THIS HOSPITAL IS A “NO HITTING ZONE”
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It is not uncommon to walk through a busy clinic or emergency waiting room and see or hear a stressed parent yelling at, spanking or threatening to spank a child in order to elicit good behavior. Staff and visitors passing by a lobby restroom may hear a child crying in response to what sounds like a whipping being administered. These misguided discipline efforts are generally ineffective, sometimes border on abuse and are disturbing to the hospital environment and to all who witness them. In pediatric settings, health care professionals have child advocacy obligations they don't have (to the same extent) when they see these behaviors in the grocery store or at the mall. Yet, for a variety of reasons staff members are often uncomfortable about intervening even when they feel someone ought to do so.

Following some complaints by visitors and comments from staff members, Rainbow Babies & Children’s Hospital of University Hospitals of Cleveland declared itself a “NO HITTING ZONE”. Eye-catching posters were placed in patient rooms, public bathrooms, by elevators and entrances, and in waiting rooms. Brochures and handouts addressing a host of discipline issues were created for free distribution to parents. Educational sessions were provided for doctors, nurses, child life specialists, secretaries, social workers, rehab therapists, lobby receptionists, etc. detailing the new policy, introducing the family educational materials and demonstrating a variety of practical approaches to intervening in abusive or disruptive discipline situations. These offerings have been incorporated as a routine part of orientation for new nurses. Advocacy for alternatives to physical discipline was extended to the entire community through a public service television spot (“The More You Know”). The project was recently featured at Pediatric Grand Rounds and interest on the part of community physicians has been gratifying.

The goals of the “No Hitting Zone” initiative are as follows:

- Reduction in frequency of occurrence of abusive or disruptive discipline
- Enhancement of staff comfort, competence, and accountability with regard to intervening in occurrences of abusive or disruptive discipline

Pre-implementation surveys assessed staff impressions of the frequency with which they encountered parental discipline interventions that appeared excessive/abusive and/or were disruptive of the environment. The survey also assessed staff familiarity with policy (nonexistent at the time though some seemed to feel there was one), comfort with and strategies for intervening, access to educational materials for distribution to families and knowledge levels regarding discipline alternatives to spanking. Post-implementation surveys demonstrated a big jump in familiarity with policy, strategies for intervening, access to educational materials for families. Almost without exception, when asked directly, staff indicated they weren’t sure whether there had been a reduction in the frequency with which they encountered inappropriate/disruptive discipline but interestingly, the number of individuals responding that they encounter such incidents as often as “once a week” or “once a month” dropped dramatically.

Initial concerns that staff would not see this initiative or the mandatory in-services as a priority were not realized. Almost without exception, staff had a thirst for the information and resources. The response was often along the lines of: “it's about time somebody did something”. Clinical areas we overlooked requested in-services and supplies of posters and family education materials---requests even came from some areas on the adult side of UH where children may accompany parents to appointments. Concerns that posters would be torn down or showered with graffiti were also unfounded. It has been suggested that the posters should have been larger than their 8½ X 14 size however a lot of thought went into their design, including size. The posters are so (intentionally) ubiquitous that if they were larger, it would give the impression that the primary focus of the hospital is on child discipline and may have made parents feel they were being harassed rather than invited to review their thinking about their style of discipline. They were laminated to discourage graffiti, resist dirt and increase longevity. In all of the elevator lobby areas, waiting rooms and public bathrooms where parents sometimes go to administer discipline less publicly, signs were posted with Velcro so they could have a place of some permanence and yet easily be replaced. Managers are reminded to make inventory rounds every 6 months so that dirty, defaced or missing posters can be replaced.
Language on the posters is permissive—parents aren’t told they can’t spank their children (except on our premises) but instead are given good reasons not to resort to spanking and invited to speak to a nurse, social worker or child life specialist if interested reading material about effective discipline measures. Amazingly, posters have not been defaced or torn down.

Anecdotal stories (some of them quite poignant and some of a humorous nature) provided by staff to the project creators illustrate that parents and children are paying attention. For example, a day care worker attending a class on child care and discipline issues at the VNA mentioned to her classmates that she took her child to RB&C where she had seen “No Hitting Zone” posters and was able to rattle off most of the logic for seeking alternatives to spanking. A social worker was in exam room in Pediatric Practice and as she spoke with a mother, the son, who had been exploring the room and reading the poster, said, “See, Mom, I told you you’re not supposed to hit me.” A receptionist in the Rainbow lobby saw a woman walking off with the poster from the wall by the elevators and when she mentioned that she didn’t think the posters were to be removed, the woman answered, “well, it looked like it was coming down anyway and I could really use this.” Wisely, the receptionist allowed the woman to leave with the sign and she put in a request for a replacement poster. A surprising number of staff have called requesting educational materials to take home to their sons and daughters who have young children and face discipline challenges. Based on these and other stories, it is reasonable to project that the initiative is having a larger and more positive impact than can be measured.

The “No Hitting Zone” campaign was presented at 2005 Spring’s NACHRI conference in New Orleans the 2007 APSAC Colloquium in Boston and as a result of that exposure; hospitals across the country have consulted us about developing their own programs and have adapted our materials. With respect to “next steps,” copies of the educational materials will be added to hospital website for easy access by professionals and parents. The most popular of the educational materials is a brochure that introduces the basics regarding 6 alternatives to spanking. Separate downloadable handouts will be developed for each of those forms of discipline that will allow greater detail and a lowered reading level.

The “No Hitting Zone” campaign and materials were created and funded by the Department of Child Advocacy and Protection, Dr. Lolita McDavid, Medical Director. Helpful editorial input was obtained from Child Life and from nurses in the Pediatric Emergency Department. Kathy Sanniti, one of the Rainbow Directors provided financial support for a second order of the family education materials when supplies were exhausted more quickly than anticipated. Through Child Advocacy and Protection, funds are now available to permit us to fill some of the requests from community physicians for materials to be distributed by their practices. Website posting should eliminate the out-of-pocket expenses for this sort of need in the future. Any area in the hospital or community with an audience of 15 or more individuals may request an in-service for their staff as well as samples of staff and family education materials by contacting Lauren McAliley at (216) 844-8541 or via email at Lauren.mcaliley@uhhs.com. This contact information may also be used by anyone aware of additional locations within the hospital that would benefit from posting of “No Hitting Zone” signs.