

5-11-2019

Mental Health of Children with Chronic Illness

Courtney B. Hoster

Follow this and additional works at: <https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/studentengagement-honorscapstones>

Recommended Citation

Hoster, Courtney B., "Mental Health of Children with Chronic Illness" (2019). *Honors Capstones*. 783.
<https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/studentengagement-honorscapstones/783>

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Research & Artistry at Huskie Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Capstones by an authorized administrator of Huskie Commons. For more information, please contact jschumacher@niu.edu.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Mental Health of Children with Chronic Illness

A Capstone Submitted to the

University Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree with Honors

Department of Nursing

Courtney Hoster

DeKalb, Illinois

11 May, 2019

Mental Health of Children with Chronic Illness

Chronic illness is an issue that continues to rise in the United States, with 27% of children living with at least one chronic physical illness (“Chronic Illness,” 2019). Common chronic illnesses affecting children include asthma, epilepsy, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. In addition to physical concerns having to do with these chronic illnesses, the mental health of these children must be of concern as well. Rates of psychiatric disorder in children with chronic illness are up to four times greater than children who are physically healthy (Bennett, Shafran, Coughtrey, Walker, & Heyman, 2015). When assessing the pediatric patient with a chronic physical illness the majority of the nurse’s attention is focused on the physical condition of the child, many times with little focus on the mental and emotional status of the child. Nurses play a vital role in assessing these pediatric patients and are likely to be the first members of the healthcare team to notice a change in the patient and initiate interventions in an effort to advocate for the child.

Background

Mental and emotional wellbeing of all children should be a top priority for a healthcare team treating any child, but especially when that child has been diagnosed with a chronic physical condition. The mental health status of children with chronic illness may often be overlooked due to the possible complexity of their disease state and symptoms. If the healthcare team does not identify signs of mental distress, these children will not receive the proper treatment necessary to cope with these issues. Consequently, if these issues are not dealt with they have the potential to negatively impact the child into their adult years (Butler et al., 2018). Mental health is a topic that is covered in nursing education and training. However, mental health as it relates to pediatric chronic illness is not discussed as often or as in depth in pediatric

care settings as it should be. The purpose of this literature review is to examine the current trends in research surrounding pediatric physical chronic illness and mental health outcomes.

Review of Literature

Five articles were selected from 2015 to 2019 based on the following key words: Chronic illness, mental health, mental illness, outcomes, anxiety, and depression. CINAHL Complete was used to obtain articles. These articles were selected because they were published within the last five years and were peer-reviewed. In addition, each of these articles directly examined children with various chronic illnesses while studying the possible development of mental health issues over time.

Emerson, Morrell, Neece, Tapanes, and Distelberg (2018) completed a qualitative study surrounding children with chronic illness and the longitudinal progression of their self-concept over time. The researchers were analyzing depression symptoms and child to parent attachment in relation to chronic illness. The children in the study took part in a three-month outpatient program in an effort to improve mental health outcomes. This article reported a higher incidence in avoidant attachment patterns in children with chronic illness compared to children that do not suffer from chronic illness. This article presents important results to the nursing profession in regards to mental health in children with chronic illness. Nurses must be able to identify signs of poor attachment and depression in children. In addition, it is essential that nurses educate guardians of children with chronic physical illness on the signs and symptoms of depression, and when to contact a healthcare provider if they begin to notice them.

Ferro, Gorter, and Boyle (2015) completed a longitudinal survey of 2,825 children aged 10-11 years until they were 24-25 years of age. Of these children, 753 of them had a chronic illness, while the other 2,072 did not (Ferro et al., 2015). In this survey, they were looking to

identify the progression of depressive symptoms in children with chronic illness versus generally healthy children as they progressed from early adolescence to adulthood. It was found that the children living with a chronic illness had significantly less favorable mental health outcomes as compared to the other group. This study suggests that further efforts must be made to psychosocially support children living with chronic illness. The nursing profession, as well as the healthcare team as a whole, must continue to support the mental health of children with chronic physical illness well into adulthood.

Pavlova, Ference, Hancock, and Noel (2017) conducted a study surrounding children with chronic abdominal, headache, and complex pain. The researchers utilized questionnaires to analyze mental health outcomes, including rates of anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances amongst their sample size of 147 children (Pavlova et al., 2017). This study showed that female children with chronic illness reported higher levels of anxiety and sleep disturbances as compared to the male children that took part in this study (Pavlova et al., 2017). In addition, older children reported significantly higher levels of depression symptoms as compared to younger children, resulting in a positive correlation between age and depression in this sample of children with chronic pain (Pavlova et al., 2017). The findings of this study support the idea that chronic pain is associated with poor reported mental health status amongst children. In addition, these findings also suggest that poor mental health status is associated with sleep disturbances. Every effort must be made to manage chronic pain in pediatric patients in order to promote mental wellness and proper sleep.

O'Neill and Robinson (2016) published an article containing three case studies surrounding children with chronic skin conditions and the psychosocial implications of living with these conditions. The three case studies encompassed children dealing with mild to severe

forms of eczema, as well as intermittent skin conditions related to food allergies (O'Neill & Robinson, 2016). The researchers concluded that there appeared to be a correlation between chronic skin conditions and poor self-esteem and overall mood. However, the sample size provided in this study was extremely small. Finally, the authors recommend that nurses treating children with chronic skin conditions be mindful of possible mental health issues that may accompany dermatological issues (O'Neill & Robinson, 2016). They suggest that nurses understand what embodies good mental health while being prepared to educate guardians of children with skin conditions on signs of mental distress (O'Neill & Robinson, 2016).

