

Sources of Social Support: Adolescents With Cancer

Heather B. Haluska, MS, CCLS, Peggy O. Jessee, PhD, CCLS, and M. Christine Nagy, PhD

Purpose/Objectives: To evaluate how a cancer diagnosis affects adolescents' perceived sources of social support, amount of support needed, and level of satisfaction with support compared to an age-matched, healthy, adolescent group.

Design: Cross-sectional, comparative, nonrandom survey.

Setting: Summer camp for adolescents with cancer and a rural high school in the southeastern United States.

Sample: Adolescents with a diagnosis of cancer ($n = 64$) and age-matched, healthy adolescents ($n = 115$).

Methods: Subjects completed the Social Support Questionnaire, Perceived Social Support From Family Scale, Perceived Social Support From Friends Scale, and demographic information forms.

Main Research Variables: Sources of social support, amount of support perceived, and level of satisfaction with support.

Findings: Adolescents with cancer perceived social support coming from both friends and family and reported high levels of support satisfaction from each source. Compared to healthy adolescents, those with cancer reported similar support sources and satisfaction levels; however, adolescents with cancer perceived parental relationships as more supportive.

Conclusions: Similarities between healthy adolescents and those with cancer regarding social support were more prevalent than differences. The social benefits of camp settings for chronically ill children should be explored further.

Implications for Nursing: Nurses and other healthcare professionals should allow adolescents in the healthcare setting every opportunity to maintain their social networks of friends and family by encouraging visitation, providing social opportunities in the hospital, and emphasizing the importance of attending school when medically able.

The average five-year survival rate for all types of childhood cancer is 77% (American Cancer Society [ACS], 2002). About one in every 1,000 young adults ages 20–29 is a survivor of pediatric cancer (ACS, 1999). One implication of increased survival rates is that many forms of childhood cancer are becoming more like chronic illnesses rather than terminal diseases. Although a large body of research has addressed the psychological impact of cancer on the lives of children and adolescents, limited research exists on the long-term social implications of the disease. Nurses and others who work with chronically ill adolescents should

Key Points . . .

- High survival rates of child cancer necessitate examining the social impact of living with and surviving the disease.
- The findings of this study suggest that adolescents with cancer had social supports that compared favorably with those of healthy adolescents.
- Adolescents with cancer should be afforded every opportunity to maintain their social networks of friends and family throughout treatment.

be aware of the specific developmental needs of adolescents and the effects of illness on social development. With more adolescents with cancer surviving into adulthood, the need to examine the social implications of living with diagnosis and treatment is imperative (Kazak, 1993; Klierer, 1997). Nurses are in a unique position to use social support as a coping tool for teenage patients.

Social Support

Social support can be defined as the social aspects of an environment that provide support to an individual (Krahn, 1993). Researchers have found that perceived support is one of the most critical and effective factors in helping adolescents (Hartup, 1993) and adults cope with and adjust to life changes (Krahn; Sandler, Wolchik, MacKinnon, Ayers, & Roosa, 1997). The nature of adolescence requires almost constant adjustments in cognitive, physical, and social development. The importance of perceived social support during this phase of life cannot be underestimated. Clearly, a cancer diagnosis during this already turbulent time requires significant effort and adjustment (Manne & Miller, 1998).

Heather B. Haluska, MS, CCLS, is a child life specialist in the Child Life Department of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, TN; and Peggy O. Jessee, PhD, CCLS, is a professor and M. Christine Nagy, PhD, is an associate professor, both in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. (Submitted March 2001. Accepted for publication November 14, 2001.)

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1188/02.ONF.1317-1324