

Department of Health Sciences

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# **Small Patients, Big Challenges: Exploring Child-Centred Approaches in Prehospital Emergency Care**

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ACADEMIC THESIS

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## **Abstract**

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**Background:** Children require special attention in healthcare because of their unique developmental requirements. As such, ambulance nurses can perceive calls regarding children as challenging and difficult to handle. At the same time, ambulance nurses also often need to contend with a child's anxious parent, an experience that can seem like having to deal with multiple patients instead of just one. Regardless, nurses are expected to be sensitive and attentive to the child patient's wishes and allow them to participate in their own care. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are entitled to be heard in matters concerning them. This is also expressed in child-centred care, which emphasises the importance of a child's perspective in care. It is, therefore, of interest to explore the care of children in a prehospital context. **Aim:** This research sought to contribute to knowledge that can support the development of child-centred approaches in prehospital emergency care. The overall aim was to gain a deeper insight into how care encounters between ambulance personnel and children are perceived by both ambulance personnel and parents, as well as to explore the strategies used by ambulance personnel to manage these situations. **Method:** To achieve a deeper understanding of the research topic, a qualitative design was chosen, with data being collected through interviews. Studies I and II were both conducted in three regions and included 17 ambulance nurses. Data was analysed using

qualitative content analysis for Study I and reflective thematic analysis in Study II. Study III covered five regions and included 12 parents, with the resultant data being analysed using deductive content analysis. Study IV was carried out in five regions and included 10 child representatives. Phenomenography was used to analyse the collected data. **Findings:** The overarching findings of the studies were that there is a need for a child-centred approach in prehospital care, wherein children's emotional and developmental needs are met. Such an approach can develop a sense of participation in the children and foster trust between them and ambulance personnel. True caring requires ambulance personnel to use empathy, adaptability and teamwork. They also have to deal with challenges such as emotional stress and insecurity among ambulance personnel, particularly when they lack experience with children. Strictly following protocols without considering children's needs may hinder child-centred care, risking unequal care and a failure to meet legislative demands. However, creativity in the care encounter with adaptability towards the children's developmental levels—through play, honest communication and other strategies—can foster safety and participation. Allowing children to be heard and considered creates a sense of autonomy in them and fosters trust between them and ambulance personnel, strengthening care quality. The physical design of ambulances often presents limitations but can be overcome with minor adjustments. Even in emergencies, maintaining clear, empathetic communication ensures dignity and support for children and families. **Conclusion:** These studies underscore the importance of a holistic, child-centred approach in the prehospital setting, but organisation and/or

individual barriers pose challenges to their implementation. Professional, sensitised preparedness is essential for ambulance personnel, and it must be supported by additional education involving hands-on training. The ability to adapt is crucial when caring for children. Empathetic, candid communication by ambulance personnel can address children's medical and emotional needs, encouraging their participation in the care process. Such a compassionate, child-centred approach begets trust from the children and their families while also upholding their dignity, even during emergencies. When supported, children are more likely to be able to participate in their care.

**Keywords**

Ambulance, Caring, Nursing, Paramedic, Paediatric, Participation, Relationship