

Beyond Safety: Embedding Dignity of Risk in Peer Support for Young People with Chronic Illness and/or Disability

Authors:

RACHEL ELLIS¹, HANNAH BUDWAY¹, AMY DELANEY¹, COURTENAY SCOTT¹, JANE HO¹

¹ *Department of Youth & Transition, Sydney Children's Hospitals Network (SCHN), Sydney, Australia*

Background/Purpose:

Young people with chronic illness and/or disability often have limited opportunities to take risks, assert independence, or challenge systems due to overprotection in healthcare. While *dignity of risk*—the right to make choices, take risks, and learn through experience—is well established in adult disability and aged care contexts, it is rarely applied to adolescents in hospital-based programs. Within the Chronic Illness Peer Support (ChIPS) service at SCHN, we identified a need to embed dignity of risk more intentionally. This project aims to co-design a toolkit with young people that positions inclusion, autonomy, and constructive challenge as central to peer participation and identity development.

Approach:

Using a Quality Improvement framework, we piloted a co-design initiative with ChIPS participants aged 14–25. Creative participatory methods such as narrative inquiry and visual mapping made abstract concepts of autonomy and psychological safety accessible. Young people were equal partners in design, testing, and evaluation, ensuring the toolkit reflected their lived experiences. The project was embedded within existing ChIPS structures to support sustainability and scalability.

Outcomes/Impact:

The toolkit provides a structured approach to embedding dignity of risk within ChIPS, enabling staff and young people to navigate the inherent tension between clinical safety and psychosocial growth. In health settings where protection and predictability often dominate, the toolkit reframes risk-taking as essential to development and identity formation. It strengthens capacity to balance medical and psychological safety, supporting stretch, experimentation, and autonomy without compromising care. Through co-designed tools, reflective prompts, and decision-making frameworks, it fosters transparent communication, shared accountability, and empowerment. Anticipated outcomes include measurable improvements in inclusion, autonomy, and confidence; enhanced staff capability to support constructive risk-taking; and deeper alignment between clinical governance and developmental wellbeing.

Innovation and Significance:

This project is innovative in applying dignity of risk within adolescent hospital-based peer support. Its integration of co-design, creative methods, and challenger safety offers a scalable, inclusive model that strengthens belonging, identity, and transition readiness for young people with diverse needs.

No disclosures of interest to note.