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Parental perceptions of prosocial behaviour in children with cancer.

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ABSTRACT

Prosocial behaviour is a much needed element in society that creates a sense of cooperation and unity. Acts of helpfulness, sharing and care enhance the wellbeing of communities. Prosocial behaviour in children with cancer is an under-researched topic that provides glimpses into the workings of this special population. The perceptions and experiences of parents of this demographic with regards to their children's possible prosocial behaviour and attributions of its fluctuation during and after hospitalization is even less explored. Due to its qualitative nature, this study focused on perceptions and insider worldviews of the participants. It also used the interpretive voice of the researcher to enhance the phenomenological aspect of the enquiry. Data from nine participants using semi-structured interview questions, yielded material that was then analysed using Thematic Content Analysis. Two categories of themes were gleaned from the narratives: i) 'behavioural and character attributes' and ii) 'process of illness'. Seven themes emerged under the first category and two under the second. It was argued that the definition of prosociality in the broad sense that includes internal attributes such as resilience and positivity can have effects that are likened to prosocial behaviour and which was found in the sample. Furthermore, engaging with the horrors of their children's illness puts parents in contact with difficult feelings which can make them utilize an array of defences, including the idealization of their children. One expression of this 'halo effect' is viewing their children as prosocial. However, it was also found that children in life-threatening situations may indeed spur the expression of higher levels of prosocial behaviour, defined in the broad sense above and beyond parental defences. Attributions of this process may be transcendental as well as defence based. Recommendations for future research can be empirical studies linking prosocial behaviour to prognosis of illness and the stage of cancer or remission.