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Enhancing Acute Distress Management in Preschool-Aged Pediatric Oncology Patients

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Background: In the United States, one in 285 children will be diagnosed with cancer, and over fifty percent of children identify their cancer journey as distressing. Acute distress, or intense psychological suffering, results from cancer-related treatments, hospitalizations, unknown outcomes, and even reintegration of daily life. The preschool-age population has the highest risk of developmental and intellectual regression from repeated distressing events. Evidence-based standards for managing acute distress in this population are available, but utilization of interventions is often inconsistent. Empowering caregivers to use non-pharmacologic strategies for their child in distress can help ease their stress, which can positively influence child behavior. A redesigned distress management tool, initially developed for adults, was integrated with evidence-based strategies tailored for distress support in preschool-aged children. **Purpose:** The purpose of this evidence-based project was to enhance acute distress management by increasing knowledge and confidence in caregivers about recognizing and managing distress in newly diagnosed preschool-aged oncology patients. **Methods:** This project involved designing and implementing a Distress Action Plan (DAP) while utilizing the Pediatric Emotional Distress Scale (PEDS) to evaluate distressing behaviors and equip caregivers with strategies for recognizing and managing distress in their child. **Findings:** Of the 6 patients/caregivers reached during the project implementation, 5 were introduced to the DAP. In the reassessment period, caregivers showed increased average responses in their ability to recognize stress triggers and knowledge to use calming techniques for their child in distress. All reassessed caregivers engaged with the DAP. **Discussion:** The implementation of the DAP and PEDS facilitated conversations between caregivers and the psychosocial oncology nurse about distressing behaviors and coping mechanisms. This was clinically significant, as it supported the emotional well-being of preschool-aged oncology patients and their families while reinforcing evidence-based strategies as an essential component in their plan of care.

Keywords: pediatric oncology, distress, preschool-aged, caregiver, Pediatric Emotional Distress Scale