

Jeannie Lindheim's Hospital Clown Troupe



Swinging between the trees

The Art & Joy of Hospital Clowning: An Improv-based Hospital Clown Training Program

by Jeannie Lindheim

A Magical Moment from Jeannie Lindheim.

An Excerpt from the Manual

I poked my head around the corner of the door and saw the sad serious face of a 16 year old. He saw me. I *oohh-ed* and *ahhh-ed*, "You look like a movie star!" And he did! A huge grin spread from ear to ear. "Would you like a clown visit?" A huge nod - *Yes*. We did dumb magic. He gave us the thumbs up. We asked if he wanted us to sing him a song. Thumbs up. We bowed. Two thumbs up. He laughed and seemed SO happy. And then I realized that he does not speak. We played and played, and when we left his room, the face that had been sad when we first entered was now sparkling with joy.



Our primary goal is to engage and empower the children. This is an enormous gift to children, who are seldom given choices about their care in the hospital. Our style of improvisational clowning gives them the sense of control over some aspect of their world.

This control starts with the first appearance of the clowns at the hospital door. The clowns always ask permission to visit a child. If the child's answer is "Yes," the clowns begin to connect with the child. We clown to the light behind the child's eyes. Our clowning is sweet, gentle, and age appropriate for each child. If the child says "No," we honor that decision by blowing kisses and melting away.

We want each child to feel that they have their own personal clown.

A former clown, Anne-Marie Audet, said, *As hospital clowns, we use the simple human gifts of kindness and respect for each other's inner beings. We seek to uncover and cherish the hidden spirit of joy and creative energy that lives in the heart and soul of every child and those who love them, a spirit so often hidden away by the frightening experience of disease and disability.*

Our clowns offer silly improvised poems using the child's name, ask for the child's help with a magic trick, offer the child magical marionette strings to make a clown dance around, or do the child's favorite music: rap, hip-hop, or whatever! The child is empowered to make choices offered by the clowns.

As clowns, our main approach is to have problems with every single thing we do. Obstacles are a clown's delight. This also empowers the children because they tell us how to do it correctly. Our clowns learn more than 60 shticks they can do with the children, but the real key to our way of clowning is "swinging between the trees" and improvising whatever feels appropriate for that particular moment.

We ask the child what they love and what their interests are, then make up wacky improvisations tailored to that specific child.

Of course, if the child is too sick to interact, we may play with a puppet or do some silly antic so they can enjoy our color and goofiness. We might take out a tiny music box and play a sweet tune. If the child is too sick, we offer the music box to the parent to play for their child, thus empowering the parents.

We don't accept advertising in The Hospital Clown Newsletter. This article is full of useful information for you and your groups which Jeannie provided in place of an ad.

Below are excerpt from The Joy and Art of Hospital Clowning manual. It differs from other manuals in that it deals with group participation and how to develop a spontaneous hospital clown group.

All clown groups, whether you work with children or adults, singles or pairs, experienced or inexperienced, can benefit from adapting the exercises, experience, and wisdom to your programs. I recommend it highly. – *Shobi Dobi*

More Excerpts from the Program Manual

Purpose of this Program

This book and the accompanying video/DVD have been created to support growth and professionalism.

These materials were developed to serve as a reference for the clowns in our Troupe:

- To provide new concepts for clowns who are already clowning in hospitals, primarily in the areas of: Empowering the child, giving choices, using improvisation, and developing a clown character, and
- To introduce other interested readers to many tools and techniques used in the wonderful world of improvisation-based hospital clowning for children.

This training program is meant for:

- People already clowning in hospitals who want to expand into our style of improv-based, child-empowerment clowning.
- People already working with children in hospitals, such as Child Life Specialists and Nurses, who wish to learn Clowning
- Anyone interested in understanding the skills required to do improv-based hospital clowning.

Please note: We believe that hospital clowning for children requires professional training and supervision. These materials are intended to serve as a supplement to professional training.

Description of the Training Presented in this Program

Throughout the training, we focus on empowering the child, giving the child choices, and asking permission. The technical part of the training is divided into three parts:

- Characterization techniques, in which trainees learn techniques for transforming honestly and organically to a clown. These techniques develop stage presence, free the body to take risks in movement, increase movement vocabulary, and develop the freedom and relaxation needed for characterization.
- Improvisational techniques, in which trainees learn many improvisational tools and techniques to use specifically in a hospital setting with the children and families.

- Role-playing, in which trainees experience being the visiting clown, the child in the bed, and the child's parents, siblings, caretakers, and friends. To be an effective clown, it is important to understand all of these roles.

Following are some excerpts from the manual. Exercises to develop use of props in the hospital. (For hygiene information please see the past issue section at this newsletters website www.hospitalclown.com)

Developing clown voices using your props

- Find three props in the room.
- Find someone with whom you have not worked before and sit on the floor opposite each other.
- Each of your props will have a different voice. You and your partner will take a few minutes and work with your props and voices. You are just trying different voices. Go very high in pitch and go very low. Go nasal, but don't tighten your glottis. You can stay with one voice or change voices during your play. Use accents if you'd like, or use gibberish.
- Now talk to each other's props. Do a little 20-second play introducing your props to each other.
- What did it feel like? You can use this in a skit with the children in the hospital. One prop may talk to another prop. The objective is to open up the little boy and little girl in each one of you. This is Clown World because it doesn't make any sense.

