

The American Therapeutic Recreation Association Information Sheet

Recreational Therapy for Children and Adolescents

Childhood is typically a fun, playful, and exploratory period of life. At times, a child or adolescent



must spend time in a hospital or treatment facility, often an unanticipated experience. To help children and youth cope with these experiences, Recreational Therapists work with them in pediatric acute care hospitals, long term care facilities, medical day care programs, mental health treatment facilities or homes, and pediatric physical rehabilitation hospitals. Children and youth in these facilities may receive treatment for a life-threatening injury or illness including but not limited to: a traumatic spinal or brain injury, respiratory conditions, chronic health conditions, depression, anxiety, oppositional defiance disorder, pediatric pain disorders, musculoskeletal conditions or surgeries, and more.

Recreational Therapy, also known as therapeutic recreation, is a systematic process that utilizes recreation and other activity-based interventions to address the assessed needs of individuals with illnesses and/or disabling conditions, as a means to psychological and physical health, recovery and well-being. Further, Recreational Therapy means a treatment service designed to restore, remediate, and rehabilitate a person's level of functioning

and independence in life activities, to promote health and wellness as well as reduce or eliminate the activity limitations and restrictions to participation in life situations caused by an illness or disabling condition (ATRA, 2015).

When working with children and adolescents with special healthcare needs, the specific purposes of Recreational Therapy is to:

- Help recover from the illness/condition
- Develop necessary skills for successful participation in social and leisure activities
- Alleviate the impact of hospitalization or disability on a child's play and social development
- Transition safely out of the hospital or treatment facility with a plan for a healthy leisure lifestyle.

Recreational Therapists (RTs) are part of an interdisciplinary team in child and adolescent settings. They work with this team to ensure that the “whole child” is considered, meaning that RTs advocate for a child's psychosocial needs, not just physical and cognitive abilities. RTs also advocate for the child's family to be included in the treatment and discharge plan.

Parents, siblings, and other family members and caregivers are always included in the Recreational Therapy treatment planning, and service provision of children and adolescents. Support is provided to

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Recreational Therapy for Children and Adolescents *(continued)*

families to help them understand a child's needs and situation. Education and guidance are provided on how to engage each child in play and support the child's development of leisure skills.

Recreational Therapists, who work with children and adolescents in pediatric hospitals, units, or treatment facilities, need training and education in child psychology, lifespan human development, childhood development, and knowledge regarding how childhood illness and hospitalization impact development. These therapists are also knowledgeable about behavior management strategies. **Recreational Therapists put this knowledge into practice with patients through the following:**

- **Use of standardized assessments** of patient skills, abilities, and attitudes. Assessments may evaluate one or more of the following areas: physical, cognitive, behavioral, social/emotional, and/or leisure functioning.
- **Improvement of physical functioning** through adapted sports and participation in recreation-specific activities to develop locomotor skills, balance, coordination, motor planning, strength and endurance, object control skills, and eye/hand coordination, to increase group participation in physical activity programs.
- **Improvement of cognitive functioning** through the development of therapeutic activities that improve attention span, problem solving, decision making skills, and creative expression.
- **Improvement of behavioral functioning** through the development of therapeutic activities that improve: anger/frustration control, respect for others and self, trust issues, gender issues, gang intervention, assertiveness training, conflict resolution, stress management, relaxation training, values clarification, and team building skills.
- **Improvement of social/emotional functioning** through the development of therapeutic activities that improve: social/group interactions, peer relationships, cooperation, boundary issues, self-expression, leadership, self-advocacy, play skills, communication, and team building skills.
- **Instruction of leisure education** to develop the skills necessary for independence in recreational participation (awareness, interests, attitudes, patterns, skills, advocacy), knowledge of recreational resources (at school, home, and in the community), and the recognition of the benefits of recreational involvement.
- **Facilitation of Community Integration** to help access resources in the community, practice skills learned in therapies, understand how to navigate through the community using public or private transportation, as well as receive the emotional benefits from being out of the hospital.
- **Discharge Planning** for transitioning patients with disabilities and special healthcare needs into the community through social skill training, education on the use of local transportation, identification of environmental and social barriers, money management, self-management skills, and awareness of leisure interests and resources.
- **Provision of diversional and volunteer services within facility** including but not limited to: supervision of free play in recreation or playrooms. Planning of special events for children and families, as well as coordination of volunteers and donations.
- **Instruction on use of technology for leisure opportunities** including but not limited to: iPads, computers, social media, communication boards, leisure-based video games and switch toys.



Recreational Therapists are professionally credentialed by the National Council for Therapeutic Recreation Certification (NCTRC). The Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS) "exemplifies the profession's dedication to quality standards and excellence." The CTRS is recognized as the qualified provider of recreational therapy services.

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