

# HYPNOSIS AS A HOLISTIC NURSING TOOL FOR COMMON PEDIATRIC CONCERNS

by CHRISTINA COWGILL, MNA, CRNA, PMHNP-C, NC-BC, BCH, CI;  
and CHRISTINE GILCHRIST, PhD, MPH, RN, NC-BC, CH



As holistic nurses, we see the whole person (body, mind, and spirit) and witness the remarkable ways the unconscious mind influences healing, resilience, and recovery. Particularly in pediatric care, the mind-body connection can offer healing potential in areas where families feel stuck or hopeless. One evidence-informed yet underutilized tool in this area is clinical hypnosis.

Hypnosis is a naturally occurring state of focused attention and inner absorption, allowing access to unconscious processes where new learning and healing can take root. Children, with imagination and responsiveness, are often particularly receptive to suggestion, making them well-suited for this therapeutic intervention. Hypnosis is a low-risk approach that can address diverse pediatric issues, from bedwetting and habit disorders to anxiety and self-esteem challenges.

## HYPNOSIS FOR CHILDREN: EVIDENCE & PRACTICE

Since the 1970s, research and practice have demonstrated the efficacy of hypnosis in pediatric care. Clinicians, such as G. Gail Gardner, PhD and Karen Olness, MD, have documented the value of hypnosis in child health settings (Kohen & Kaiser, 2014). Hypnosis has an established history in the treatment of habit disorders like thumb-sucking, nail biting, and hair-pulling.

In a foundational study, Gardner (1978) demonstrated how children could respond to hypnotic suggestions that disrupted unconscious habit loops and replaced them with healthier behaviors. Research in dermatology further supported the use of hypnosis for body-focused repetitive behaviors, often in conjunction with behavioral strategies (Shenefelt, 2000).

For children, these techniques might involve imagining they are wearing an invisible glove that reminds them to control or resist the habit, or reframing the habit into a “signal” to take deep breathes and refocus. Ng and Lee (2008) found that hypnosis was effective in managing sleep issues in children and teens.

Hypnosis can not only improve sleep quality but also teach children lifelong self-regulation skills they can use anytime their nervous system feels overstimulated. Research has also been conducted on the use of hypnosis for children with asthma, cancer, tic disorders, and pain management (Kohen & Olness, 2011).

More recently, reviews have offered compelling evidence that hypnosis reduces symptoms during medical procedures. One review by Bastek and van Vliet (2023) found that hypnotherapy can reduce distress and improve cooperation during procedures. Another review by Geagea et al., (2023) found that in over three-quarters of the 38 studies examined, clinical hypnosis outperformed control conditions as well as other non-pharmacological interventions such as acupuncture and distraction for reducing children’s pain and distress during medical procedures.

## HYPNOSIS & SCOPE OF HOLISTIC NURSING PRACTICE

Nurses are uniquely positioned to broaden the application of clinical hypnosis. Their training in patient-centered care, holistic assessment, and therapeutic communication enables them to integrate hypnotic techniques into their practice effectively. As Kohen and Kaiser (2014) emphasize, clinical hypnosis enhances the effectiveness of existing interventions

by facilitating self-efficacy and fostering behavioral change. Nurses are often the most consistent point of care, uniquely situating them to observe subtle shifts and tailor hypnotic work to complement care plans. Essential components of nursing care (providing comfort, reducing distress, building trust, and supporting behavior change) closely align with many of the goals of clinical hypnosis.

Hypnosis aligns with nursing's holistic model, offering a gentle yet powerful means of helping clients access their inner resources for healing and growth. *Holistic Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice* includes hypnosis as one of the “complementary health approaches” (American Nurses Association [ANA] & American Holistic Nurses Association [AHNA], 2019, p. 31). The ideal foundation for effective hypnosis, especially with children, is trust — a fundamental tenet of nursing care (ANA & AHNA, 2019).

Professional competency is maintained by meeting the training requirements of established certifying bodies and ensuring all practice aligns with both state regulatory guidelines and national clinical standards. Because hypnosis certification exists outside of nursing licensure, and training programs vary widely in focus, nurses are responsible for ensuring that hypnosis is practiced within their recognized scope of nursing practice as defined by their state's Board of Nursing (BON) and consistent with nursing's ethical and clinical standards.

### **PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS WITH PEDIATRIC PATIENTS & CLIENTS**

In alignment with our professional *Code of Ethics* (ANA, 2025), which upholds the principle of self-determination, it is important to recognize that age does not preclude children from actively participating in their own care. Each person is unique and not a representative of their age demographic (Yapko, 2019), so it is essential to view and assess each child as an individual. With that, and an understanding of childhood development, nurses can design an age-appropriate hypnosis treatment (Yapko, 2019). Hypnosis, which uses imagination and inner resources, can be tailored to a child's developmental stage, allowing them to feel empowered and engaged.

