

<u>Creative Ideas to Keep Peers with Serious Illness</u> <u>Connected to the Classroom</u>

Welcome Back (students returning to school following a period of absence)

- Make a survival kit for a patient that has not been able to start the school year with the class. The kit may include:
 - Pictures of staff and students with whom the patient may not be familiar
 - Hints written by classmates to describe students' perceptions of teacher expectations.
 - Hints written by teachers to describe classroom rules, procedures, and any additional pieces of advice
 - Hints written by classmates to describe unwritten rules/social norms in and around the building that students come to learn by being in the building. This is especially helpful when the student is entering a new school or entering after school has been in session.
 - A map of the building including location of classes, location of locker, and a procedure describing locker operation.
- Initiate a school-wide or grade level hat day when the student returns to school. All students can wear various hats or a school can design a hat for all to wear specifically to honor their friend who has an illness. For example, a local school created a hat as a tribute to the patient that included a cancer ribbon on the side. The school donated profits from hat sales and the sixth grade students were permitted to wear that hat for the remainder of the school year.
- Encourage students to wear shirts of the specific color representing the diagnosis of the returning student. For example, if a student returns to school after receiving treatment for a brain tumor, encourage a school-wide 'gray shirt day' in recognition of brain tumor awareness. The color for diagnoses may typically be found on the national organization websites.
- Recognize the returning student during morning announcements.
- Hang a welcome banner for the returning student.

Intermittent (students who miss school periodically or for several days at a time)

- For students receiving chemotherapy, organize a parade or pep rally such as a 'chemo parade' with a send off to include things such as balloons, posters, a human tunnel, and lots of cheers for a student leaving for their final chemotherapy treatment.
- Make and send a scrapbook, to the student, of any events such as fieldtrips or guest speakers that the student may have missed.



- If a student is working on reading fluency, audio record classmates reading books and send the recordings and books to the student so that s/he can read along with the recording.
- Send home school calendars so that the student and parent are aware of special events such as picture day. Even though the patient may not be able to attend school, depending on the day, they may be able to come to school for a special program or picture day. Be aware of large school orders such as ordering of new spirit wear, class rings and yearbooks, as missing an important order such as these can be devastating.
- If the student is attending school between chemotherapy treatments, consider permitting crackers in the desk or a ginger ale in the locker to help with nausea. Create a non-verbal hand signal the student can use to be excused to go to the school nurse without disrupting class (sometimes lying down for a few minutes can help with fatigue and nausea). Clean desktops, locker handles, doorknobs, and pencil sharpeners daily to reduce the risk of the patient contracting an infection. Permit the student to come in early or late one day to practice walking the path between classes or practice opening their new locker. Educate all staff members of the condition including 'specials' such as gym, art, and music teachers.
- Video tape special events such as a pep assembly, basketball game, student class presentations, particularly interesting science labs, or party days during which classmates can give personal video messages to the student.
- Encourage team involvement. If the student is on a team, maintain the student's roster spot, uniform, and locker. Teams can embroider the student's initials onto their uniforms or dedicate seasons/games to the student even if the student was not previously a member of the team.
- Assemble a joke book, including jokes collected and/or created by classmates, to give the student.

Extended (students who may miss school for long periods of time)

- Make and send blankets or cards to the student and possibly other patients in the hospital.
- Write letters, cards, and emails to the student. Encourage 'kid talk' for the content of the letters. Discuss the happenings at school with teachers, friends, projects, sports teams, special events, etc. Other discussion points include video games, movies, and television. Well wishes are always nice, but try not to focus each letter around the illness.
- Ask the school guidance counselor to pull 3 or 4 students each Friday (or a pre-arranged time with the parent) to his/her office to place a phone call to the patient. It is helpful when the guidance counselor brainstorms topics for conversation, with the students, before placing the call.



- Send activity packets, created by classmates, to help the patient catch up on academics.
 Assigning activity packets as a review to various students or collaborative student groups as an assignment for each chapter, unit, or section serves a dual purpose. Teachers can grade students on packet creativity and structure, and can assign the patient a grade for packet completion. Encourage students to be creative including making mazes, puzzles, word finds, and riddles.
- When it is safe for the patient, take a game to the hospital and/or the student's home and play with the student for awhile.
- Use a web cam in the classroom for the student to see lessons live; record and post the video so the student can access it at a later time if the student is not feeling well when the class occurs. While this is an excellent idea to allow on-going student participation, it is typically more effective in meeting the social/emotional need of missing school. Keep in mind, this has been rarely effective as the single delivery of missed instruction.
- Permit student to submit projects or presentations via video tape when the student is not able to attend school, however is feeling well enough to complete school work. Allow classmates to view video taped presentation if approved by student/family.
- Establish a web page through <u>www.carepages.com</u> or <u>www.caringbridge.com</u>. The patient can provide medical updates on the web page and students can write back and forth.
- Create a theme or holiday basket of goodies to send to the student. Ask the student's parent(s) in advance for the student's preferences (as they may have changed due to experiencing side effects from therapy) and any guidance as to medical restrictions. Toys and games that are sent should be new, as used items have the potential of carrying unwanted germs to patients with compromised immune systems. Latex balloons and live flowers are prohibited. Please refrain from bringing these items onto the hematology/oncology floors.
- Peers write inspirational quotes, words of encouragement or jokes for the patient and their family on strips of paper. Assemble the strips of paper as links on a chain that can be torn away each day as the patient goes through their treatment process.

HINT: As the school year picks up and the student's diagnosis becomes 'old news', remember this is a crucial time (many children begin to feel forgotten). Organizing outreach to patients can be a big task. Divide up the responsibility and have staff members sign up for outreach. Depending on how long the student will be out, you may want the sign up sheet to dictate some type of outreach once a month or once every two weeks. This way, a teacher only has to be responsible for organizing one or two peer outreach events, yet the student will hear from classmates on a regular basis.

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