Bridging the gap: Optimizing psychosocial support for cancer-affected youth

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ABSTRACT

Understanding support determinants in middle childhood and adolescence presents unique challenges distinct from early childhood. Younger children benefit from direct familial support and simpler emotional needs, whereas youths experience transitions marked by increasing autonomy, complex self-concepts, and heightened sensitivity to external judgments. In childhood cancer, these dynamics provoke internalizing behaviours as patients attempt to maintain a facade of resilience to avoid being perceived as inadequate. This further exacerbates vulnerability and hinders effective engagement in psychosocial support. This study explores the unmet psychosocial needs of youths with cancer and outlines adaptive support strategies for patients and families. It draws on insights from five case studies involving patients supported at the National Cancer Society Malaysia. Data were collected through qualitative caregiver interviews and direct behavioural observations of patients to identify recurring psychosocial themes and inform the implementation of targeted psychosocial interventions. Emergent themes included self-blame, guilt, anxiety over uncertainty, and grief for lost autonomy. Targeted interventions were implemented based on these insights, focusing on rapport-building, behavioural activation strategies, and holistic family care. Findings indicated that enhanced metacognitive and moral reasoning capacities underscored the importance of rapport-building to foster receptivity and sustained engagement with psychosocial care. Facilitating involvement in minor decision-making enhanced autonomy, while transparent caregiver–patient communication helped mitigate internalized guilt. Family-centered approaches involving caregivers and siblings reduced perceived burden and strengthened family cohesion. Collectively, these mechanisms supported the development of self-regulation, resilience, and recognition of social supports across the patient's illness trajectory. These findings highlight the importance of developmentally sensitive, family-inclusive care in pediatric oncology. Addressing autonomy, cognitive-emotional insight, and family dynamics helps bridge gaps in standard care. Future practice should emphasize professional training, expand psychosocial workforce capacity, and enhance transportation support to improve access to patients, enabling consistent engagement and holistic integration of psychosocial care for youth populations.

Keywords: Childhood cancer, adolescence and middle childhood, pediatric oncology, psychosocial support, family-centered care