



## REVIEW ARTICLE

# Therapeutic play to prepare children for invasive procedures: a systematic review<sup>☆,☆☆</sup>

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Received 2 May 2016; accepted 11 May 2016

### KEYWORDS

Children;  
Play and playthings;  
Anxiety;  
Behavior;  
Hospital care

### Abstract

**Objective:** To analyze the available evidence regarding the efficacy of using therapeutic play on behavior and anxiety in children undergoing invasive procedures.

**Data source:** The systematic review search was performed in the MEDLINE, LILACS, CENTRAL and CINAHL databases. There was no limitation on the year or language.

**Synthesis of data:** The literature search found 1892 articles and selected 22 for full reading. Eight articles were excluded, as they did not address the objectives assessed in this review. Twelve studies, representing 14 articles, were included. The studies were conducted between 1983 and 2015, five in Brazil, one in the United States, five in China, one in Lebanon, one in Taiwan, and one in Iran. Most studies showed that intervention with therapeutic play promotes reduction in the level of anxiety and promotes collaborative behavior and acceptance of the invasive procedure.

**Conclusions:** Evidence related to the use of therapeutic play on anxiety and behavior of children undergoing invasive procedures is still questionable. The absence, in most studies, of the creation of a random sequence to assign the subjects to either the control or the experimental group, as well as allocation concealment, are factors that contribute to these questions. Another issue that characterizes an important source of bias is the absence of blinded evaluators. It is necessary to perform further studies that will take into account greater methodological stringency.

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<sup>☆</sup> Please cite this article as: Silva RDM, Austregésilo SC, Ithamar L, Lima LS. Therapeutic play to prepare children for invasive procedures: a systematic review. J Pediatr (Rio J). 2016. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpmed.2016.06.005>

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jpmed.2016.06.005>

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**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Criança;  
Jogos e Brinquedos;  
Ansiedade;  
Comportamento;  
Assistência Hospitalar

**Brinquedo terapêutico no preparo de crianças para procedimentos invasivos: revisão sistemática****Resumo**

**Objetivo:** Revisar, de forma sistemática, as evidências em relação a eficácia da utilização do brinquedo terapêutico sobre o comportamento e a ansiedade de crianças submetidas a procedimentos invasivos.

**Fontes dos dados:** A busca da revisão sistemática foi efetuada nas bases MedLine, Lilacs, CENTRAL e CINAHL. Não houve limitação quanto ao ano ou idioma.

**Síntese dos dados:** Na busca de literatura foram encontrados 1892 artigos e selecionados 22 para leitura integral. Foram excluídos 8 artigos que não respondiam aos objetivos avaliados nesta revisão. Foram incluídos 12 estudos, correspondentes a 14 artigos. Os estudos foram conduzidos entre 1983 e 2015, cinco no Brasil, um nos Estados Unidos, cinco na China, um no Líbano, um em Taiwan e um no Irã. A maioria dos estudos mostrou que a intervenção com brinquedo terapêutico promove redução no nível de ansiedade e favorece um comportamento de colaboração e aceitação do procedimento invasivo.

**Conclusões:** As evidências relacionadas ao uso do brinquedo terapêutico sobre a ansiedade e comportamento de crianças submetidas a procedimentos invasivos ainda são questionáveis. A ausência, na maioria dos estudos, de uma geração de sequência aleatória para direcionamento dos sujeitos para os grupos controle ou experimental e do sigilo de alocação são fatores que contribuem para este questionamento. Uma outra questão que caracteriza importante fonte de viés é o não cegamento dos avaliadores. Se faz necessário a realização de novas pesquisas que levem em consideração um maior rigor metodológico.

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**Introduction**

The degree of the children's understanding about the procedure to which they will be submitted may be related to the period of stress and insecurity that they will experience. Their behavior may vary according to age, environment, the presence of strangers, and invasive procedures experienced by the children or observed in others. These factors contribute to the development of unpleasant reactions such as fear, anxiety, and resistance to the procedures that will be performed. Hospitalization means attacking their playful and magical realm, and therefore requires that the assisting professional understands their childhood world.<sup>1,2</sup>

Excessive stress and anxiety experienced by children can affect their physical and physiological health, hinder their ability to deal with medical procedures, cause changes in their behavior, and affect their recovery from illness. Therefore, there is an urgent need for clinical researchers to develop, implement, and evaluate interventions that can minimize the children's anxiety level and improve their ability to handle the stress of hospitalization and invasive procedures.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past decades, several studies that addressed children's health care have discussed different methods of educational interventions for children before or during hospitalization, when surgical and invasive medical procedures are performed.<sup>4-9</sup>

The need to play is not eliminated when children become ill or are hospitalized; on the contrary, children who can play may feel safer during the transoperative period, even in a strange environment.<sup>10</sup> One aspect of such activities

is therapeutic play, which provides a structured play activity, follows the principles of play therapy, and has specific objectives to be achieved. Its use brings relief from anxiety caused by atypical experiences for age that tend to appear as threatening, requiring an intervention that will help the child/family to cope while undergoing a highly complex invasive procedure.<sup>11</sup>

Studies have shown the benefits of therapeutic play in reducing anxiety and postoperative pain in hospitalized children.<sup>12</sup> Clinical trials have shown the positive effects of therapeutic play intervention on perioperative anxiety, postoperative pain, and negative behavior in children submitted to surgical procedures.<sup>7,9</sup>

Thus, with the objective of contributing to the knowledge about the use of therapeutic play, which is an important strategy to be used in childcare, this review aimed to systematically assess the evidence regarding the efficacy of using therapeutic play on the behavior and anxiety in children undergoing invasive procedures.

**Method**

The protocol of this review is registered at the international database for systematic reviews, PROSPERO, under number CRD42016035878, and can be accessed at ([http://www.crd.york.ac.uk/PROSPERO/display\\_record.asp?ID=CRD42016035878](http://www.crd.york.ac.uk/PROSPERO/display_record.asp?ID=CRD42016035878)). This article was written according to PRISMA recommendations for systematic reviews.<sup>13</sup>

A systematic review of the literature was carried out between November 2015 and February 2016, through a

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