

Clowning with Seriously Ill Children

Dr. Femur Bonehead, N.D.
a.k.a. Paul Robinson, Ph.D.

Dr. Paul Robinson is a licensed psychologist and a professor at North Central Technical College in Mansfield, Ohio. He has been working with seriously ill children for the past seven years at Columbus and Akron Children's Hospitals. These are notes from a workshop at the AATH Convention in Orlando Florida in November 1997. Printed with permission of Paul Robinson.

"Clowning with seriously ill children can be great fun, but it is also serious business and sacred business as well. Their hospital rooms are sanctuaries for wounded psyches and souls. Their rooms are their holy ground. Treat each child as a prince or princess and the parents as kings and queens. Their hospital room is their castle. If you are allowed to enter, you have been granted a privilege. Honor and appreciate that privilege. It is important not to be intrusive. By necessity virtually everyone else in the hospital is intrusive. Seek permission before you enter their holy ground, their palace. One can never know what is happening in the head and hearts of those behind closed doors.

"Never assume a child or his or her family will be receptive or eager to see you. The whole world does not love a clown. Their grief, their consternation may at that moment simply be too great. Be sensitive to the children's and family's emotional and physical states. They may not be much in the mood for a clown even though they may need to laugh. Simply stated, it hurts and it is scary to be sick and in treatment in a hospital. For parents the worst thing in the world is not knowing whether your child will live or die, or knowing he or she is going to die. For children being seriously ill and away from home, away from mom and dad and around strangers who do all sorts of things to them, is a frightening experience.

Respect the child's right to say no. Too often as adults we assume we know what is best for children. This can be an incorrect assumption especially with seriously ill children. Encourage the children to participate, to engage you, but do not pressure them. Suggest a couple of times that they get involved. Let them see how much fun it could be, but then back off. With all they are dealing with, they do not need pressure from you. Enough things happen to them over which they have no control. Grant power and control to children. Let them decide whether to get involved or not or in what way they will get involved. By doing so they will be empowered.

"If a child and/or his family is not receptive to you, do not take it personally, because it certainly is not meant that way. Remember that work is not about boosting your ego. It is about bringing a little humor and happiness into the lives of these children and their families. It is sacred, spiritual work. It is not done for personal gratification through there will surely be much of that.

"Be prepared to see some really sick, troubled children and families. Life can be cruel. It can be unfair. Every child should have a smile and be able to laugh. No parent should have to worry about whether or not his or her child is going to live. But, such is life. Your challenge is not to get caught up in what is wrong with the child, but to inspire a moment of humor and happiness.

Dr. Robinson organized the Lollipop Clown Troupe with his students when his son was hospitalized with Leukemia. The Troupe would dress the children and parents as clowns and then have their pictures taken together. The process of dressing them all became the play. [Editor's note: Taking pictures in the hospital, especially of children, requires written permission from a consenting adult. Polaroid cameras, however, are usually approved by staff without this permission, because there are no negatives and the pictures are given to the families. Always check with the facility staff.]

Here are some of the very special people The Lollipop Troupe met in their "healing ministry:"

"A little girl without hair who loved the golden, metallic wig. Her countenance fell when it was taken off her head so we let her keep it.

"The family with two girls both of whom had cancer. The teenage girl, who was terminal, was so excited about having her picture taken with her family. The father especially was transformed from a sad, forlorn, grief-stricken man who was crying to a man with a smile and full of appreciation.

"The child in the dialysis unit who was much smaller than age expectancy, who looked so beautiful and so proud dressed as a clown.

"The young boy who was essentially catatonic from the trauma of some medical procedure the previous day. Through just simple clowning around he was able to move his arms and to engage with his eyes once again.

"The mother who just that morning had learned that her toddler had cancer. Hospital staff had suggested that we pass by her room; however, when she heard us in the hall (we're not inconspicuous by sight or sound) she came out, teary face and all, and began to plead that we take her child's picture too.

"The little girl who obviously wasn't feeling well but who welcomed our visit. Then, after some chit chat, she pulled herself up into a sitting position because she wanted to dress up as a clown and have her picture taken.

"The moms and dads who are separated or divorced, who are often uneasily assembled in their sick child's room, but who come together for a family picture for the sake of their child.

"Those doctors and nurses who will dress up as clowns and have their pictures taken with their patients and their families. They give so much."