

# Play in hospital could improve children's mental health

The DECP responds to calls from a children's charity for investment in more play resources for children during their stay in hospital

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A new report from children's charity Starlight has been **in the news** this week, claiming that a budget for play resources in hospitals could prevent children from developing 'serious, long-term mental health problems'. The report, '**Reducing Trauma for Children in Healthcare**', suggests that giving children the opportunity to play while in hospital could reduce the risk of trauma during their hospital treatment. It also highlights 'huge gaps in play resources', with 71 per cent of NHS Trusts having no play budget at all, and calls for investment in play professionals.

Denise Miller from the BPS's **Division of Educational and Child Psychology** (DECP), welcomed the report. She said:

"For children and young people, a hospital stay can be a daunting experience filled with unfamiliar faces, strange sounds, and painful medical procedures. In such an environment, the importance of play in promoting a child's mental health cannot be underestimated.

"Play has been proven to reduce anxiety and stress levels in children and young people. It triggers the release of endorphins. When children are engaged in enjoyable activities, their bodies release 'fun moments' chemicals that can help them to cope with the anxieties of hospitalisation.

"Play is also a great way for children to express their emotions and process their experiences. In a hospital setting, children have a lot of emotions they may struggle to articulate. Play provides a means for them to communicate their feelings, whether it's through drawing, storytelling, or imaginative play. For instance, this can be especially helpful for children with English as an additional language or for others who find it challenging to express their

emotions. Furthermore, when children are engaged in play, they are less likely to focus on the medical interventions they may be undergoing.

“While hospitals can be isolating places, play can also facilitate inclusivity and social interactions. Interacting with other children and young people who are going through similar experiences can provide a sense of friendship and support. Play affords children and young people opportunities to share their concerns with other children and may help them to feel less lonely during their hospital stay.

“In short, by making play a priority in healthcare settings, hospitals can provide children and young people with a sense of normality and promote their emotional health and well-being.”