

THE  
IMPORTANCE  
OF  
**PLAY**  
IN HOSPITAL  
2021

# THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN HOSPITAL 2021

One unexpected consequence of the pandemic over the last 18 months is the heightened awareness of the importance of play for the wellbeing and mental health of children and young people. We have seen the negative consequences of children spending less time playing together and there are already new initiatives to address these.

Sadly, for children in hospital access to play and play professionals is a permanent problem which has undoubtedly been exacerbated by Covid and needs an ongoing concerted effort to resolve.

We know that children need access to play as a crucial part of their development and to help them cope with life's challenges. This is never more important than when they face the anxiety and uncertainty of serious illness, long-term conditions and hospital stays. Yet our recent research shows that **more than half of all hospitals have no budget for play and a third of hospitals do not have dedicated play professionals.**

During National Play in Hospital Week 2021 we want to highlight the vital importance of play in hospital for children's wellbeing and recovery; the need for more research and for more equitable access to play across the UK; and the importance of play professionals as we celebrate our Health Play Specialist of the Year Awards.

This year we strengthen our team with two new appointments, Laura Walsh, previously Head of Play at Great Ormond Street Hospital, and Adrian Voce, the Founding Director of Play England. Their experience and expertise, together with our research evidence and insight, will enable Starlight to lead the way in developing new services and ensuring that the voices of children and young people and their need for play in hospital are heard.

**Cathy Gilman** – Starlight CEO

## National Play in Hospital Week

Each year, Starlight celebrates the importance of play in hospitals and the work of those Play Specialists in UK healthcare settings who protect play for our most vulnerable children. National Play in Hospital Week highlights the contribution of the unsung heroes of the NHS and champions the need for better provision of play and play resources.

This report details how Starlight services support the treatment and recovery of children but it also focuses on the lack of provision in some health settings. During National Play in Hospital Week, we hear from the families who experience both ends of this spectrum; those who know that a trained and well-resourced Play Specialist is a lifeline who can make the difference in whether their child experiences a quick, full and holistic recovery to those who have not had access to the benefits of play.

Using the Power of Play in hospitals alleviates boredom, allows for the continuation of education, and provides mental stimulation; all things that we take for granted, even as adults. Investing in play can also have a positive economic impact for the NHS and improve health outcomes for children seeing reduced anxiety, better communication between patients and health professionals and, in some circumstances, a reduced need for intervention and sedation.

“ The nurses and the play specialists, honest to God they're the real superheroes because I don't think he would have gotten through it without them... I owe them so much. There were 20 kids on that ward I believe, there were 20 beds. The way they work, they made me feel like my son was the only one.”





## **The Importance of Play in Hospital**

Starlight knows that play is fundamental to children's positive development and for their ability to develop the skills they need. Play offers physical, emotional and social benefits that allow children and young people to develop the motor skills which are vital for everyday physical activity; to experiment with social behaviour and to better navigate their world.

Children in hospital can face obstacles that negatively impact play, and this can then affect their development beyond the illness itself. Giving children undergoing treatment or long-term illness access to play helps with resilience, supports healthy development, and enables children to better cope with the negative consequences of their illness. It can also help to support and strengthen a family even in the most challenging circumstances.



The child's right to play is enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is nearly 50 years since the Department of Health recommended the employment of play staff in children's wards and nearly 20 years since they stated that children staying in hospital should have daily access to a play specialist and that the therapeutic purpose of play should be included in their care plan. Inequalities in provision remain and still impact the experience of children in hospital. We know that a positive experience of hospital reported by parents and children is linked to having access to staff to play with and having enough things to do.

The 1,500 responses to our feedback surveys show that the majority of health professionals believe the resources for play that Starlight delivers improve children's experience of hospital and make it more fun. In response to some of our services, almost 100% of health professionals stated that our resources made that difference.

Four out of five health professionals using Starlight's services believe our resources for play improve wellbeing.

In the last three years Starlight has built a strong research and insights function which has conducted a literature review of 138 publications on play in hospital and during serious illness (see Cabrita Gulyurtlu et. al, 2020). The team consulted with 50 children with serious illnesses and interviewed parents on their experiences of illness and hospital treatment. Over 80% of the responses received have told us that play has a significant impact in improving wellbeing.

Hospitalisation can be a distressing experience for the whole family. Without play, hospitalisation is often a stressful experience for children which can cause long-lasting anxiety associated with treatment. Children and families we have spoken to often tell us hospitalisation can be a very lonely and isolating experience.

“ When I go to hospital I don't like to talk about it much because I get very nervous, especially if they need to take blood. I don't like needles!”





