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BRING THE HO-HO-HOS TO THE HOSPITAL FOR CHILDREN ILL AT CHRISTMAS

DAYTON, Ohio — A hospital stay can be a frightening, painful time for a child, and the situation may be even more stressful if illness or injury coincides with the Christmas holidays.

Family can play an important role in containing stress, which has been shown to exacerbate illnesses and, in extreme cases, undermines the patient’s immune system, says Roger Rape, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Dayton who has studied children and how they deal with pain and stress. “Social support can buffer people from stress, so the family should maintain and augment their support of the child in the hospital,” he says.

For the Christmas season, “if religion and prayer are important to the family, then maintain that as well,” he recommends. Special prayers for the child’s recovery are fine as long as they’re worded in an appropriate manner for the child’s age, Rape says. “Children can draw illogical conclusions. If negative things are going on, like a hospital stay, sometimes they take responsibility and blame themselves.” Rape says parents should carefully explain the illness or injury in ways their child can understand.

If the child’s health permits, bring the Christmas celebration to the patient, recommends Rape. “Continue to include the child in the family system,” he says. Make sure the child has a chance to buy presents, maybe in the hospital gift shop, or offer to follow his
or her instructions to buy presents for others, Rape says. Take the gift wrapping and ribbons to the hospital and let the child participate as fully as possible.

Room decorations can help, if they are permitted by the hospital, and parties organized by hospital staff members can bring patients and their families together to celebrate.

And don’t ignore Christmas day, Rape says. “Make arrangements with the hospital to have Christmas dinner with the child, and visit on Christmas morning and open presents. I’d go so far as to bring everybody’s presents to the hospital, not just the patient’s.

“The worst thing is for the child to feel excluded or rejected, for the family to have a major party or Christmas dinner at home and then spend an hour at the hospital. I’ve seen families go completely out of their way, which is about what you need to do with a very young child in the hospital.”

An added bonus for a family hospital celebration? “If your child has a roommate who isn’t getting the support he or she needs, you can include that patient in your celebration,” says Rape.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: For interviews, call Roger Rape at (513) 229-2395.