



CAPTAIN STARLIGHT

Evaluation of the Captain Starlight program

Captain Starlight Program: To improve the well-being of hospitalised children and their siblings through entertainment, play and distraction.

BACKGROUND

Established in 1991 the Captain Starlight program features professional costumed performers and artists who entertain and engage children in activities designed to reduce the loneliness, pain and boredom that can be associated with hospital treatment. The Captain Starlights conduct ward-rounds and are also responsible for facilitating Starlight Express Rooms located within every children's hospital across Australia.

The desire to better understand the impact of the Captain Starlight program on hospitalised children led to a formal evaluation of the Captain Starlight program. This snapshot provides a summary of the findings of the program evaluation which focused on the Captain Starlights' personal experiences of enacting the role of Captain Starlight within the paediatric hospital environment.

AIMS OF THE EVALUATION

The aims of the evaluation were to:

- Provide information that would allow for a better understanding of the Captain Starlight program and Captain Starlights' experiences;
- Identify the program's strengths and weaknesses; and
- Assist in clarifying the program's objectives.

WHAT WAS INVOLVED?

Captain Starlights were interviewed, observed in action (direct observation) and existing policy and program documents were analysed.

Forty-nine (70%) Captain Starlights were interviewed as part of the evaluation. Captain Starlights not included in the evaluation were either on maternity/annual leave, or leave without pay to engage in outside performances. The average length of employment of the Captain Starlights interviewed was 2.3 years (range 3 months to 7.8 years). The project involved:

- Face-to-face or telephone interviews (range 25 to 90 minutes)
- Direct observation of Captain Starlight in 5 Starlight Express Rooms
- Analysis of program records literature;



Interview Schedule

- What are the key characteristics of Captain Starlight?
- How important is the costume in engaging with children?
- What is the impact of the Captain Starlight role on a performer?
- What are the perceived outcomes of the program?

WHAT WE LEARNED

The findings of the evaluation focused around four key themes:

- Role and impact of the Captain Starlight costume;
- Use of 'alter egos';
- Support for the Captain Starlight program; and
- Impacts of the Captain Starlight program.

Costume

Central to the role of Captain Starlight is the wearing of a costume. Analysis of the data identified the importance of the costume in enabling the individual to become Captain Starlight. The costume:

- Provides a symbolic representation of the Captain Starlights' skills to entertain and enthrall children;
- Strengthens the children's belief in the character of Captain Starlight;
- Assists in engaging children through the use of props e.g. wristbands with magical powers;
- Establishes boundaries between the staff member and child; and
- Increases the Captain Starlights' commitment to the role, and worn collectively provides a strong visual statement.



Key impacts of the Captain Starlight program

All Captain Starlights were asked to describe the type of impact they believed the program has on hospitalised children and their families. The key impacts identified were that Captain Starlight is seen as a central part of the hospital experience, providing positive experiences for children and families. Children actively seek out Captain Starlight and happily engage in the imaginary world. Interactions with Captain Starlight can impact positively on the child's mood and behaviour.

Captain Starlights reported that they enjoyed the freedom to personalise the role.

This flexibility enables the Captain Starlight to adapt to the individual needs of any given situation. In their role the Captain Starlights help children and their families to cope with difficult feelings and behaviour. They also support families and carers and they tailor opportunities for them to participate in creative activities.

Many Captain Starlights also reported working with the treating team of health professionals to assist in reducing fear and increasing tolerance of medical treatments.

Key to the role is the successful engagement between Captain Starlight, health professionals and children and families.

Other Evaluations

In 2013, Starlight worked in partnership with Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC) to undertake a Social Return on Investment project to understand more about the impact of the Captain Starlight program and the Starlight Express Rooms on children and families. This snapshot can be accessed at starlight.com.au

Use of alter egos

The Captain Starlights adopt 'nicknames' or 'alter egos' that children help them choose. Captain Starlights noted that using an alter ego had the following benefits:

- Helps children to identify individual Captain Starlights.
- Allows the expansion of the character qualities of Captain Starlight making it easier to engage and build rapport between a Captain Starlight and the child.
- Enhances engagement with the character.
- Some examples; *Excitable, Giggles, Sunshine, Gigantor, Music, Mischief, Twist, Creative, Rainbow, Awkward.*

What supports the Captain Starlight program?

The strong mythological base of Captain Starlight being from another planet, brought to earth each day, allows Captain Starlights to actively engage children in an imaginary world.

The provision of costumes, props and the Starlight Express Room is integral to the work of Captain Starlight, as are the educational and professional development and career development opportunities.

The role is also demanding and there was recognition that maintaining good health through exercise, adequate sleep and a healthy diet are known to play an important role in reducing stress and keeping things in perspective.

KEY IMPACTS

1. Provides a positive hospital experience.
2. Develops meaningful relationships between child and Captain Starlight.
3. Improves well-being.
4. Supports family cohesiveness.
5. Creates connections between patients and families.

RESEARCH & EVALUATION SNAPSHOT



PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Short Term (1-3 interactions)	Medium Term (4-6 interactions)	Long Term (7+ interactions)
Positive mood "in the moment" achieved (e.g. laughter, joy)	Positive mood achieved: anticipation, in the moment and reflection achieved	Positive reframing of having a serious or chronic illness and hospitalisation achieved Positive memories created
Stress, tension and anxiety reduced	Attitudes and beliefs about hospitalisation and treatment positively changed	Resilience that increases health care participation, treatment compliance and health outcomes is enhanced
Meaningful activities provided Boredom alleviated	Self-expression and creativity enhanced skills developed	Skill acquisition and mastery achieved Self-esteem and self-confidence improved
Opportunities for social interaction created	Social isolation reduced and the development of social skills enhanced	Sense of community and belonging achieved
Distraction during treatment provided	Fear and anxiety about hospital and treatment reduced	Coping with hospital and treatment improved Recovery enhanced
'Connection' between Captain Starlight and child achieved	Rapport developed with Captain Starlight and positive social behaviours are modelled	Social functioning optimised

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION AT STARLIGHT

Starlight is committed to research and evaluation so that we can ensure our programs are making a significant difference to the lives of seriously ill children, young people and their families. If you would like to learn more about our work please email us at impact@starlight.org.au.