Reeve et al., (2017) published the final study included in this literature review. The purpose of this study was to utilize the PROMIS pediatric measures to determine if these measures were effective in detecting change over time involving symptoms of mental illness in children and adolescents experiencing chronic conditions such as sickle cell disease, nephrotic syndrome, and cancer. The PROMIS pediatric measures examine both self-reported and proxy-reported physical, mental, and social health ("Intro to PROMIS," 2019). Both qualitative and quantitative data was gathered using the PROMIS measures completed by children ages 8-17 that were dealing with cancer, nephrotic syndrome, or sickle cell disease (Reeve et al., 2017). Mental health issues that were measured included fatigue, anxiety, peer relationships, depressive symptoms, and anger. This article acknowledges that children dealing with a chronic physical illness are more likely to struggle in peer relationships, report fatigue, and report symptoms of mental illness during times of disease progression. This study concludes that the PROMIS pediatric measures may be used to measure the impact of chronic disease on children aged 8-17 (Reeve et al., 2017).

Discussion

The majority of the studies examined in this literature review contained sufficient evidence to support their findings, which overall concluded that children living with a chronic physical illness do display higher rates of mental illness. When it comes to the topic of mental health and children with chronic illness, it was difficult to identify studies where the sole purpose was to identify the mental health outcomes of children dealing with chronic illness versus generally healthy children. Roughly half of the articles reviewed discussed specific chronic diseases, such as cancer, nephrotic syndrome, eczema, and chronic pain. In addition, half of the articles contained an adequate sample size while the others were relatively small. Small sample sizes decrease the reliability of the findings in an article, as the sample size may not adequately represent the target population.

Recommendations

There were many common themes presented in the studies that were reviewed. These themes included anxiety, pain, and depression. Overall, children living with a chronic physical illness display increased rates of both self-reported and diagnosed anxiety and depression, as well as sleep disturbances and poor self-concept. Assessing and treating the patient holistically, rather than just physically, is an incredibly important concept when it comes to nursing care. Although children presenting with chronic illness may display complicated and distressing physical symptoms, it is important that mental and emotional health is continually being assessed. Promoting mental wellness in these children is important in order to encourage proper development and maintain a quality of life.

In addition, nurses must be prepared to educate guardians about signs and symptoms of common mental illnesses associated with chronic physical conditions, so that they may identify these problems early if they do arise. It is important for the nursing profession to promote the

equal importance of mental health as it compares to physical health as a way to advocate for all patients, including pediatric patients living with a chronic physical illness. Further research is needed in this area in order to identify the particular mental health issues and outcomes as they relate to children with chronic illness. As specific mental health conditions are identified as common comorbidities of pediatric chronic illness, primary and secondary prevention specific to these certain mental health conditions may be enacted in order to improve the mental health outcomes in these children. This may be accomplished by conduction of additional longitudinal studies that observe patients with various pediatric chronic illnesses from diagnosis to adulthood to identify common themes regarding mental health amongst this population.

References

- Bennett, S., Shafran, R., Coughtrey, A., Walker, S., & Heyman, I. (2015). Psychological interventions for mental health disorders in children with chronic physical illness: A systematic review. *BMJ Open*, 100(4), 308-316. doi:10.1136/archdischild-2014-307866
- Butler, A., Van Lieshout, R., Lipman, E., Macmillan, H., Gonzalez, A., Gorter, J., . . . Ferro, M. (2018). Mental disorder in children with physical conditions: A pilot study. *BMJ Open*, 8(1). doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2017-019011.
- Chronic Illness and our Children's Health. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.focusforhealth.org/chronic-illnesses-and-the-state-of-our-childrens-health/>
- Emerson, N., Morrell, H., Neece, C., Tapanes, D., & Distelberg, B. (2018). Longitudinal model predicting self-concept in pediatric chronic illness. *Family Process*, 58(1), 100-113. doi:10.1111/famp.12361
- Ferro, M., Gorter, J., & Boyle, M. (2015). Trajectories of depressive symptoms during the transition to young adulthood: the role of chronic illness. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 174, 594-601. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2014.12.014
- Intro to PROMIS. (2019). Retrieved from <http://www.healthmeasures.net/explore-measurement-systems/promis/intro-to-promis>
- Pavlova, M., Ference, J., Hancock, M., & Noel, M. (2017). Disentangling the sleep-pain relationship in pediatric chronic pain: the mediating role of internalizing mental health symptoms. *Pain Research and Management*, 2017. doi:10.1155/2017/1586921
- O'Niell, K., & Robinson, J. (2016). Psychological thinking in children and young people with skin disease. *Dermatological Nursing*, 15(4).

Reeve, B., Edwards, L., Jaeger, B., Hinds, P., Dampier, C., Gipson, D., . . . DeWalt, D. (2017).

Assessing responsiveness over time of the PROMIS pediatric symptom and function measures in cancer, nephrotic syndrome, and sickle cell disease. *Quality of Life Research*, 27(1), 249-257. doi:10.1007/s11136-017-1697-z

Research, 27(1), 249-257. doi:10.1007/s11136-017-1697-z