



THE SOAR PROGRAM: SCHOOL RE-ENTRY & ONGOING ACADEMIC RESOURCES

Limited school resources and the rigors of a demanding curriculum make it almost impossible for educators to provide the individualized pre-and-post school re-entry support essential for a young student with cancer. To meet these compelling needs, Winthrop-University Hospital—thanks to a generous grant from the Michael Magro Foundation—has established the S.O.A.R. program at its Cancer Center for Kids (CCFK) in Mineola, New York.

The SOAR Program is designed to increase each child's chances for a successful academic experience during treatment for his or her disease, and for years after treatment has ended. For children to thrive in the classroom, they not only need a smooth transition or "re-entry" but they often require ongoing assistance, sometimes through their college years. The SOAR Program nurtures the patient, the family and the academic community, empowering the success of their collaborative efforts.

Research on the long-term effects of cancer treatment in children has revealed that as many as fifty percent of pediatric cancer survivors develop neuropsychological issues that can negatively impact educational performance. For most children, school is the center of their world. It defines their work, their social skills training, and their sense of normalcy and purpose.

Youngsters who can't go to school because of illness are at risk for compromised social development, poor self-image, and learning difficulties. Children who are diagnosed and treated for cancer are usually unable to attend school for prolonged periods of time. The nature of their illness, physical limitations and the intensity of treatment may place them at risk for infection, poor concentration and an inability to attend a full day of classes. When finally able to return to school they commonly become apprehensive and fearful because of changes in appearance, concerns about ability to compete academically, prolonged lack of contact with classmates, and anxieties about leaving the safety of home and family. Parents often worry about how their child will navigate through the day, and if their child will be exposed to illness. The school itself may express concerns about the risk of infection and about the returning child's ability to participate in normal school activities.

The goals of the SOAR Program are to ensure a physically safe and medically appropriate school environment for the child still undergoing chemotherapy; to help children who are on treatment keep up with missed schoolwork and academic demands; to introduce programs utilizing interactive videoconferencing equipment; to integrate homebound patients with live classroom activities; to help ease the social transition back to school for children with cancer; to provide safe forums for patients and families; as well as to educate school personnel and classmates about childhood cancer and what to expect when the patient returns to school. Additional goals are to increase community awareness, knowledge and understanding of the needs of survivors of childhood cancer through outreach and education; to empower families to navigate the educational system and access the help their children need; to provide appropriate on-site neuropsychological evaluations as needed; and to provide ongoing assistance throughout all phases of medical treatment and levels of education. Children of all ages are accepted into the program

The unique aspects of the SOAR Program are that it provides a consortium of resources ministering to the special medical, academic and psychological needs of the child with cancer. The team is comprised of a medical staff including Board Certified pediatric hematologists/oncologists, certified nurse practitioner, a licensed clinical pediatric psychologist, a licensed pediatric neuropsychologist, a certified pediatric oncology nurse coordinator, a certified clinical social worker, a certified child life specialist and an educational advocate. These team members are available to attend all school meetings.

Additional SOAR components include flexibility, adaptability and an in-depth knowledge of the population served. It is a pilot program with reproducible standards for other centers; longitudinal follow-up and access to assistance for survivors; on-site neuropsychological evaluations, including test administration, scoring of data, report preparation, and patient and family feedback.

Children need to feel comfortable and secure; a prolonged absence from the classroom often requires ongoing assistance to families as well as school staff. The S.O.A.R. team embraces the patient, the family, and the academic community, empowering the success of their collaborative effort. It is a mission the Cancer Center for Kids continues to foster with hope and healing.

III. THE PEDIATRIC HEMATOLOGY/ONCOLOGY EDUCATION PROGRAM TEAM MEMBERS

Education services are coordinated and provided by a multidisciplinary team, which includes medical and nursing staff, psychology, social work, child life and an educational advocate. Services are made available to patients from birth through high school and beyond.