

Play is a core part of good care for babies, children and young people. It is not only about keeping children occupied. In healthcare, play supports understanding, coping, trust, communication, agency, development and a sense of normality.

Why play matters

- Play can reduce anxiety, fear and distress.
- It helps children understand what is happening and what is expected of them.
- It supports preparation before procedures, coping during procedures, and working through experiences afterwards.
- It helps preserve dignity, agency, relationships and a sense of childhood.
- It can also help parents and carers feel more confident in supporting their child.

What Starlight and the Society of Health Play Specialists have done

- Starlight has worked with NHS England to produce the Play Well toolkit and also provides practical professional resources, a toy box service, videos and implementation support to help teams embed play.
- The Society of Health Play Specialists is the official education and registration body for Health Play Specialists. It supports training, registration, professional standards and continuing professional development.
- The Play Well toolkit was produced by NHS England and Starlight in collaboration with the Society of Health Play Specialists and a taskforce of more than 60 health professionals and young people.

What is in the Play Well toolkit?

Guidelines for commissioning and designing health play services

Explains the role of play in health and healthcare, the integrated universal, targeted and specialist model, the functions of the play team, the workforce, environments, resources and quality improvement.

Recommended standards for health play services

Sets out what good looks like for policy, staffing, professional registration, environments, resources, multi-disciplinary working, referral pathways and training.

Quality checklist

Provides a practical way for services to review what they currently offer, identify gaps and plan improvement.

What this means for everyday practice

- Play should be treated as part of everyday child-centred care, not as an optional extra.
- Play is everybody's responsibility, not only the play team's responsibility.
- Staff can use playful, developmentally appropriate communication by speaking to the child directly, preparing rather than surprising, offering realistic choices and adapting to the child in front of them.
- Colleagues should know when and how to refer early for health play support.

Useful resources

- NHS England Play Well toolkit: national guidance, standards and checklist for England. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/long-read/play-well-recommended-standards-for-health-play-services/>
- Starlight health play pages: overview of Starlight support, health play team information, box services and free resources. <https://www.starlight.org.uk/how-we-help/health-play-services>
- Starlight resources for professionals: prep books, role descriptions, communication tools, social stories and print-off materials. <https://www.starlight.org.uk/how-we-help/health-play-services/resources-for-professionals>
- Starlight video resources for professionals: short practical videos on playful approaches, sensory play and preparation ideas. These videos include information about medical equipment and procedures. <https://www.starlight.org.uk/how-we-help/health-play-services/video-resources-for-professionals>
- Society of Health Play Specialists: training, registration, public register and professional standards. <https://sohps.org.uk/>

BRING PLAY INTO EVERYDAY CLINICAL PRACTICE



Top tips for professionals working with children and young people in healthcare



Why it matters

Play helps children feel safe, understood and involved. It can reduce anxiety, build trust, support understanding, and help children cope with healthcare experiences. Play is everybody's responsibility.



10 top tips

- 1. Speak to the child first**
Acknowledge the child directly and include them from the start.


- 2. Start with connection**
Notice something about the child first - a toy, a t-shirt, a favourite character or an interest.


- 3. Offer real choices**
Small choices help build trust and a sense of control.


- 4. Prepare - do not surprise**
Use simple language, pictures, demonstration or role play to show what will happen.


- 5. Use play before, during and after procedures**
Play can help children prepare, cope in the moment, and work through what happened afterwards.


- 6. Meet the child where they are**
Adapt to age, developmental stage, communication style, sensory needs and anxiety level.


- 7. Work with parents as partners**
Support parents to join in with comfort, play, distraction and reassurance.


- 8. Make the environment more child-friendly**
A calm tone, familiar objects and age-appropriate resources all help.


- 9. Slow down and use simple language**
Use clear words, one voice at a time, and check understanding.


- 10. Ask for health play support early**
Do not wait until things are going wrong. Early support can make a big difference.





Key message

Play is not an optional extra. Small playful changes in everyday practice can reduce trauma, improve trust, and preserve a sense of childhood.



★ Derived from the Play Well toolkit and learning from Starlight and the Society of Health Play Specialists.★

Play is not an optional extra. It is part of good, child-centred healthcare.