Pugh, Valley Children’s senior vice president, clinical operations and chief nursing officer. “Our staff saw a problem and came up with a solution.”

The multidisciplinary team that developed and oversees the program comprises Valley Children’s staff, including Reyes and another registered nurse who has a child with ASD; two charge nurses; two nurse educators; Child Life program specialists; and a behavioral analyst.

George’s Pass completed a soft launch in summer 2014. “We’ve been working out more of the details since then,” said Reyes. “The program has been well received, with a lot of positive feedback from parents and other family members and caregivers.”

The new process also enhances the experience for staff and physicians. “They feel better prepared to provide individualized care to meet each child’s and family’s needs,” said Reyes. “It creates a better experience for all those involved.”

Because of the program’s success, Valley Children’s has extended George’s Pass to patients with high anxiety and behavioral issues as well.

“This has been a very rewarding effort,” said Reyes. “In the end we’re helping kids, and that’s what it’s all about.”

Monica Prinzing is a communications specialist for Valley Children’s Healthcare, a system of pediatric care providers and medical facilities serving a 45,000-square-mile region in Central California. A nonprofit, pediatric regional medical center on a 50-acre campus near Fresno, Valley Children’s Hospital is one of the largest hospitals of its type in the nation. The 356-bed facility has a medical staff of more than 550 physicians, offers more than 40 pediatric specialties, and consistently ranks at the top of its peer group for quality patient outcomes and patient satisfaction. Valley Children’s has received repeated designations for nursing care excellence from the Magnet Recognition Program®.

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