



# The Power of Play is Magic

## Why Play in Hospital matters



**Children  
In Hospital**  
Ireland (CIH)



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In Hospital**  
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Making hospital a happier place through play and advocacy

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## Why Play in Hospital?

Children in Hospital Ireland (CIH) has championed play in hospital for over 50 years. Play in hospital is vitally important for children when they are in hospital. It provides a normalising experience in a stressful situation, increasing their resilience and ability to cope with their illness. For children in hospital play is one of the few opportunities for them to have control over some aspect of their care.

Catherine Matthews, Principal Clinical Psychologist, Children's Health Ireland at Crumlin says,

"For children play is the journey to developing resilience in their lives and maintaining and accessing their mental health"

Rachel Griffin, Hospital Play Specialist, Cork University Hospital adds,

"Play can give a child control back...by giving them that playfulness you will empower them to be an active participant in their treatment"

Play can also aid treatment and recovery. Rachel Griffin shares a heart-warming story about the positive impact that play had for a young girl who needed her burns dressing changed.

"This little girl was very upset, and she was refusing to let the nurses or doctors go near the bandage because it was stuck...Through play that little girl took the bandage off herself, she saved herself having to get more medicine, she did so while she laughed and giggled, she didn't feel the pain...play had that really powerful effect for her"

Play is also important for supporting development and learning. Tracy Holmes' son Freddie spent several months in Children's Health Ireland at Crumlin. Tracy says,

"With the challenges we faced we really understood how important play was, how much it stimulates, how much they actually and grow and develop through play"

The benefits of play in hospital impacts the entire family. According to Catherine Matthews play offers a pillar of support for parents, alleviating some of the pressure they face. The provision of high-quality play in hospital allows parents to 'feel safe enough to attend to other children at home' and to 'focus on their own personal care'.

Play also helps to normalise the childhood illness experience for families, with Rachel Griffin sharing one anecdote about how play enabled a family to see 'their little boy as a little boy' rather than as a patient undergoing difficult treatment.

The facilitation of play in hospital requires the input of trained and appropriately qualified Hospital Play Specialists. Lorraine Smith, Hospital Play Specialist, Children's Health Ireland explains the philosophy guiding this role,

"I want that child to leave with less stress. If they've had a positive experience the first time around, the next visit is not going to be as bad. We always have to think about the child"

Rachel Griffin expands on the positive impact that the intervention of Hospital Play Specialists has for parents,

"When they see somebody coming in and playing with their child and they see the fun factor coming back that also helps the parents to relax and go back to being a playful parent. That's the side to parenting that's very hard to do in a hospital environment"

Children in Hospital Ireland provide an extensive volunteer play service across Ireland, with over 400 trained volunteers. Catherine Matthews emphasises the positive impact of the play volunteers,

"I never really used to like the colour red but when our play volunteers come on the wards it is a great colour to see coming...I can feel myself sigh, these children are going to be getting a gift now, this whole new atmosphere is coming in"

Tracy Holmes discusses the vital support the Children in Hospital Ireland volunteers provided to her family,

"I'm getting a bit emotional just thinking about it. They are just amazing. They don't get enough credit. We really wouldn't have got through our time in Crumlin without their services"

Play in hospital is not an add-on, it is a vital part of the healthcare journey and should not be overlooked and neglected. The importance of play is eloquently captured by the words of Catherine Matthews,

"Play is not a luxury. Play is an essential coping tool and strategy"

# The State of Play in Hospital in Ireland

The right of the child to play is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This right cannot be diminished when a child is in hospital.

There are, however, significant barriers which prevent the full attainment of this right when children are in hospital in Ireland. Joining the Dots, a 2018 report on an initiative to hear the views of children in hospital, indicated that 30% of 6–11-year-old children in hospitals did not think that they had adequate things to do when in hospital; furthermore, an average of 34% of 12–17-year-olds said there was nothing to do in hospital for young people. The report also highlighted staff concerns about recreational facilities, highlighting that ‘there are not enough facilities for children of different ages’.[1]

Children in Hospital Ireland (CIH) carried out a survey of hospital play specialists in February 2022, revealing many of the challenges faced. This survey builds on CIH’s internal knowledge, informed by several decades of experience providing a volunteer-led hospital play service across the country.

The findings of the survey indicate that there is an under-investment in the provision of qualified hospital play specialists and that many smaller paediatric units have no play specialists. Whilst CIH provides a volunteer play service, this is not a substitute for trained professionals.

There is currently no hospital play specialist training course on the island of Ireland, with people required to travel to Britain to access training. This is despite a commitment made in the 2004 National Play Policy to develop a third-level course in Ireland, with a target date of 2004. The majority of respondents to the CIH survey stated that there are inadequate opportunities for the on-going professional development of play specialists in Ireland.

Covid-19 measures have limited the type of play available to children in hospital. A majority of respondents reported that fewer play materials were available as well as more restrictions regarding which children can access play. There has also been an increase in 1:1 play. A significant concern raised by hospital play specialists, and shared by CIH, is the loss of many playrooms, which have been repurposed for other medical and administrative purposes. It is vital that these spaces be restored to their intended purpose.

There is a pressing need for a new National Play Strategy. The strategy should recognise the wide range of settings in which play can occur, including hospitals and care facilities, and place an obligation on providers to develop adequate and appropriate facilities and ensure adequate staffing to support the facilitation of play

## Notes

[1] [https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/JoiningtheDots\\_Report\\_June2018.pdf](https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2018/06/JoiningtheDots_Report_June2018.pdf)

# Children in Hospital Ireland Recommendations



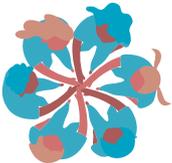
Develop a new National Play Strategy and include updated information on play available in hospital settings



Develop a third-level hospital play specialist course on the island of Ireland



Working with Children's Health Ireland, the HSE, and hospital management to ensure all playrooms are restored to their intended purpose



Invest in staffing, facilities and equipment for play in hospital