

A laptop may boost a hospitalized child's recovery

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Kids who videoconference with family, friends report less stress, study says.

(HealthDay)—A hospital can be a lonely and stressful place for a sick child recuperating from a serious illness, but researchers say relief from boredom and isolation is just a mouse click away.

Kids who regularly videoconference with family and friends exhibit significantly reduced stress by the end of their hospital stay, a study published online June 30 in *Pediatrics* reports.

"This social connection is important to their state of mind, health and well-being," said senior author Dr. James Marcin, director of the pediatric telemedicine program at University of California, Davis, Children's Hospital. "The kids love it, and the parents love it. They are happier and more likely to participate in rehab."

UC Davis Children's Hospital provides loaner laptops to children expected to have an extended stay in the hospital. It will even ship a loaner webcam to parents located far away who don't have one, Marcin said.

The laptops are loaded with many videoconferencing options—Skype, Yahoo and such—so the kids and parents can use a program they might already have at home.

Doctors have seen much anecdotal evidence that videoconferencing can help keep up a kid's spirits. And earlier studies have shown that in-person family visits can decrease stress and improve recovery times, researchers said in background information.

This new study aimed to see if virtual visits could provide those same health benefits, Marcin said.

The study included 367 patients at UC Davis Children's Hospital. The average child in the study was nearly 10 years old, stayed about 12 days in the hospital, and lived about 73 miles away.

About two-thirds of the patients took advantage of the hospital's videoconferencing program, while the other third did not. Researchers assessed the patients' stress levels upon their admission and discharge, and compared one group to the other.

Children who kept in touch with people using videoconferencing had 37 percent more reduction in stress by the time they left the hospital, compared with children who didn't videochat, researchers found.

The notion of offering kids a video connection to friends and family is "probably one of the best things since sliced bread," said Alan Hilfer, director of psychology at Maimonides Medical Center in New York

City. "As far as I'm concerned, there's no downside to this."

Hilfer said the program goes hand-in-hand with other efforts to reduce the isolation felt by child patients, such as lengthening visiting hours in pediatric wards.

"We all know the mood of a child dramatically affects recovery rates," Hilfer said. "Kids in a good mood with a positive outlook tend to get better faster."

UC Davis has provided videoconferencing for kids for about a decade, its technology evolving from clunky old videophones to sleek new laptops, Marcin said.

He recalled a girl who had been hit by a car and lost her leg in the mid-2000s. Her long struggle in the hospital led her to become very surly, a nurse's nightmare.

"The thing she said she missed the most was her school classmates," he said. The hospital set up a videophone in a room at her school, and at lunchtime her friends could visit with her.

"It was a game-changer in terms of her affect and her participation in rehab," Marcin said. "She became a complete joy to care for."

The proliferation of Wi-Fi and high-speed Internet makes it relatively easy for a [hospital](#) to offer such [videoconferencing](#) to child patients, Hilfer said.

"I hope it catches on," he said.

But Marcin noted that times are tight in health care, and "if you can't bill for it, it's tough to get personnel to do it."

Also, [kids](#) may be slightly ahead of the curve than the doctors caring for them, he added. "They're very engaged in their social media world," Marcin said. "I think [health care](#) has to catch up with that."

More information: For more information on childhood stress, visit the [Nemours Foundation](#).

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