We found that if children continue having negative associations with being in hospital, these experiences and memories can impact on their ability to cope with future treatment. When we looked at the intersectionality between hospitalisation and other factors like deprivation and disadvantage, we found that these children and families were more likely to be in hospital and more likely to have a compounding negative experience, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.



Play is a valuable resource to the NHS and is integral to supporting the wellbeing of children and young people through serious illness and hospital treatment, by:

- Enabling children and young people to have a more positive experience of hospital and making it a fun place to be.
- Reducing anxiety, fear and stress associated with being in hospital.
- Reducing a child's feeling of pain associated with hospital treatment which can in turn sometimes reduce the need for sedation.
- Helping children and young people in hospitals build resilience which helps them to cope and be better engaged with treatment.
- Giving children their sense of control and autonomy back, which is often lost through illness and hospitalisation.
- Strengthening family wellbeing and relationships.
- Helping to improve children and young people's engagement with treatment, leading to better recovery.
- Improving the rapport between the health professional, child and family.

Play improves the delivery of healthcare to children in the NHS, their outcomes, wellbeing, and recovery and also has the potential to save the NHS money in doing so. Research undertaken by Starlight using CQC data (see Cabrita Gulyurtlu, 2020) found that having someone to play with, and enough things to do in hospital have a significant impact on a child having a more positive experience of hospital (CQC, 2018) by reducing anxiety and distress, improving the delivery of treatment and children's health outcomes.

Despite the significant impact of play for children, their parents and the NHS, there are inequalities in the provision of play in hospital settings and access and opportunities for play can be very limited. This is why it is important to raise awareness of play in hospital and the vital role played by play professionals.

**Play is important.**

**Play is invaluable.**

**Play is vital.**



## Half of children do not have access to play when in hospital

In the most recent CQC survey of 33,179 children and young people in hospital in England (2018), they reported poorer experiences in being able to play and having enough to do. Amongst children aged 8 to 11 that responded to this survey, 39% stated that staff did not play with them. Half of all children and young people that responded to the survey said that there were not enough things to do in hospital. The data gathered by CQC showed a significant variation in children's experience of hospital across the country. These findings are supported by Starlight's own research.

“ I used to like having music therapists or clown doctors come in, but they only go to the big hospitals so if I'm in our local hospital I don't often get to see anyone and it's just me and mum for days.”

**Child supported by Starlight**





Opportunities and the quality of play in hospitals is a postcode lottery across the UK. In addition to CQC’s (2018) survey of children in hospital, Starlight’s own data has shown that half of the hospitals and other health providers using our services do not have a budget allocated for play.

### Range of Different Play Budgets Across the UK



Survey of Starlight Service users. April 2020-July 2021.

Of the 510 hospitals, hospices and other health organisations we work with, 29% said they did not have a budget but fundraised for it, and 18% said they were given a budget for resources for play. However, the majority of hospitals across the UK do not have funding for play. **In organisations supported by Starlight, 53% stated that they had no budget for resources for play.** Of the 135 organisations that had funds for play, more than 60% had a budget of less than £500 for the whole year. We have also been told that in cases where funding is not available, play specialists will fund the purchase of resources for play themselves.

The organisations that had annual play budgets of £5k or more were all of the larger and mainly children’s hospitals. This variation in play across hospitals was also observed by children and their parents. Families we have spoken to often commented on the disparity of resources for play in different hospitals during their stay.



## Starlight is the main provider of resources for play in hospital

For 25 years Starlight has used the power of play to make the experience of illness and treatment better for children and their families. In the last year alone and despite the challenges of the pandemic we have delivered resources to a variety of health professionals in over 500 hospitals and other health establishments from phlebotomists to radiographers to nurses, as well as play specialists. Having seen the impact that play can have in hospital through these health professionals, we believe that all health professionals across the UK should have a basic level of understanding and competence in the importance and use of play in delivering treatment and care to children in hospital.

Over the last five years we have provided resources for play to over 800 health care providers. Based on the feedback we receive, our play services in hospital have been accessed over 1million times by children and young people across the UK. Our first-hand experience of the life changing impact of play in hospital and our relationships with health professionals, children, young people and their families across the UK places Starlight in a unique position to represent the importance of play for the wellbeing of children in hospital and make sure the voices of children are heard.





## The importance of Play Specialists

The importance of play in hospital is enshrined throughout health policy and practice. It is recommended by NICE (2021) the Care Quality Commission (2014), the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education and the Department of Health (DoH, 2003; National Children's Bureau, 2005) as being integral to promoting children's wellbeing in hospital, and, is endorsed as an essential aspect of a child's treatment and palliative care (Chambers, 2018; Villanueva et al., 2016).

