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Play in healthcare

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Playing is central to children's physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing. When they play, children contribute to their immediate wellbeing and to their own development. There is a well-established body of solid evidence¹ that shows the contribution that play, particularly self-organised play, can make to children's long-term and immediate wellbeing, to their physical health and to their mental health and resilience.

To children themselves, playing is one of the most important aspects of their lives – they value time, freedom and quality places to play. For children who experience serious illness and hospital treatment, play has a positive impact on wellbeing and their ability to cope with fear, pain, and treatment.²

The wellbeing of children and teenagers who are patients in hospitals, hospices, accident and emergency units, outpatient clinics or undergoing procedures at home can be supported by the provision of play. Play and appropriate therapeutic play strategies should be embedded within the child's care plan and seen as a vital and routine part of a child's admission. As play is vital to a child's healthy growth and development it is acknowledged that when children undergo medical and surgical procedures, ensuring access to play is maintained carries great significance.

Hospital stays and healthcare visits will have positive physical and medical outcomes for children's health. However, these experiences create a sense of uncertainty and children and their families may experience a sense of displacement³ and stress. The 2018 International Play Association's *Access to Play for Children in Situations of Crisis* toolkit notes that, 'in situations of crisis, stress, weakened physical and emotional development, feelings of lack of control and loss of trust steadily multiply if children lack everyday opportunities for play'.⁴

Illness in children may impact on their play behaviour, particularly if there is a long period of illness or if they need to undergo treatment in hospital. The need to play continues during illness. However, some aspects of hospitalisation, such as an unfamiliar setting, separation from family and friends and frightening procedures may cause stress and anxiety for children.

Children with chronic illnesses may receive treatment as outpatients, and make frequent visits over long periods of time, in community settings such as hospices and outpatient clinics. Their continued need to play should be provided for. Illnesses and conditions such as asthma, diabetes or eczema may result in children experiencing social and emotional difficulties because of missing time from social situations such as school and play and recreational activity.

Starlight Children's Foundation, the UK charity for children's play in healthcare, has gathered data, research and evidence⁵ to show that play in health care situations can:

- create an environment where stress and anxiety is reduced
- lessen children's fear of pain during procedures
- help children understand treatment and illness
- support children to regain a sense of confidence
- strengthen family wellbeing and relationships
- speed recovery and rehabilitation
- have more positive experiences of healthcare
- reduce the length of hospital stays and the need for more appointments.



The play in healthcare workforce

Play in healthcare is a broad term used to describe the provision of therapeutic and specialised play, organised as a distinct service and delivered by skilled, professional health play staff within hospitals and other healthcare settings where children are cared for, both as inpatients and outpatients. Recreational and leisure opportunities will also be provided to children to support their stay.

Health play teams are made up of play specialists, senior play specialists, playworkers, play assistants/leaders, youth workers and a play service manager. The play service manager is often qualified, very experienced or has undertaken other management training.

Health play specialists – skilled, qualified and registered clinical support professionals who use therapeutic play to safeguard children's emotional and mental health during treatment and procedures, through their healthcare journeys.

Health playworkers – healthcare professionals who have undertaken and hold a playwork qualification. They have a good understanding of child development and hold responsibility for providing and facilitating general, developmental and normalising play activities in hospitals and other healthcare settings.

Health play assistants and play leaders – healthcare professionals who also have an understanding of child development. They support the provision and facilitation of general, developmental and normalising play activities in hospitals and other healthcare settings.

Hospital youth workers, youth support workers and youth co-ordinators – professionals who ensure teenagers receive age-appropriate support, have their individual needs assessed, and refer resources and services that align with their interests and needs. A youth worker is essential in supporting a young person into adult care, if required.

Health play interventions

Health play specialists, as fully integrated members of health professional teams support children and families to better understand illness and treatment through a number of play interventions:

Pre-admission support allows the health play specialist to build a relationship of trust with a child who has an imminent planned procedure. This is also referred to as preparation, desensitisation or gradual exposure play. The child is provided with a suitable description of the treatment planned and allowed to ask questions and raise concerns.

The hospital play specialist, usually working with a member of the health professional teams, will work with the child to identify how they might work together to make the treatment more manageable. This allows the child to gain a level of control over the procedure and the hospital play specialist can gently explain what is expected of the child during it.

Creating a procedure plan as part of this will help put the child's voice and choices into their healthcare journey. When a hospital play specialist engages with a child prior to treatment, they are often seen as a trusted member of the team and are sometimes present during procedures to make the child feel more at ease.

Normalising play helps children to relax through experiencing familiar play opportunities. A health play specialist will use this type of intervention both on a one-to-one basis and through the provision of group activities in a playroom or other play space, or at the bedside if more appropriate.

Preparatory play supports children and families to understand and accept treatment. Providing resources, which support, for instance, role play with medical equipment or puppets will help children co-operate with upcoming treatment. A co-operative child is more likely to have a more positive experience, as procedures are likely to be carried out quickly and without overwhelming fear.

Distraction and diversionary techniques contribute towards helping children to develop a coping strategy during a procedure or treatment. Some methods include the passive use of bubbles, singing, stories, books, fidgets or visual reality devices.

Health play specialists might also support children through the use of active breathing exercises or guided imagery. This involves asking the child to imagine a fun or pleasant situation. A child is supported prior to treatment to think about a pleasant situation then during treatment, the child is supported to concentrate on that image. This technique is most effective when children have been well-prepared for their procedure through the pre-admission interventions.

During treatment, the hospital play specialist will ask questions, such as What can you hear? or What's that in front of you?, to support the child to be in control of the imagery. This technique is useful when the treatment requires the child to remain still. The visualisation technique can also be used, in particular, when speaking is difficult.

