



Teddy Bear Hospitals: A Novel Approach to Encourage Physical and Mental Health Activities for Woodcraft Folk Children

Abigail Cole, Oke Obiuevbi, and Sham Kattan

In this think piece, Abigail Cole and colleagues explore the use of play-based learning to introduce concepts of wellbeing to younger children in the Woodcraft Folk. Through the running of a Teddy Bear Hospital, children engage with abstract health topics by caring for their teddy bears, fostering early understanding of health, emotions, and self-care.

One of the core principles developed over the last 100 years of Woodcraft Folk is to encourage living the value of everyone looking after each other. Looking after each other is a broad term, which can cover physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. Encouraging this core value of is key to any child's development, but how to convey it to our young Woodchips? Through Cole's previous experience working with young children on the concepts of healthcare, and her background as an anaesthetic doctor with a specialist interest in paediatrics, she has been trying to introduce the children to the concept of physical and mental wellness through designing and implementing a number of activities that involves the children bring their teddy bears to a teddy bear hospital.

As a doctor working in the NHS, Cole promotes health education on a daily basis amongst patients, though explanation, diagrams, leaflets, and online resources. Yet the concept of health, healthcare, wellness, and mental health can be abstract concepts to our young Woodchips. Through relating these to them, via the medium of play, imagination, and playing doctor to their teddies, complex ideas can start to be germinated.

In order to help run the sessions, Cole reflected on her days as a medical student — she was involved then with a volunteer based organisation that promotes health education amongst primary school children, called Teddy Bear Hospital. So, harbouring the core principle of working as a co-operative, she reached out to her local University of Anglia Ruskin Teddy Bear Hospital Society, as well as the Pioneers within our district with an interest in working with the younger children, to help run the session.

Bringing on board these young volunteers meant the Teddy Bear Hospital had multiple benefits, not only for our Woodchips, but also for our Pioneers helping with the session and gaining

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experience running activities with younger children, and for the medical students to gain experience with interacting with children and how to communicate effectively with them.

The session ran as a “round robin” with four activity stations each manned by a volunteer/ medical student or Pioneer. They introduced the children to concepts such as healthy eating, keeping your bodies healthy, what happens when we see a doctor, what are emotions, how to stay safe in my home, and how to wash hands properly.

Feedback from parents of Woodchips, as well as the Pioneers and medical students, was incredibly positive. One Pioneer wrote a wonderful account of her experience running the session:

I wanted to help at Teddy Bear Hospital because of multiple reasons. I love kids, I love to try out everything, I love to help others, I think it will really help when I am older and also I wanted to put my experience to the test. In primary school, I took a first aid training course and successfully passed so I really wanted to prove and see how well I could really deal with scenarios and the kids. (Session evaluation form)

It showed resilience in the Pioneer volunteer as they had to negotiate the difficulties with communicating with young children “I found the kids quite challenging to deal with ... They are quite shy but when they start to warm up to you and get used to it, they are brilliant and take things so well” (session evaluation form).

Furthermore the session helped to educate the Pioneers on how we can all have a part to play on affecting each other’s mental health and wellbeing: “They practically live off of whatever vibes you give them so just show them positivity and they will be sure to stay happy as can be” (session evaluation form).

Given that mental health and wellbeing was a major concern identified by Woodcraft Folk members at the All Party Parliamentary Group meeting (Woodcraft Folk, 2021), then running activities such as the Teddy Bear Hospital, engaging our youngest Woodcraft Folk members in discussions helps this generation grow up speaking openly about their physical and mental health with their peers, and can only serve as a conduit to improving social change and positive thinking around these matters.

The Authors

Dr Abigail Cole (MBBS, FRCA), is an Anaesthetic Registrar who currently works at Great Ormond Street Hospital. She qualified as a doctor in 2011 from St George’s Medical School. She has been a member of Woodcraft Folk for the last three years and is a regular leader of Wivenhoe Woodchips group, where her two young children also attend. Dr Oke Obiwevbi (MBChB), is a Resident Doctor, who qualified with her medical degree from Anglia Ruskin University in 2024. It was when studying that she helped with Wivenhoe Woodcraft group, running the Teddy Bear Hospital. Sham Kattan is a member of Wivenhoe Venturers Group. She has a keen interest in first aid and hopes to study medicine and become a paediatrician in the future.

Reference

Woodcraft Folk. (2021, February 15). *APPG young people & mental health*. <https://woodcraft.org.uk/appg-young-people-mental-health/>