### The champions of play in hospital

Central to enabling play in hospital are Health Play Specialists (HPS). Health Play Specialism is defined as the professional delivery of play in hospital for children and young people undergoing medical treatment. Health Play Specialists primarily seek to offer children play on a daily basis, upholding each child's right to play and acknowledging that play supports development, is child-directed and takes many forms. In an environment that can be frightening and overwhelming for children, play can provide comfort. It can also allow both an assessment of a child's wellbeing, and the establishment of a relationship of trust. This formation of trust can facilitate further support by the HPS during invasive procedures.

“ Sometimes I think, I don't know what I would do without them [HPS] being there. Sometimes even for myself to think, right, so this is what my daughter's going to get done and this is what it's going to look like. Especially if it's a new hospital.”





We know that play in hospital and health play specialism have a significant impact on a child's experience of hospital and treatment, their wellbeing and recovery, (see Perasso et al, 2021; Cabrita et al., 2020, Kourkorikos et al, 2015 and Tonkin, 2014). In March 2021, an international consortium of experts in play in hospitals which included Starlight, published an article showcasing the importance of play specialism in hospital (see Perasso et al, 2021). This article set out five reasons why it is important to have a play specialist in hospitals:

1. Health Play Specialists improve children's wellbeing.
2. Children need less sedation for pain management.
3. Children are more likely to engage with medical treatment.
4. Play is an essential part of palliative care.
5. Play in hospitals can result in long-term savings for hospitals.

The importance of play specialists is also understood from the parents and children who directly benefit from their work. Families supported by Starlight have told us about the vital role and importance of Play Specialists for their wellbeing in hospital.

“ The nurses and the play specialists, honest to God they're the real superheroes because I swear to God I don't think he would have gotten through it without them... I owe them so much. There were 20 kids on that ward I believe, there were 20 beds. The way they work, they made me feel like my son was the only one.”

Children and parents have highlighted how Play Specialists have a big impact on improving their experience. HPS are often the ones who provide a welcome distraction from treatment, explain procedures in easy-to-understand language, help them feel more relaxed, supported, less stressed, and even let them have fun in hospital.

Despite the importance of the role of the HPS being recognised as integral to the delivery of medical treatment in hospital by NICE, the CQC and DoH, the impact of this role is often overlooked, there is not enough awareness of the importance and impact of this profession.

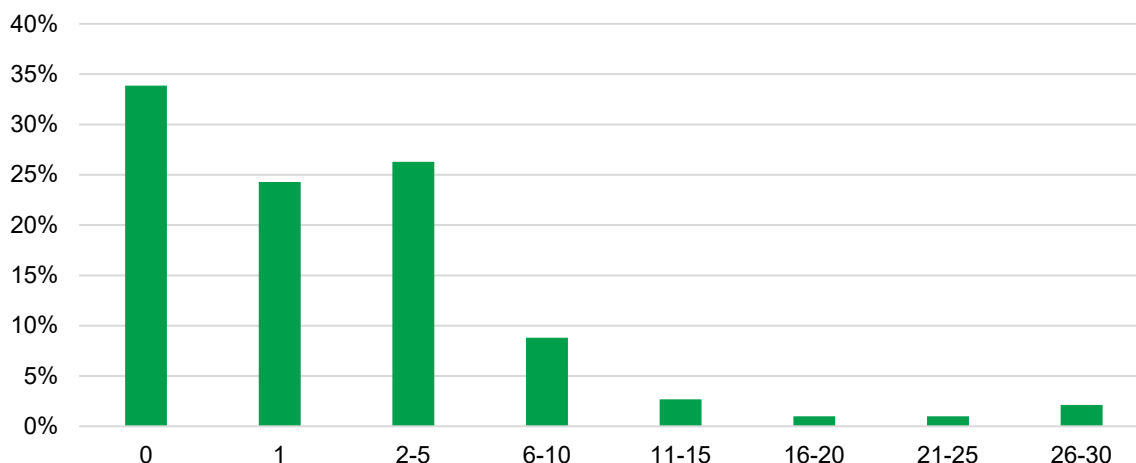




## Over a third of hospitals do not have a Play Specialist

Despite the importance of HPS of the almost 500 hospitals and hospices that apply for Starlight services, under two thirds have a play specialist. Although having a play specialist has a significant impact, over a third of the hospitals, hospices and others we support had no play specialists, and just over half of these organisations had between 1-5 play specialists.

### The size of play teams in different organisations receiving Starlight services across the UK



Organisations that had more than 20 play specialists tended to be larger children’s hospitals. Although there is an increasing widespread understanding of the importance of play and play specialism, there are many hospitals that have few or even no play specialists at all. This will limit children’s access to play in hospital.