Post-procedural support and play is particularly important following an unexpected or emergency procedure and for working through any misconceptions and misunderstandings when preparation has taken place. The health play specialist will sensitively engage with the child and health professional teams to identify any fears or misunderstandings they may have.

Through ensuring **free access to a range of resources** (such as sand, play dough, building blocks and art materials), either in a playroom or at the bedside, the hospital play specialist provides the opportunity for children to explore difficult issues at their own pace and with materials of their choice. Being allowed to create something and destroy it or tear it up can support children to face fear and anger without explicitly discussing these feelings.⁶ For all children, the hospital experience can be made easier and normalised by bringing in familiar items from home.

Sibling support can be an important aspect of health play services, particularly in settings that care for children with long-term or life limiting conditions. Siblings will sometimes face the hospitalisation or treatment of a brother or sister with some level of difficulty. They may resent the attention their sick sibling receives, worry that they may get ill and they may miss having them around. As health play teams have knowledge and experience of the importance of play with all children, they are well placed to support siblings.

This support may occur in free play sessions in the hospital playroom or through one-to-one sessions where children can explore their feelings and concerns. Sibling support is facilitated well in a children's hospice, where groups are used to bring together children who are sharing the same experiences as well as one to one work.

The importance of the playroom and space for older children

Hospital playrooms are incredibly important. The most obvious benefits are the availability of a range of opportunities, resources and space for children to play, to engage with one another, cope with the stress of their illness or hospital stay and have fun.

Hospital playrooms provide a safe space for children where they know that procedures do not take place. Equally important is the strong message a hospital playroom conveys. The presence of and access to a hospital playroom suggests that children have permission to play. It recognises that time and space for play are vitally needed and contributes to children realising their right to play as recognised in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Sensory spaces and equipment are beneficial for children of all ages and should also feature as part of quality healthcare provision. These help develop senses (sight, smell, hearing, movement, touch), hand-eye coordination and language development. They create a calm environment which can alleviate stress and anxiety, helping patients and their families relax.

For older children and teenagers, access to space for their rest, relaxation and recreation is also important. Activities like playing board games, video games, or card games, as well as listening to music, watching movies, or engaging in creative activities like art, writing or crafting can be beneficial.⁷

The *Playing and being well* literature review, published by Play Wales, discusses how video games can help children's experiences of illness and hospitalisation.



There is some therapeutic value since they allow those with limited mobility and energy to play. Playing video games can help reduce nausea and anxiety and generally enhance positive affect, and carry the potential for further benefits.⁸ There is evidence for the usefulness of ‘serious’ video games (that is, video games designed to develop specific skills or teach concepts), which can operate as a complement or alternative to other therapies for children and teenagers with anxiety or depression⁹ and also as part of treatment for autistic children or those with ADHD. Commercially available energetic games (such as Wii) were found to be helpful for children with developmental co-ordination disorder (DCD) and autistic children.

Outdoor space

Access to outdoor play spaces can be incredibly important to sick children as it can provide a solace from unfamiliar and sometimes unsettling hospital wards. Playing outdoors contributes to a range of health and wellbeing outcomes, including:

- increased muscular strength and aerobic fitness
- increased agility, range of motion, flexibility, co-ordination and balance, and decreased fatigue, stress and depression
- lowered blood pressure in children with hypertension (especially for aerobic activity), and improvements in levels of cholesterol and bone density
- increased blood flow and oxygen intake
- improved mental health
- improved self-esteem and cognitive functioning.

Play informed practice: using play to support children when they are receiving medical care in outpatient clinics

Medical appointments and clinical procedures are likely to cause some trauma and uncertainty for children, impacting on their emotional wellbeing. Incorporating play can help alleviate the impact and contribute to immediate wellbeing and to long-term improvements in children’s lives. It:

- helps children understand medical terms
- distracts children from uncomfortable or worrying treatments
- improves cooperation during procedures.

Using the power of play to support children to better cope with medical care

Responsive allied health practitioners who understand the need for play can support children to better cope with medical care.

Allow children to self-organise their play

Trauma often involves a loss of control over our circumstances. Allowing children the freedom to choose how and what they play can restore a sense of control. Play that is not overly structured by adults can empower children to make decisions that contribute to their own healing and wellbeing. It reinforces their independence and can help rebuild their confidence.

Top tip: try to allow children to decide what games to play, which toys and resources to use and how to engage with you in a playful way.

Creating a play-friendly environment

Child and play-friendly environments – or lack of them – affect the healthy development of children. A play informed approach lends itself well to a holistic approach to providing care for children of all ages.

Top tip: toys, storybooks, games and puzzles can relieve anxiety and will help children cope with what is happening.

Top tip: using basic distraction resources, such as textured squishy balls, dolls, soft toys, fabric or bubbles, can put children at ease.

Top tip: simple games, such as ‘I spy’ or memory games, might help children cope with procedures.

Top tip: music or sounds from nature will also contribute to a calm atmosphere.

Top tip: encourage small world play – sand or sensory trays, building blocks, puppets, dolls and other figures help children understand their stories through imaginary characters.

Children in hospital or receiving treatment for long term illnesses face particular challenges including separation from family and peers, new and unfamiliar environments, disruption to routines and discomfort and pain.¹⁰ Playing is essential to the health and happiness of children and it should be given priority when children are ill.

All children staying in hospital or receiving long term health care should have daily access to a health play specialist – a trusted advocate who, through the provision of a rich play environment¹¹ will ensure that children receive time, space and permission to realise their right to play.

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Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children's right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.