

Partnering with schools can ease challenges for children with chronic illnesses

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Children with chronic illnesses can face an array of social, emotional, cognitive and academic challenges. Pediatricians have the power to make a difference in the lives of these children when they partner with schools and families, said pediatric psychologist Puja Patel, Ph.D.

“Every avenue provides support, but I think it is when we have that overlap and that collaboration, it creates such an amazing support system for children,” said Dr. Patel, interim director of pediatric psychology in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Texas at Austin Dell Medical School.

Dr. Patel discusses the role of pediatricians, hospitals and specialty clinics in setting these children up for success at school during the on-demand session “Hospital-School Partnerships to Address Needs of Children With Chronic Illness” (OD0163).

Dr. Patel works at the Children’s Blood & Cancer Center at Dell Children’s Medical Center where she supports children with mental health challenges arising from their medical conditions. She also has worked with children who have functional abdominal pain or chronic pain conditions like fibromyalgia.

During the session, she discusses how to assess the needs of this heterogeneous population. For example, children with cancer need support during treatment as well as during their survivorship years. Children with sickle cell disease can be fine one day and then have a pain crisis. The intermittent impact of their medical condition can be confusing to schools and peers.

“And so just kind of thinking about how to best support kids in those contexts, regardless of what their condition looks like,” Dr. Patel said.

She also reviews the types of accommodations and supports that school can provide and encourage pediatricians to help families advocate for what their child needs.

For example, pediatricians can recommend a gradual return to school for children who have been hospitalized so they don’t feel overwhelmed. Or they can explain to educators that a child with sickle cell disease experiences hand cramps and needs a typing device.

They also can help ensure a child’s social needs are met. If a child with severe asthma can’t participate in physical education class, the pediatrician can work with the school and family to come up with other ways the child can participate, like operating a timer, instead of just sitting out.

“What I have found is across the board everybody that’s in education wants to help students,” Dr. Patel said. “They are passionate about helping kids, but sometimes they just don’t have the knowledge.”

As children get older, pediatricians can empower students to advocate for their needs and encourage parents to give their children some control, she added.

Finally, Dr. Patel highlights several models of hospital-school partnerships.

“Oftentimes, I think the biggest challenge for kids with chronic illness is that they miss instruction,” she said.

“And so it's how to make instruction accessible for them.”