

What is Palliative Care and How Can It Help a Seriously Ill Child?

Your child's healthcare team may have spoken to you about palliative care or comfort care. Perhaps you have wondered exactly what that means. Palliative care refers to medical and other treatments that keep an ill person as comfortable and as free of pain and other symptoms as possible. In this way it is different from treatments that focus on curing, but the two are not always separate. People who are being given treatments that are intended to cure a disease can still benefit from a palliative approach at the same time.

Palliative care seeks to avoid the four "U's": treatments that are Uncomfortable, Unwanted, Unproductive, or Useless. Unfortunately, with the healthcare system's emphasis on high technology, invasive procedures and highly trained specialists, those "U's" are still very much with us in the treatment of serious illness. In a 2000 study, 89 percent of parents whose children had died of cancer at a major university children's hospital said their children died in pain. Less than 20 percent of these families thought their child's other symptoms were well controlled.

Palliative care is a fairly new term that describes an old idea: making sure that when a person is sick, it is the whole person that is taken care of, body, mind spirit. A primary goal of palliative care is to lessen physical, emotional and spiritual suffering. That includes giving support to the family where needed. Palliative care can benefit sick children and their families, whether or not there is a possibility of cure, by improving the quality of life.

A palliative care team can be associated with a hospice or a hospital or both. The team is usually brought in to advise you and your child's doctor about how to deal with your child's symptoms, as well as any concerns or fears you or your child might have. A typical team includes a doctor, nurse, and social worker, and offers the services of child life and pain management specialists along with a chaplain or other spiritual or religious counselor.

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