

Racetrack

By Katherine Franklin, PT, DPT, PhD (c)

New consult pops up on my screen

“Physical therapy, eval & treat”

Four year old male in PICU, bed three

Bronchiolitis due to RSV.

I stop by the playroom to find a toy

I need something fun for this little boy.

Tucked in the corner, it catches my eye

The latest addition from our Christmas gift drive.

A plastic racetrack and a bright red car

Whispering thanks to the donor, whoever they are

I tuck it under my arm and head onto the unit

Productivity metrics -- we better get to it.

As he sees my gloves and mask, I hear how
He lets out a small sigh and furrows his brow.
Till he catches a glimpse of the prize I've brought in
And his face breaks into the sweetest of grins.

The racetrack offers a new motivation
To say yes to rehabilitation.
Each day of that week I stop by for our session
And marvel aloud at his rapid progression.

First, he struggles to sit upright and to breathe
Then he gets out of bed with promising ease
And then he can squat and jump up and down
And push his little red car all around.

That Friday morning, I stop by to play
What I find when I get there takes my breath away.
Room three is quiet, the door is ajar
I see an empty racetrack, an overturned car.

I learn he was intubated last night,
His tiny body tried hard to fight.
The team did all that they knew how to do
Still, it wasn't enough to bring him through.

I thank the nurse, then I take a deep breath
Walk into the room, kneel down by the bed.
I feel my hands shake as I pick up the toys
And quickly I whisper a prayer for this boy.
The familiar smell of purple wipes
Hits my nose, burns my eyes.

I blink back tears as I begin cleaning
A routine task, but this time with meaning.

I set my shoulders and find my stride
Take his toys to the playroom once they've dried.
Clear space on the shelf to place them back
The little red car and the plastic racetrack.

About the Author



Katherine A. Franklin, PT, DPT, PhD(c) is a clinical assistant professor in the hybrid pathway at the University of Utah's Department of Physical Therapy and Athletic Training, teaching pediatrics and pathophysiology. She is also a PhD candidate in the School of Physical Therapy at Texas Woman's University with research interests in the intersection between disability studies and physical therapy education and practice. Katie's clinical background includes work in the neonatal and pediatric intensive care units, which helped to inspire this piece. She believes that the humanities can help us to cope with grief and loss in a deeply meaningful way.