

# Storytelling in Pediatric Oncology Unit

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## Contaço de Histórias em Unidade Oncológica Pediátrica

## La narración de Historias en Unidad de Oncología Pediátrica

Sabrina de Jesus Oliveira Neves<sup>1</sup>; Patrícia Fernandes do Prado<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

**Introduction:** In pediatric oncology, innumerable and complex challenges are present, many related to the existential changes that permeate the world of the child and the family and those who professionally care for these patients. **Objective:** Identify the benefits of storytelling in oncological child care. **Method:** This is an integrative review of the literature, in which the articles were searched from 2003 to 2018, in the Portuguese and English languages, in the databases: Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (Lilacs), Nursing Databases (Bdenf), *Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online* (Medline), *Scientific Electronic Library Online* (SciELO) and National Information Center of Medical Sciences of Cuba (Cumed). **Results:** Of the articles found three were in accordance with the proposal of the theme. Among the benefits of storytelling in oncology pediatrics are patient well-being, collaboration in the health-disease process, relieving pain and suffering from oncological treatment, and favoring the bond between the child and the team multi-professional. **Conclusion:** The historytelling is a strategy that enables children with cancer to be more comfortable with their clinical condition, maximize their well-being and help in their recovery, allowing for more humanized care.

**Key words:** Child; Neoplasms; Bibliotherapy; Play Therapy.

### Resumo

**Introdução:** Em oncologia pediátrica, inúmeros e complexos desafios estão presentes, muitos relacionados às mudanças existenciais que permeiam o mundo da criança e da família e daqueles que profissionalmente cuidam desses pacientes. **Objetivo:** Identificar os benefícios da contaço de histórias no cuidado à criança oncológica. **Método:** Trata-se de um estudo de revisão integrativa da literatura, no qual os artigos foram pesquisados, no período de 2003 a 2018, nas línguas portuguesa e inglesa, nas bases de dados: Literatura Latino-Americana e do Caribe em Ciências da Saúde (Lilacs), Bases de Dados de Enfermagem (Bdenf), *Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online* (Medline), *Scientific Electronic Library Online* (SciELO) e Centro Nacional de Informação de Ciências Médicas de Cuba (Cumed). **Resultados:** Dos artigos encontrados, três estavam de acordo com a proposta da temática. Entre os benefícios da contaço de histórias na pediatria oncológica, destacam-se o bem-estar dos pacientes, a colaboração no processo saúde-doença aliviando a dor e o sofrimento proveniente do tratamento oncológico, além do favorecimento do vínculo entre a criança com a equipe multiprofissional. **Conclusão:** A contaço de história é uma estratégia que possibilita à criança com câncer um maior conforto em relação ao seu estado clínico, maximiza o seu bem-estar e ajuda em sua recuperação, permitindo um cuidado mais humanizado.

**Palavras-chave:** Criança; Neoplasias; Biblioterapia; Ludoterapia.

### Resumen

**Introducción:** En oncología pediátrica, innumerables y complejos desafíos están presentes, muchos relacionados a los cambios existenciales que permean el mundo del niño y de la familia y de aquellos que profesionalmente cuidan a esos pacientes. **Objetivo:** Identificar los beneficios de la cuenta de historias en el cuidado al niño oncológico. **Método:** Se trata de un estudio de revisión integradora de la literatura, donde los artículos se buscaron 2003-2018, los idiomas portugués e inglés, en las bases de datos: América Latina y el Caribe Ciencias de la Salud (Lilacs) Bases de Datos de Enfermería (Bdenf), Sistema de análisis y recuperación de literatura médica en línea (Medline), Biblioteca electrónica científica en línea (SciELO) y el Centro Nacional de Información de Ciencias Médicas de Cuba (Cumed). **Resultados:** De los artículos encontrados tres estaban de acuerdo con la propuesta de la temática. Entre los beneficios de la cuenta de historias en la pediatría oncológica, se destaca el bienestar de los pacientes, la colaboración en el proceso salud-enfermedad aliviando el dolor y el sufrimiento proveniente del tratamiento oncológico, además del favorecimiento del vínculo entre el niño con el equipo múltiples. **Conclusión:** La cuenta de historia es una estrategia que permite al niño con cáncer un mayor confort en relación a su estado clínico, maximiza su bienestar y ayuda en su recuperación, permitiendo un cuidado más humanizado.

**Palabras clave:** Niño; Neoplasias; Biblioterapia; Ludoterapia.

<sup>1</sup> Universidade Estadual de Montes Claros. Montes Claros (MG), Brazil. Orcid iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3311-9705>

<sup>2</sup> Universidade Estadual de Montes Claros. Montes Claros (MG), Brazil. Orcid iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5433-5485>

**Corresponding author:** Sabrina de Jesus Oliveira Neves. Rua Manoel Rodrigues Lima, 260 - Nossa Senhora Aparecida. Bocaiuva (MG), Brazil. CEP 39390-000. E-mail: [sabrinajesusoliveira@hotmail.com](mailto:sabrinajesusoliveira@hotmail.com).



