

Creating a Safe Space for Children with Burns to Heal

By Jeanna Vazquez | December 18, 2020

Two weeks before his ninth birthday, Benjamin Herrera went to visit family with his mom and was surprised by his uncle to see an ATV in the yard, offering to take the young boy for a ride.

After donning helmets, the ride was a quick loop around his grandmother's ranch in Dulzura in rural southeast San Diego County, but a bump in the road caused Benjamin to lose his footing and when he tried to replace his foot on the peg, he instead accidentally stepped on the ATV's fast-spinning tire.



"We protected his head, but obviously that wasn't enough," said Julieta Herrera, Benjamin's mother. "The tire ripped through Benjamin's shoe and sock, leaving a second-degree burn on the bottom of his foot."

"I just kept telling him to stop, stop," said Benjamin, recalling the moment.

Once his uncle heard Benjamin over the loud ATV engine, he immediately stopped and carried Benjamin to safety.

"He was so brave and didn't cry," said Julieta. "Tears came to my eyes once I saw his wound because I was so worried about my son and the pain he was in."

Lucky for Benjamin, his grandmother is a certified nursing assistant and quickly bandaged the wound before they headed for the Regional Burn Center at UC San Diego Health, which houses the only Pediatric Burn Unit in San Diego and Imperial counties.

As part of his follow-up care, Benjamin and his mom were also seen at the Burn Center's outpatient clinic once a week for three weeks.

Family Centered Approach to a Special Kind of Care

Treating children for burns can be especially challenging as coping with fear and anxiety associated with a burn wound is more difficult for younger individuals. The team at UC San Diego

Health takes a family centered approach that ensures the social, emotional and psychological needs are met for pediatric patients and their families. One way: toys.

“It’s all about minimizing the trauma this experience has on the child,” said Kate Hamelin, certified child life specialist at UC San Diego Health. “Our mission here is to prevent any lasting negative impacts caused by the situation our patients find themselves in while they are receiving care for their burns. The toys we give to our patients help create a safe space for kids in the hospital.”



Alyssa Garcia and Kate Hamelin with UC San Diego Health’s Child Life Program. Each toy pictured will go to a child being treated for burns at the Regional Burn Center at UC San Diego Health, which houses the only Pediatric Burn Unit in San Diego and Imperial counties.

The toys are a vital part of treatment as they support a child’s developmental growth while they are in the

hospital, reduce the traumatic impact of their wound or hospitalization, and are also used as an incentive or distraction to young patients so their care teams can more effectively treat them. Many of the toys even help provide education to pediatric patients so they better understand and cope with their injuries or diagnosis.

Once a patient leaves the hospital, the toy goes home with them.

For Benjamin, his favorite toy was the game Connect Four. His child life specialist would play with him during each outpatient appointment while his wound was assessed, cleaned and redressed.

An Unexpected Result of the COVID-19 Pandemic

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, many parents and children have found themselves working and learning from home. This situation resulted in an increased risk and frequency of

burns from cooking, hot liquids and flames.

“People continue to get burned during the pandemic, and burn care cannot be delayed without increasing pain, risk of infection, scarring and other poor outcomes,” said Eli Strait, burn program manager at UC San Diego Health. “While more people are home for longer periods of time, the number of patients we’re treating for burn both in our inpatient and outpatient units have unfortunately increased compared to years prior.”

Not only has the pandemic affected the number of burn cases being seen, it has also severely impacted the number of toys typically donated to the program.

In a normal year, Hamelin and the Child Life team lead a Pediatric Burn and Injury Prevention Program that consists of visits to local schools to educate kids on how to prevent burns or other injuries. The effort also helps kids learn how to be safe at home and at school. Presentations are fun and interactive, using story time, crafts and activities, such as “crawl-under-the-smoke.”

As a “thank you,” toys are often donated to the pediatric burn unit for patients; however, due to the pandemic, all of these school outreach programs and events have been canceled, impacting toy donations.



“We have been so grateful that for several years these schools and organizations have served as a

major source of donations that support our work, but as a result of the pandemic we have lost those critical connections to donations and funding for the foreseeable future,” said Hamelin. “Currently, we have enough toys to last us only until spring 2021.”

To help with donations during the pandemic, the team set up an Amazon Wish List so that supporters can continue to help through online donations. More information and a link to the wish list [can be found on the Child Life Program web page](#).

“Instead of feeling stressed or nervous for what could be a painful and scary doctor’s visit for my son, I felt at ease during his appointments,” said Julieta. “The scariest part was my son getting hurt, not the treatment. And I know he looked forward to his time playing Connect Four with his favorite child life specialist, Brenda, which was a welcomed distraction that I will always be grateful for.”

While his foot still heals, Benjamin is looking forward to getting back to running around the backyard with his three brothers. And next time he rides an ATV, he plans to wear boots.

The UC San Diego Health Regional Burn Center at UC San Diego Health was established in 1973. Verified by the American College of Surgeons and American Burn Association as a level 1 pediatric and adult burn center, the team at UC San Diego Health treats approximately 450 hospitalized patients each year, and another 1,000 patients are seen in the outpatient burn clinic. Approximately 1/3 of all admissions and outpatient visits are pediatric patients under the age of 18.

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