

Health & behavior

Tommy Moose gives comfort to children

Stuffed animal helps the sick, traumatized

By Betty Klinck
USA TODAY

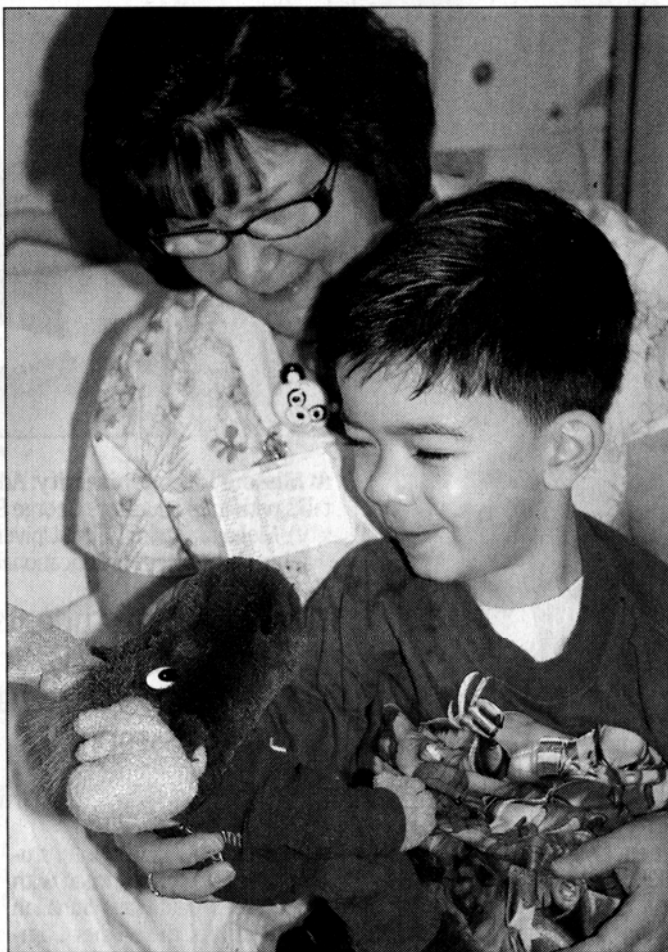
Sometimes something as simple as a stuffed animal can make a difference.

Police officers interviewing young sexual-abuse victims in Piedmont, W.Va., in 2007 were struggling because the children were too nervous to give investigators the information necessary to lock up the abuser, says Police Chief Chris Paitsel. That seemed to change, at least in one case, when the victim was handed Tommy Moose, a plush moose doll distributed by the Moose International non-profit group.

"We gave Tommy Moose to the little girl, and it was like a little light had come on. She started smiling and playing with the Tommy Moose, and when we started questioning again she just opened up," Paitsel says.

"She was telling the story to Tommy Moose. It was just like night and day."

Moose International founded the Tommy Moose program in 2003 to provide police officers,



By Theresa Mulkins, Health Quest

He's all ears: Child life assistant Theresa Palome gives Ethan Perez, 4, a patient at Vassar Brothers Medical Center, his own Tommy Moose.

"They'll smile and hug the moose. . . . It's just something to hold on to so that you're not feeling so frightened."

— Theresa Palome of Vassar Brothers Medical Center in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

firefighters and ambulance personnel with friendly-looking moose dolls to distract and comfort children in traumatic situations. The Moose, a community service organization of about 1.2 million men and women, distributed its 100,000th Tommy Moose in November.

Kurt Wehrmeister, director of communications at Moose International, based in Mooseheart, Ill., says appreciative comments like Paitsel's are not uncommon. The group has heard from organizations such as the California Highway Patrol and Vassar Brothers Medical Center in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., where Tommy Moose comforts sick kids.

Theresa Palome, a child life assistant at Vassar Brothers, uses Tommy Moose in play therapy to calm kids going for chemothera-

py, MRIs and surgery, and even uses him sometimes to demonstrate where children will get "boo-boos" by putting bandages on the toy.

"They'll smile and hug the moose," Palome says. "It's just something to hold on to so that you're not feeling so frightened."

Jennifer Smith, child life specialist at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, says she, too, uses play therapy with sick kids that ranges from playing with race cars to making music to reading books.

She says therapeutic and expressive play are often used not only to help distract children from traumatic situations but also to offer them a sense of familiarity so they feel comfortable enough to cope with their feelings as they endure illness or medical treatments.

Smith adds that St. Jude typically does not permit plush or fabric toys in cases where children are highly susceptible to infection because fabric toys cannot be as thoroughly sanitized as materials such as plastic.

Play can be just as vital to the parents of traumatized children or children with behavioral problems as it is to the kids, says Joyce Nolan Harrison, a child psychiatrist and director of Preschool Psychiatry and Community Pro-

grams at Johns Hopkins Children's Center in Baltimore.

Hopkins Children's Center runs a program called "child center time" during which parents and children play together, allowing the child to lead rather than being quizzed or taught by parents along the way, which helps "teach parents to enjoy their kids again," Nolan Harrison says.

She adds, however, that there are many forms of therapy and that Hopkins Children's Center often does not use formal play therapy but methods such as cognitive behavioral therapy, which focuses on understanding the thoughts and feelings behind behavior and then working to repair the child's misconceptions.

Children who are traumatized, for example, often struggle with the fear that their parents or caregivers cannot keep them safe, and so cognitive behavioral therapy would work to reassure children that sometimes scary things happen that are out of their or their parents' control, Nolan Harrison says.

"The thing about play therapy is that it's pretty complicated and it takes a sophisticated therapist to do it correctly. It's about seeing what's there, what the symbolism in the play is, and interpreting the play," she says. "It takes a skilled senior therapist."