## INTRODUCTION

Pediatric oncology involves numerous complex challenges, many related to life changes in the world of the child and family and the healthcare team caring for these patients. The stigma, negative aspects related to the symptoms, and the suffering from the cancer increase the discomfort with this diagnosis, one of the most difficult realities faced by these children and their families<sup>1</sup>.

During hospitalization for the cancer treatment, pediatric patients suffer from being far from home and everything familiar in their daily routines. In particular, they undergo painful and invasive procedures like chemotherapy and its side effects, which can affect their physical, intellectual, and emotional development, viewed as an obstacle in the struggle against illness in the hospital routine<sup>2</sup>.

These changes appear suddenly in the child's life and highlight the importance of projects to overcome the negative aspects brought by the cancer. Such essential projects include appropriate care using playful activities to minimize the effects of hospitalization and safeguard the patient's emotional status in order to promote a better relationship with the family and healthcare team in relation to the hospital experience<sup>3</sup>.

Storytelling is one such playful activity, both pleasurable and therapeutic, that poses no boundaries for the child. Telling a story is more than entertainment and stimulus for the imagination; it fosters the development of reasoning, assists the child in understanding unpleasant situations, and helps resolve conflicts<sup>4</sup>.

Storytelling helps reframe the hospital setting, initially considered a "place of disease", turning it into a joyful place, favoring the children's learning process and encouraging them to read. In addition, access to children's stories and books fosters positive interaction with the storytellers, who become important in the process of coping with the illness and the journey towards restoring the patient's health<sup>5</sup>.

In pediatric oncology, play expressed through stories is thus a therapeutic tool that assists the child's care, facilitates his or her adaptation to (and acceptance of) the treatment, and attenuates feelings of pain, fear, irritability, and anxiety<sup>6</sup>.

Based on these premises, it is important for the attending healthcare team to study the subject of storytelling, which has gained increasing space in the literature in recent years, in light of the importance of play in hospital wards and the use of this therapy as a positive and creative way for the child to deal with the difficulties resulting from the cancer. The current study thus intends to address the following question: What is the benefit of storytelling as part of care for children with cancer?

## METHOD

The study was based on an integrative literature review, a method that collects and summarizes the results of studies on a given theme or question, with the aim of delving into and integrating the knowledge and the studies' potential applicability in practice<sup>7,8</sup>.

The search strategies related to the above-mentioned research question were defined in a protocol that oriented the study's development. The phases in the integrative review were: definition of the theme and the underlying question; criteria for selection of studies; definition of the information and categorization of the studies; evaluation of the studies; and interpretation of the results and presentation of the review<sup>8</sup>.

The article search related was performed in periodicals indexed in the following databases: Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (Lilacs), Brazilian Nursing Database (BDENF), conducted in the portal of the Virtual Health Library (BVS), *Scientific Electronic Library Online* (SciELO), *Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online* (Medline), and Cuban National Information Center in the Medical Sciences (Cumed), from July to August 2018, using the following descriptors: children, oncology, reading, and play. The descriptors were cross-analyzed and combined using the Boolean operators "e" and/or "and".

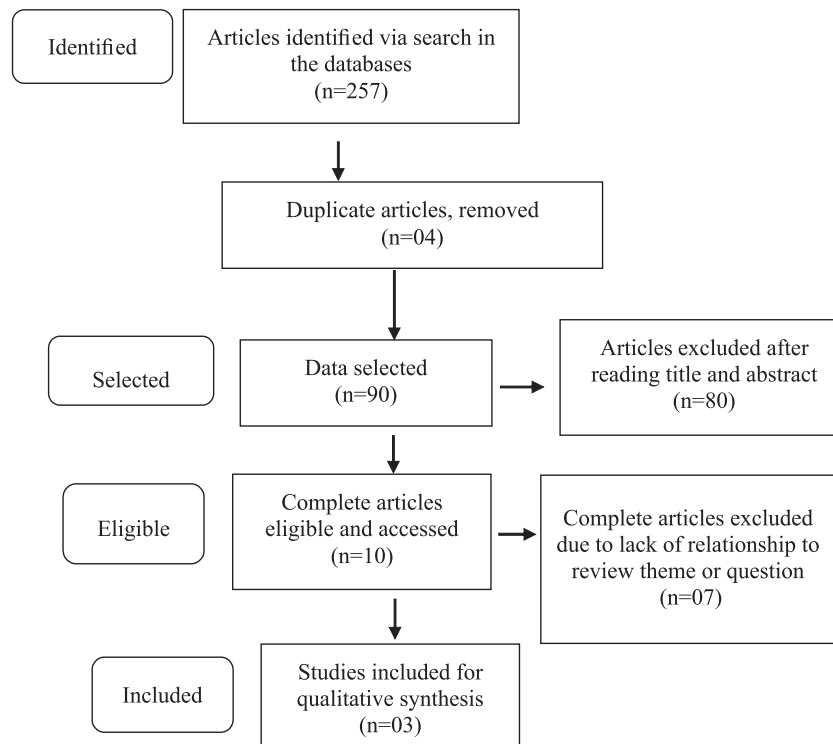
Inclusion criteria for the study selection were: complete articles available online, in which the target population was pediatric cancer patients (0 to 19 years of age); published in Portuguese, English, or Spanish in Brazilian or international periodicals from 2003 to 2018. The exclusion criteria were: duplicate articles, theses, and articles that did not address the current review's question.

