



Complex Child E-Magazine

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Christmas on the Wards by Keely Schellenberg

Being in the hospital any time is difficult for children and their families. Being in the hospital over the holidays just compounds the difficulty for everyone involved. With an unexpected admission, holiday plans can be derailed, family visits and vacations can be cancelled, and special traditions can grind to a halt. All of this is extremely hard, not just on the child in the hospital, but also on the entire family, who find themselves forced to reinvent the holiday.

There are, however, ways to brighten things up during this time, even when your child is too sick to participate much at all.

Brighten Up Your Room

Last Christmas we found ourselves in the unfortunate position of spending our holidays in the hospital with our six-year-old son Brandon, who was quite ill with a gastrointestinal virus. To further the disappointment, Brandon and I spent the bulk of the holiday apart from Dad and his little brother Tyler. We were uprooted from home, with little time to plan any alternate activities. It was a difficult holiday, to say the least.

In spite of it, we found several ways to lighten things up.

One of the hardest parts of being inpatient, at least for us since we are Christmas decoration fanatics, was the drabness of the room, and the lack of "cheer" around us. Spending all day long in that small drab room gets old even at the best of times, and even more so when the rest of the world seems to be surrounded by lights, tinsel and garland. On December 23, when it was clear we were in for the holidays, we set out to brighten things up a bit.

If you're able to get out or send someone out to pick a few things up for you, the dollar store or a similar venue can be your best friend. Ten dollars can purchase an array of small, simple decorations that are easy to hang with scotch tape. We had a small tree, a small string of lights, some tinsel, and a small hanging candy-cane by the door. It did wonders for the mood!

If you're not able to get out, and don't have anyone able to make the trip, there are still ways to brighten things up. I managed to get a set of Crayola Window Writers (markers

that are made for drawing on windows) from the child life staff and spent about an hour one afternoon drawing and coloring. The plate glass windows became covered with large candy-canes, trees and bows.

Crayons or markers and paper can provide a backdrop for smaller but equally effective pictures. Candy-canes, bows and Christmas trees are easy to draw, even for the less-than-artistically-talented like myself, and do wonders to bring a bit of the Christmas mood into the room. We even managed to get a Lite Brite from the child life department and created a Christmas tree with it. We kept it lit in the corner of the room in the evenings. Get creative! You may surprise yourself!

Creating New Traditions

Next up was creating some new traditions. We realized that our disappointment in not being able to partake in our usual array of holiday traditions, such as baking and family dinners, would only compound Brandon's disappointment. We decided to reinvent the season for ourselves. Often, larger hospitals will have child life programs that will include some activities around the holidays. For example, our hospital had a gingerbread house built in the playroom and a Christmas ice cream party on Christmas Eve. While Brandon couldn't eat the ice cream, he had fun just being around others and listening to the music for a little while. If possible, try to take advantage of these programs. Even if you're only able to go out for a short time, it is usually time well invested.

If your child is not able to leave the room, ask the child life staff if they can bring the activity to them. Often they are more than happy to do what they can to make things easier. Their department exists for this purpose!

Another simple activity that can brighten things up a bit is cookie decorating. You can usually purchase plain sugar cookies at the grocery store for a small cost, as well as tubes of pre-made colored icing. The cleanup is easy and it is the kind of activity that can be done from a bed if need be.

If your child is well enough to leave for a short time, do talk to his doctors about the possibility of a short-term "day pass" on Christmas day if you think being home for a short time would help his mood. You may be able to go home just for the morning for presents, or perhaps in the evening for a family get together. Often, if the child is stable enough to leave for a period of time, the staff will do what they can to make it happen. I know of a family who even managed to get permission to have a Respiratory Therapist come home WITH them on Christmas day for a few hours, just so they could see family. People and staff really do try to make things as easy as possible this time of year. We were able to take Brandon home for three hours on Christmas day and it was so wonderful for him to open his presents with his brother and family!

If you're not able to go home Christmas morning and you have certain traditions, try to recreate them, even on a small scale, in the hospital. Last year Brandon's stocking was

stuffed and left under the small tree in our room, along with three or four smaller gifts, so he had something to open when he woke up. Along with some Christmas music, it made for a pretty nice morning, all things considered!

Change Your Expectations

The one thing that I found the hardest was redesigning my expectations of the holidays. Christmas Eve in the hospital is a very busy, upbeat, and vibrant time. Santa often drops by for a visit, gifts are exchanged, staff is usually upbeat and excited, and the atmosphere is a pretty positive one. But Christmas day is a HUGE letdown from the day before. There's a skeleton staff, and one that's usually mildly unhappy about working on Christmas day at that. The volunteers are gone, the child life staff is gone, and the playrooms are usually shut down. It's an extremely lonely time, especially for families who are used to a busy and social Christmas.

Don't expect it to be the way you're used to. By dropping those expectations, you will be able to create a new and different experience. It won't be the Christmas you wanted, and it will still be rotten that your child has to be inpatient, but with a little effort, and a bit of an attitude shift, it can still be a magical and memorable holiday.

Keely Schellenberg is the stay at home mom to Brandon (7) and Tyler (4). Brandon has a Mitochondrial Disorder (Complex 1 Deficiency) and is very determined NOT to spend this Christmas in the hospital (but just in case we have our Crayola window writers packed in our hospital bag).