

The role of the healthcare assistant (OSS) in pediatric wards

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Keypoints

Through collaboration, empathy, and professionalism, the healthcare assistant ensures that every child receives care that is not only clinically effective but also deeply human.

Abstract

In pediatric healthcare, the role of the Operatore Socio Sanitario (OSS), or Healthcare Assistant, is crucial for delivering comprehensive care. The OSS collaborates with nurses, pediatricians, and other healthcare professionals to address the physical, emotional, and developmental needs of children. Their responsibilities extend beyond basic support tasks, encompassing emotional comfort, environmental safety, and relational care. By integrating technical skills with empathy and understanding of child development, OSS professionals contribute significantly to the well-being of pediatric patients, facilitate recovery, and provide essential support to families during stressful periods.

Keywords

Pediatric care, Healthcare Assistant, Operatore Socio Sanitario, child development, emotional support, multidisciplinary care, patient well-being, family support

Introduction

In the complex and delicate environment of pediatric healthcare, the role of the *Operatore Socio Sanitario* (OSS), known in English as the Healthcare Assistant, is of fundamental importance. The OSS works alongside nurses, pediatricians, and other healthcare professionals to guarantee holistic care for children and their families.

Pediatric patients are unique in that they are still developing physically, emotionally, and psychologically; therefore, their care requires not only technical skill but also empathy, patience, and an understanding of child development. Within this multidisciplinary setting, the OSS ensures that the essential aspects of daily assistance, emotional comfort, and environmental safety are constantly maintained.

The work of the OSS in a pediatric ward is not limited to simple support tasks. Instead, it represents a central element of the care process, integrating physical assistance with emotional and relational dimensions. Their contribution is essential to promoting the overall well-being of the child, enhancing recovery, and supporting family members during a challenging and often stressful period.

1. Daily Assistance and Basic Care

A core function of the OSS is to provide assistance with activities of daily living (ADLs). These include hygiene care, feeding, positioning, and mobilization of the child. Although these tasks may appear routine, they are crucial to preserving the dignity, comfort, and safety of each young patient.

In pediatric settings, assistance must always be tailored to the child's age and level of autonomy. For infants, the OSS helps with diaper changing, bottle preparation, and

bathing, ensuring strict adherence to hygiene and infection control standards. For older children, the OSS promotes independence by encouraging participation in self-care activities, such as washing hands or eating independently, whenever possible. In this way, the OSS not only meets basic physical needs but also contributes to the child's sense of confidence and autonomy, which are important elements of healthy psychological development.¹

Furthermore, the OSS ensures that the ward environment remains clean, safe, and comfortable. Proper sanitation and organization of spaces are critical to reducing the risk of infection and creating a reassuring atmosphere. The presence of bright colors, toys, and familiar objects often makes the hospital less intimidating, and the OSS plays an active role in maintaining this child-friendly environment.

2. Emotional and Psychological Support

Hospitalization is often a distressing experience for children, who may not fully understand the reasons for their illness or the procedures being performed. Feelings of fear, anxiety, and separation from family can have a negative impact on their emotional state and even on the healing process. In this context, the OSS plays an essential role as a bridge of empathy and reassurance.

Through gentle communication, storytelling, play, and the use of non-verbal cues such as smiles or gestures, the OSS helps to reduce tension and foster trust between the child and the healthcare team. The emotional support provided by the OSS often complements the medical treatment, helping to create a therapeutic environment where the child feels secure and valued as a person, not merely as a patient.²

Moreover, the OSS is trained to recognize signs of distress or behavioral changes that may indicate deeper psychological discomfort. By promptly reporting these observations to nurses or psychologists, the OSS contributes to the early identification of emotional or relational

difficulties, ensuring timely intervention and individualized care.

3. Collaboration within the Healthcare Team

The pediatric ward operates as a multidisciplinary system, where effective communication and teamwork are vital. The OSS collaborates closely with nurses and physicians, providing essential support in both clinical and logistical aspects of care. They may assist during medical procedures by preparing materials, positioning the child, or ensuring that hygiene standards are strictly followed. Their role requires a deep understanding of professional boundaries and an ability to coordinate seamlessly with other staff members.

The OSS also participates in team briefings and handovers, sharing valuable observations about the child's condition, mood, or behavior. Such input often provides insight into subtle changes that may not be immediately evident during medical evaluations. This continuous exchange of information enhances the overall quality and safety of care.

4. Support to Families

The hospitalization of a child represents a difficult experience not only for the patient but also for their parents and relatives. Feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and fatigue are common. The OSS provides practical and emotional support to families, helping them adapt to the hospital environment and daily routines. This may involve explaining procedures in simple terms, offering reassurance, or simply listening to a parent's concerns.

By promoting open communication and empathy, the OSS contributes to building a trusting relationship between healthcare professionals and families. Such collaboration is fundamental, as parents are central to the child's recovery process. The OSS helps them maintain a sense of involvement and participation in the child's care, reinforcing the continuity between the hospital and home environments.³

5. Education and Health Promotion

Another important aspect of the OSS's role in pediatrics is participation in health education and preventive activities. Together with nurses, educators, and doctors, the OSS promotes good hygiene practices, proper nutrition, and healthy behaviors. These educational moments are not only directed at children but also at parents, who are encouraged to adopt preventive measures that can reduce future health risks.

Through observation and daily interaction, the OSS identifies opportunities to reinforce positive behaviors—such as handwashing, correct use of medical devices, or adherence to dietary guidelines. By fostering awareness and responsibility, the OSS helps create a culture of prevention and self-care within the pediatric setting.⁴⁻⁶

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of the Healthcare Assistant (OSS) in pediatric wards is multifaceted and indispensable. Beyond the technical aspects of daily care, the OSS embodies the values of compassion, patience, and respect that are at the heart of pediatric nursing. Their actions contribute to the physical well-being of the child, but equally to emotional stability and family harmony.

Through collaboration, empathy, and professionalism, the OSS ensures that every child receives care that is not only clinically effective but also deeply human. In a healthcare system that increasingly values efficiency and specialization, the OSS reminds us that healing begins with attention, presence, and kindness — the true foundations of holistic pediatric care.

References

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