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5th August 2026 National Play Day – Play is not a luxury, it is essential healthcare

Every year, National Play Day celebrates the importance of play in children's lives. While often associated with recreation and enjoyment, play within healthcare serves a far greater purpose. The Association of British Paediatric Nurses (ABPN) on National Play Day 2026 highlights the critical role therapeutic play and health play specialists have in improving outcomes, experiences and wellbeing for children and young people across all healthcare settings, including acute, outpatient and community services. As healthcare increasingly shifts closer to home, it is essential that children and young people have access to developmentally appropriate play support wherever care is delivered.

Play is recognised as a fundamental right of every child under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child[1]. Within healthcare, play is increasingly recognised as an evidence-based intervention that helps children and young people understand their experiences, reduce anxiety, build resilience and actively engage in their care[2]. Supporting parents and families to participate in play activities with their children is vitally important.

Play supporting better healthcare outcomes

The impact of therapeutic play extends far beyond making hospital visits more enjoyable. Health play specialists support children and young people to:

- Understand illnesses, investigations and treatments
- Reduce anxiety before procedures and interventions
- Develop coping strategies during challenging experiences
- Improve emotional wellbeing and confidence
- Increase engagement with healthcare plans
- Promote developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed care

Play is often described as the brain's favourite way of learning, communicating and connecting. Through play, children can process information, express emotions,

[1] United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31).

[2] Starlight Children's Foundation. *Health Play Services Research and Resources*.

rehearse difficult situations and develop a sense of control in an environment that may otherwise feel overwhelming.

Practical examples can be seen across NHS services.

- Many children can learn to swallow tablets from as young as three years of age with appropriate support and preparation. Learning this important life skill can increase independence, improve medicine adherence and reduce the stress associated with liquid medications, benefiting both families and healthcare services.
- Similarly, health play specialists have been instrumental in supporting children undergoing MRI scans without general anaesthesia.
- A recent quality improvement project demonstrated that 82% of MRI scans were successfully completed with health play specialist support. Preparation sessions helped children feel less anxious, improve their understanding of the procedure and develop effective coping strategies. Families overwhelmingly reported positive experiences, with all respondents agreeing that health play specialist support reduced anxiety and was appropriate for their child's age and level of understanding.

  The project also demonstrated wider healthcare benefits, contributing to a 60 reduction in the general anaesthetic MRI waiting list whilst generating significant cost savings for the NHS.

  MRI Health Play Specialist Quality Improvement Project (Local NHS Trust Audit, 2023–2024).

Play services remain unevenly available

Despite growing evidence and national recognition, access to health play services remains inconsistent across the United Kingdom.

The NHS and Starlight Play Well Toolkit[3] highlight significant variation in the availability of health play services, workforce shortages and inequalities in access. Recent national work has identified the need for greater investment, stronger leadership and a more consistent approach to embedding play across healthcare systems.

The Play Well Standards developed by the Society of Health Play Specialists[4] provide a framework for delivering high-quality health play services, including clear governance, workforce development, leadership, quality improvement and meaningful involvement of children and young people in service design.

The recently published National Cancer Plan for England[5] also recognises the importance of therapeutic play, youth support and psychosocial care as essential components of developmentally appropriate healthcare for children and young people.

[3] NHS England & Starlight. *Play Well Toolkit*.

[4] Society of Health Play Specialists (SOHPS). *Play Well Standards*.

[5] National Cancer Plan for England (2026) – Children and Young People's Cancer Recommendations.

The Association of British Paediatric Nurses calls on Government and health leaders to:

- Recognise therapeutic play as an essential healthcare intervention, not an optional extra.
- Invest in the health play specialist workforce to meet growing demand.
- Support implementation of the NHS and Starlight Play Well Toolkit across all health care provision that children access.
- Ensure equitable access to health play services for all children and young people.
- Embed developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed care across healthcare settings.
- Strengthen collaboration between nurses, health play specialists and multidisciplinary teams.
- Include health play services within future NHS workforce planning and service development.

Jessica Semedo, Roald Dahl Transition Nurse Specialist and Association of British Paediatric Nurses member says:

"Children and young people do not experience healthcare through clinical procedures alone. They experience it through relationships, communication, environment and how safe they feel throughout their journey.

For many children, hospitals can be unfamiliar and overwhelming places. Alongside illness, they may be navigating anxiety, sensory overload, uncertainty and a loss of control. What feels routine to healthcare professionals can feel frightening to a child.

Health play specialists help bridge that gap. Through therapeutic play, preparation and trusted relationships, they create opportunities for children and young people to understand what is happening, express their feelings and develop coping strategies that support both their emotional wellbeing and clinical outcomes.

Play is often misunderstood as simply a recreational activity. In reality, it is a powerful healthcare intervention that reduces anxiety, builds confidence, supports development and improves experiences for children, young people and families. National Play Day reminds us that play should not be viewed as a privilege within healthcare, but as a standard component of high-quality paediatric care."

Notes for editors

- The term *child* refers to infants, children, young people and young adults up to 25 years of age.
- National Play Day is an annual celebration promoting the importance of play in children's lives, wellbeing and development.

- Health play specialists are registered professionals who use therapeutic play and activity-based interventions to support children and young people through healthcare experiences.
- The NHS and Starlight Play Well Toolkit aims to improve access to high-quality health play services across England.
- The Society of Health Play Specialists promotes standards, education and professional development for health play specialists throughout the United Kingdom.
- The Association of British Paediatric Nurses is the oldest children's nursing association in the world, established in 1938, with members spanning clinical practice, education, leadership and research.

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