A total of 257 studies were identified that were related to the theme. The initial search was done with the keywords in the title or abstract, and when necessary the full text was consulted. In all, 254 studies were excluded, and the review's final sample thus consisted of three publications. Figure 1 shows the flowchart with the search strategies used in the respective databases and the reasons for exclusion, as recommended by the PRISMA group<sup>9</sup>.

It was not necessary to submit the study for approval by the Institutional Review Board, since it dealt with free-access data rather than documents that would ethically require data privacy or confidentiality.

## RESULTS

Chart 1 shows the characteristics of the articles selected and used in the integrative review, with the authors' names, year, title, periodical, population/participants, methodology, sample size, and principal results.



**Figure 1.** Flowchart according to PRISMA methodology for selection of studies, Montes Claros, Minas Gerais, Brazil, 2018  
**Source:** Adapted from PRISMA Group<sup>9</sup>.

## DISCUSSION

Telling stories in pediatrics awakens enchantment and joyful feelings in the patients, as well as acceptance of an otherwise traumatic setting, besides contributing to their cognitive, affective, and social development<sup>10</sup>.

The study by Paixão, Damasceno, and Silva found that a playful approach like storytelling for pediatric patients that are bedridden or have their movement limited by the illness helps them cope with the health-disease process and relieves the pain and suffering from the cancer treatment<sup>11</sup>.

Storytelling is thus a playful strategy that permeates the pediatric oncology wards, aimed at the patients' wellbeing, since listening to stories helps them reclaim hopes and dreams, besides accelerating their recovery, shortening their length of stay, creating a bond with the multidisciplinary team, and experiencing humane care<sup>10</sup>.

Stories allow living beyond the immediate reality, providing an opportunity to reflect on one's own problems, thereby consolidating the idea that hospitalized children need to transcend the moment they are experiencing. Among the fairy tales, Pedrosa *et al.* highlight *Beauty and the Beast*, which facilitates integration between easy and difficult situations, a beautiful situation (childhood) and

a scary one (the treatment), but with a happy ending, and *The Three Little Pigs*, representing the passage through life's phases with a happy ending (straw house – childhood; stick house - adolescence; and brick house - adulthood), despite the problems (wolf)<sup>12</sup>.

We found few studies in the literature in recent years that address storytelling as a strategy in pediatric oncology. New studies are thus needed to collect more information on this topic in order to improve the care provided to this patient population.

## CONCLUSION

Storytelling is a strategy that allows children with cancer to enjoy greater comfort in relation to their clinical status, maximizing their wellbeing with potential therapeutic effects, allowing them to recreate their emotional state and favoring bonds with the healthcare team.

However, the method has been used relatively little by health teams, and few studies have attempted to understand storytelling as a fundamental factor for children's growth and development. The professionals caring for this patient population should thus acknowledge this need, providing the means to employ it and incorporating it as part of more humane care.

**Chart 1.** Distribution of articles according to author, title, periodical, population/participants; methodology, sample size, and principal results, 2003- 2018

Author	Title	Periodical	Population/ participants	Methodology	Sample size	Principal study results
Silva et al. <sup>10</sup>	Dream and imagination circles: storytelling in a pediatric chemotherapy service [in Portuguese]	Rev Enferm UFSM	Nurses and medical, nursing, and psychology students	Report on the experience	21 members	Storytelling allows understanding aspects related to the illness process experienced by the children and families and thus transforms the patient care and treatment practice. Play activities are the main tools for an approach between the attending healthcare team and the children's world.
Paixão, Damasceno e Silva <sup>11</sup>	Importance of play activities in pediatric cancer care [in Portuguese]	CuidArte Enferm.	Preschool and school-age children	Literature review	Not specified	Reading and other playful strategies such as games, songs, sounds, skits, dance, painting, and drawing foster development, learning, socialization, and humanization, bringing countless benefits during the process of treatment, recovery, and rehabilitation for the hospitalized child, family, and multidisciplinary team.
Pedrosa et al. <sup>12</sup>	Fun in movement: a playful project for children hospitalized in the Pediatric Oncology Service of the Maternal-Child Health Institute Prof. Fernando Figueira (IMIP) [in Portuguese]	Rev. Bras. Saúde Mater. Infant.	Children hospitalized in the pediatric oncology ward of the IMIP and their accompanying persons	Report on the experience	60 patients	The possible strategies used by children to cope with hospitalization include playing and reading, which are proper to their life phase, in which they discover, experiment, invent, exercise, and check their skills, besides having their creativity, initiative, and self-confidence stimulated. The development of these strategies makes the hospital setting more pleasant for the children and favors the continuity of their growth development.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

Sabrina de Jesus Oliveira Neves contributed to the study's conception and planning, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, writing of the manuscript, and approval of the final version for publication. Patrícia Fernandes do Prado contributed to the study's conception and planning, data analysis and interpretation, writing of the manuscript, critical revision, and approval of the final version for publication.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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None.

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