## Starlight and the Importance of Play in Hospital

For children in hospital, access to play and play professionals is a permanent problem - exacerbated by Covid - which needs an ongoing concerted effort to resolve. Working across the UK, Starlight has a unique opportunity to lead the way and over the coming months we will focus on four key areas to make the most of the expertise of our new team members:

### Four priorities for Starlight

1. Research to understand where play is most needed.
2. Proactive service delivery to hospitals in most need.
3. Raise the profile of the importance of Health Play Specialists.
4. Represent the voices of children and young people, their parents and health professionals.

### 1. Research to understand where play is needed most

We, with others, have successfully managed to pull together the paucity of existing evidence on the importance and impact of play in hospital but a focused effort is now needed to fully understand where the gaps and inequalities in access to play in hospital are across the UK. To achieve this, we will extend our research to deepen our understanding of:

- the number of play specialists in each hospital/ward and aim to have play specialists included as a separate category in the NHS staff census
- the budget/resources for play in each hospital/ward with services for children and young people
- the models and types of play being delivered
- the impact this is having on outcomes for children in hospital.

Starlight is about to launch a study into the extent and nature of play in hospital in the UK, and we are asking health professionals, Hospitals, Trusts, Boards and CCGs to support us in mapping the extent and nature of play in hospital in the UK. This evidence will be shared and used to develop new services; and identify ways in which Starlight can ensure children and young people's voices are heard by play budget decision-makers in hospitals.



## **2. Proactive service delivery to hospitals that are most in need**

There are 750,000 disabled children and nearly 100,000 with a serious, life-limiting illness in the UK. Poverty exacerbates the impact of serious illness. We know that some children are more likely to be admitted to hospital and have a more negative experience than others. These include children with long-term complex conditions, younger children, BAME children and children living in households in areas of higher deprivation. Our aim is to reduce the inequalities in access to play between hospitals, therefore improving the hospital experience and wellbeing of children in areas of most need. To achieve this we use UK Government Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and Care Quality Commission Data on hospital experience of parents and children to identify hospitals which would most benefit from our support, prioritising those which haven't already received Starlight services.

In each hospital we connect with a person responsible for ensuring the services are used and who can give valuable feedback to improve our understanding of the unique circumstances and challenges of each hospital so that we can tailor our service offer accordingly. Our aim is to expand our proactive service delivery.

## **3. Raise the profile of the importance of Health Play Specialists**

As part of National Play in Hospital Week, Starlight recognises play professionals who embody the power of play in hospitals. We award the titles of Health Play Specialist of the Year and Play Team of the Year to raise the profile of HPS and introduce the specialism of Health Play to audiences who may not previously been aware of its presence in the health service. Research this year has shown that recognition of the importance of the role of HPS might be better achieved by international (or even national) consensus around both the title and the role. Lack of agreed international guidelines leads to fragmentation of the role in theory and practice and specific training and educational standards which are also recommended by the National Association of Health Play Specialists (NAHPS) would help to support recognition of the importance of the role.

Working in partnership with NAHPS this year we plan to pilot Starlight Health Professionals, bringing together recognised training and education; play expertise and participative research capability. This will help contribute to the development of recognised standards for Health Play Specialists as well as plug some of the gaps in access to play professionals that many children and their families experience.



#### **4. Represent the voices of children and young people, their parents and health professionals**

Over the last three years our research has transformed our understanding of why play is important to children's wellbeing; the barriers to play for children with serious illness and long-term conditions and what really matters to children, parents, and health professionals. It has also become evident that there are significant inequalities in access to and provision of play between hospitals and that children in some areas are experiencing play deprivation.

The child's right to play is enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is nearly 50 years since the Department of Health recommended the employment of play staff in children's wards and nearly 20 years since they stated that children staying in hospital should have daily access to a play specialist and that the therapeutic purpose of play should be included in their care plan. Inequalities in provision remain and still impact the experience of children in hospital.

We know from Care Quality Commission data that a positive experience of hospital reported by parents and children is linked to having access to staff to play with and having enough things to do. Our ambition is to be the Protector of Play for seriously ill children and children with long-term conditions. While we ensure that children have access to play activities and develop ways to improve access to play professionals, our newly appointed Head of Policy and Public Affairs, Adrian Voce, will shape a new function at Starlight to support children and families with lived experience, to make their voices heard and raise awareness of their experience, influencing decision-makers and proposing solutions to bring about change.



**THANK YOU**

We would like to thank the children, parents and health professionals who have generously shared their experience of play in hospital; the many people who expertly integrate Starlight services in to play activities for children in hospital and the very many people, companies, trusts & foundations who make all of this vital work possible through their generous support. We would also like to recognise the incredible resilience of the Starlight team over the last 18 months and the relentless determination to improve the wellbeing of seriously ill children and their families despite the myriad personal and professional challenges of living and working through a pandemic.





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