Research Briefing

Space to Care: An ESRC funded project exploring children’s perceptions and experiences of hospital space

Improving the built environment in which healthcare is delivered through innovative planning and design is a central tenet of contemporary NHS service planning. The Space to Care study explored the implications of this in relation to children’s hospitals where, core to the current policy agenda, the aim is to provide child-friendly hospitals that meet the differing needs of children of all ages. Drawing on interviews with 255 children and young people aged between 4 and 16 years, together with observations carried out in inpatient and outpatient facilities in the three different hospitals that they attended, the key findings are:

• the decoration of hospital spaces, and the facilities for recreation, are geared towards very young children. Children aged 7 and older experienced both inpatients and outpatients as rather babyish environments.

• hospitals are not generally experienced by children as scary spaces. Only those spaces that are associated with ‘needles’, such as treatment rooms, are perceived as scary and then only if children have experience of such procedures.

• young children, as well as adolescents, value personal space and privacy - but want to be able to choose when to have it. While cubicles provide privacy they can, however, be experienced as boring and isolating since young people also value social interactions with staff and other young people whilst in hospital.

• children and young people do not generally desire gender-segregated spaces.

• children and young people dislike sharing hospital space with young babies because their crying keeps them awake at night and would prefer babies to be in separate wards.

• children and young people dislike dull, dirty, disordered and crowded spaces and like clean, tidy, colourful, bright, comfortable and well maintained spaces.

• children and young people voiced few concerns about way-finding in hospitals, since they rarely move around unaccompanied.

• despite emphasis in the policy agenda on creating a healing environment through providing views of nature and access to the outside, few children commented on this.

• children and young people value having some control over their environment. For example, they wished to be able to switch their lights and televisions on and off and to have free access to recreational facilities such as adolescents’ rooms, which were often kept locked.

http://www.cscy.group.shef.ac.uk/research/spacetocare.htm

Penny Curtis, Allison James, Jo Birch. 2007