## **CASE STUDY: BEDWETTING**

For children with primary monosymptomatic nocturnal enuresis (bedwetting without other urinary symptoms), hypnosis offers a compelling alternative to medications and alarms. A 2024 pilot study found that an online self-hypnosis program significantly increased dry nights in children, with no reported side effects (Bayne, 2024). The approach supports the child's autonomy, strengthens body-mind communication, and eliminates shame.

Jack, a healthy 6-year-old, was brought to a nurse trained in clinical hypnosis due to persistent bedwetting. He often avoided sleepovers and showed signs of low confidence, worrying that his friends might find out. In their first session, Jack was guided to imagine a “super bladder” that activates a special brain signal (like a superhero beacon) when full. The nurse also invited Jack to picture himself wearing an invisible “cape of confidence” at night, reminding him he was strong and capable.

Over three weeks, Jack practiced bedtime self-hypnosis using imagery and breathwork, with his parents encouraging his nightly routine. By the third week, his parents reported five consecutive dry nights—something they hadn't seen in months. Jack beamed with pride, and his parents noticed not only improved sleep but also a boost in his self-assurance during daytime activities. His mother later reflected, “For the first time, Jack felt like he had control over his body. It changed how he saw himself.” This drug-free, empowering approach engaged Jack as an active participant in his healing, not a passive recipient of treatment.

## **CASE STUDY: CONFIDENCE, SELF-ESTEEM, & PERFORMANCE ANXIETY**

Children and teens navigating school, sports, and social pressures are especially vulnerable to performance anxiety and low self-esteem. Hypnosis offers a strengths-based approach to help them connect with internal resources and build resilience.

Sofia, a 14-year-old talented basketball player, struggled with anxiety before games; her stomach turned, thoughts raced, and she often froze during free throws. A nurse hypnotherapist introduced calming breathwork and guided imagery: visualizing the court as a calm, focused “zone” where she felt centered and strong. They created a personalized “mental anchor” by linking her memory of making her best shot with a simple physical cue, pressing her thumb and finger together. Sofia also practiced self-hypnosis at home, imagining herself moving fluidly on the court while staying relaxed.

After three sessions and consistent practice, Sofia not only improved her free-throw accuracy but also rediscovered her joy in playing. Her coach noticed she looked more confident and composed under pressure, and Sofia herself said, “I remembered why I love the game again.” Her father shared, “We saw the shift not just in sports, but in her whole outlook. She carried herself differently, more confident, more at ease.” Beyond basketball, Sofia began applying the same techniques during exams and presentations, carrying her new sense of calm into other areas of her life.

By respecting the child's decision-making capabilities, we reinforce their autonomy and cultivate trust within the therapeutic relationship.

### A CALL TO NURSES: RECLAIMING OUR HEALING ROLE

Nurses are often the first and most trusted point of contact for families seeking guidance on behavioral or emotional concerns. Whether used in bedside care, integrative coaching, or independent hypnotherapy practices, hypnosis fits seamlessly into the holistic nursing paradigm. There are reputable, nurse-specific certification programs in place, accompanied by national standards that recognize hypnosis as a safe, ethical, and effective tool. By acquiring skills and certification in hypnosis, we can integrate this evidence-based solution grounded in relationship, creativity, and client empowerment. It is time to integrate hypnosis more extensively into holistic nursing practice as a neuroscience-informed, child-centered intervention that honors the whole person. As holistic nurses trained in hypnosis, we have the potential to transform pediatric care, one empowered child at a time.

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**Christina “Christy” Cowgill, MNA, CRNA, PMHNP-C, NC-BC, BCH, CI**, is a board-certified hypnotherapist and certified instructor of hypnosis. Her clinical practice integrates her backgrounds in psychiatric mental health and anesthesiology, with a focus on supporting clients experiencing depression, anxiety, and chronic pain. Committed to advancing trauma-informed hypnosis education for nurses, Christy advocates for clinically grounded hypnosis training pathways and is a founding member of Calm Collective Care. Learn more at [EnterIntoCalm.com](http://EnterIntoCalm.com)



**Christine Gilchrist, PhD, MPH, RN, NC-BC, CH**, has over 20 years of nursing experience in community health, holistic healing, and higher education. In 2013, she was among the first nurse coaches board-certified by the American Holistic Nurses Credentialing Corporation. She is a founding member of Calm Collective Care, where she is a consulting hypnotist. Christine created and facilitates “Journeying Together Along Dante’s Path” which combines reflection, awareness practices, and a supportive community to help people strengthen clarity and courage. Learn more at [christinegilchrist.com](http://christinegilchrist.com)



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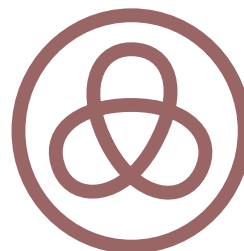
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