Interactions using your prop

- Pick up one prop.
- Walk around the room and have interactions with the other clowns using your prop. Use different voices, including animal voices.
- Meet everyone else's prop.

Again some excerpts of exercises for group improv routines.

Jump rope tangle

- For this trick you need: a jump rope and several clowns.
- Give one end of the jump rope to a clown. The jump rope goes around several clowns and they get wound up in rope.
- The clowns ask the child, How do we get untangled? Or the clowns can mime the question.
- The child tells the clowns how to get untangled but the clowns misunderstand him and get more tangled up.
- The child finally succeeds in getting the clowns untangled from the jump rope.
- The main thing is to keep eye contact with the child.
- At a party, children can actually touch you to get you undone. At the hospital, the child can give you directions but not touch you.
- Be careful that none of the clowns gets stuck holding a difficult position for too long.

Imaginary baseball game

- For this trick you need: other clowns.
- Caution: If you are using a real ball and it has touched the floor, do not let the child touch it. The hospital floor is full of germs. Better to have the child mime the ball.
- The batter sets up the three bases and home plate, all within a very small area. Some clowns use a rubber chicken as the bat, or the clown can mime a bat.
- The pitcher may be a clown or the child, depending on how interactive the child wants to be. The child might also participate as another role (umpire, outfielder).
- The child can be given an imaginary baseball, so she can be the pitcher. Kids love this!
- No matter what is pitched, the clown thinks he has smacked it out of the park, runs the bases, and makes it home safe. This can be very funny in super slow motion. He's thrilled! Often the ball isn't even hit. It is ridiculous fun and the clowns have a great time. Children love to see clowns being ridiculous!
- Another play is one where the batter claims it's a ball, the pitcher claims it was a strike, arguing nose to nose. The possibilities are limitless!

Clown Symphony

- For this shtick you need: three to ten people in the room.
- The clown invites each person to make a sound.
- Invite the child to conduct them all together from the bed to make a "musical" symphony. Offer the child a washable prop to use as a baton.

Clown remote control

- For this shtick you will need: a remote control device. Broken ones are easy to find!
- One clown uses the remote control to control the other clown.
- Then you can give the remote control to the child. Let the child remote control the clown.
- The controlled clown needs to maintain eye contact with the child and keep in sync with what the child is doing. If you can't see the remote in the child's hand, another clown can watch the child's hand movements and make a sound when the child moves the lever on the remote.
- Caution: You must disinfect the remote control after the child touches it.

Here are some excerpts of exercises shown on the video (or DVD) accompanying the manual describing role playing exercises.

Child in Bed (Role Play Exercise)

- Divide into small groups. Put chairs together to simulate a bed. Determine a door and define the room.
- Chose one clown per group to role-play the child. I will come around and give directions on how the child will respond.

- The other clowns will appear at the door, make their offer to clown, come in, clown for two to three minutes, then leave.
- Then the child in the bed will give feedback about what worked, what didn't, and how the child felt.

Processing the role-playing

What have you seen that doesn't work?

We got too close to the child. The child needs more distance to be able to see us.

We didn't include the child. The child may want to be part of the activity if he is feeling well.

Stay in contact with the child so you know what she wants. It is empowering to be included, if possible. Sometimes they are too sick, but even if they are only lying in bed and watching you, they might be able to play gently. For example, if you blow bubbles they can blow them back to you. We want them to 'play' if they can because then they feel like a child again, not a patient.

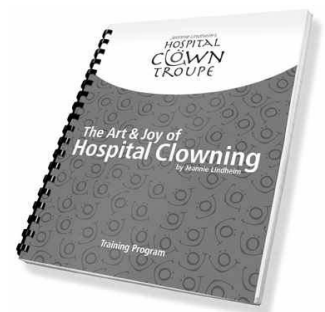
The gentle art of doing nothing can be beautiful. Less is more. You can do an entire shtick of blowing kisses. Anything can be a shtick.

It's all about the child in the bed. Whatever you are doing, the focus is always on that child. The minute the clowns just play together and leave out the child, the child loses interest. Maintaining eye contact with the child helps keep them included.

Keep the connection with the child; always check in with the child. The child is able to take us in if we move in slower motion. Also, we appear very large to the children since we are standing and they are in a bed.

If a child is shy or timid about clowns, eye contact may feel threatening. You might try parallel play where you play near the child but you don't make actual eye contact until the child feels comfortable. You might act shy yourself and very slowly move closer to the child, always asking permission. If you have a puppet with you and the child is shy, your puppet might be shy, too. You could play with your puppet until the child warms up to you. Then as the child feels more comfortable, you can look at the child and have your puppet talk to her.

If you wish to order a copy of The Art & Joy of Hospital Clowning please send a check for \$49.95 + \$5.00 Shipping & Handling to: Jeannie Lindheim's Hospital Clown Troupe, Training Manual, PO Box 470745, Brookline Village, MA 02447 Specify whether you would like either DVD or VHS format Order on the Internet at: <http://www.hospitalclowns.org>



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