

Child's play



Play is a vital part of any child's development, even when they're sick. Volunteers with the Children in Hospital Ireland charity help to ensure kids get dedicated play time, whatever their ability

Words: Róisín Healy



Decorations made by Galway patients

None likes to hear of a child spending time in hospital, but there are ways to ease the stress on kids and their parents. As well as advocating for children in hospital and their parents, the Children in Hospital Ireland (CHI) charity ensures that kids admitted to hospital get the opportunity to play, thanks to a nationwide network of volunteers. Lisa Porter is a play specialist at University Hospital Galway. She explains that play can help a child deal with the experience of being hospitalised. "Play is essential for the healthy, stable development of all children both physically and emotionally, but it is especially beneficial for sick children in hospital as it helps the child understand, accept and deal with the hospitalisation process," Lisa says. "In the playroom and playground the children can do what they know best, practice old skills and learn new ones, experiment with ideas they have and solve problems through trial and error. Enough emphasis cannot be placed on the advantages of play and children of all ages benefit from playing."

Anna Gunning, CEO of CHI, explains that research has proven that even when a child is ill, play is an essential part of their development. "In order to aid their recovery children need normal things like play and education facilities in the hospital. It is not normal for a child to just lie in bed all day, and they need social interaction

too," Anna says. The play service is what the charity is best known for – it was formed in the 1970s as an advocacy group for the rights of parents and children in hospital. Their focus now is on ensuring all children have access to play in hospital, no matter what their ability. "There is such limited staff in the hospitals, we are trying to bridge the gap and complement what is available in the hospital with our volunteers. It's a really simple service but that is what is needed, these volunteers are here solely to play with the children."

Of course sick children have their limitations and playtime in a hospital setting brings many challenges. "Yes it is quite a different setting for the children, and there are certain things that dictate what they will be able to do, if a child has tubes in them of course they can't go running around the ward," Anna says. "But the thing is our volunteers don't need to know about the child's diagnosis, we just need to know what the child is capable of, that is the extent of the information we need." Children can be brought to a play room where they can play with toys or do arts and crafts and mix with other children. For those who are not mobile, volunteers have lots of designated bedside activities they can do to keep kids entertained, whether that's singing nursery rhymes or colouring or singing. This year the charity is focused on being more inclusive. "We have started to work on our diversity, and started a programme for children aged 0-6 who have additional needs. Perhaps these children tend to get left out because they are non-verbal, or they may have complex needs. We have special sensory toys our volunteers can incorporate into play, and it is also about giving them extra training in this area to build their confidence."

There are 420 volunteers in 13 hospitals nationwide. "We are doing our three-year strategic plan at the moment and the goal is to be in all the hospitals that need or want us. Tralee and Letterkenny would be hospitals that we really want to get into, but it's about rolling out the service well so it works, not trying to make it happen on a shoestring," Anna says. The volunteers get training, as well as paperwork, as there are lots of regulations and information on best practice and confidentiality and of course Garda vetting. After an introduction and interview evening, once the paperwork is started volunteers take part in a one-

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Play specialist Lisa Porter & Mary Walsh, CHI volunteer



day training session. "We discuss the purpose of play, communication with children and young people, hygiene in the hospital and health and safety, and the online HSE training in child protection," Anna says. "Our volunteers come from all walks of life, they could be accountants, nurses, retired teachers. They all come to it because they want to give back but they all get so much out of it themselves. Yes it is terrible when a child has to be in hospital, and we can't change the situation. But we are making the sad times a little easier, and doing what we can to help. Most of our volunteers come out on a high after each session." Mary Walsh has been a volunteer in Galway for eight years. "I find it so rewarding, you wouldn't do anything

for so long otherwise. I get more out of it than I give, I come out happier than when I walk in," Mary says. "To see a child go from being quiet and shy, to totally relaxing once you take their minds off being in hospital, it is lovely. Volunteers can do one morning or evening a week but I do it twice a week because I love it so much, and I would never want to see the playroom closed because they didn't have a volunteer around."

Lisa explains that the benefit to the child is visible instantly. "Having dedicated play time is transformative for these children, they are a completely different child when they walk out of the playroom. They can be so quiet and shy and down on themselves, but the volunteers can get them talking and smiling and soon they are giggling and they are carrying on as if they were in school or nursery," Lisa says. "It's not just about distracting them from their illness, overthinking can be a real problem if a child is left sitting in the bed, feeling sorry for themselves. Of course there are hard days and it can be difficult to carry on as normal after you have built up a bond with a patient."

While hospital is the best place for an unwell child, it is a long day with early starts and lots going on. "The doctors and nurses are focused on the problem, what is nice about the volunteers is that they are focused on the child, and it's nice to see someone upbeat and smiling who isn't there to talk about the illness," Lisa says. For children in hospital long term or for regular stays, play can be a part of their treatment. "We can work towards certain areas of development too, we would work alongside the physiotherapist, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists, they can give us programmes of play to do for those children. We have to ensure that children in hospital long-term are still meeting their milestones through play."

Christmas of course is a challenging time for a child to be in hospital, and the charity does all it can to ensure the child still feels special. "Our volunteers go in up to Christmas Eve and after Christmas Day. It is even more important at this time for our volunteers to provide the kids with a distraction," Anna says. "The festive season is so important for donations. One way people can help is by buying a voucher in any Art & Hobby store nationwide, we have a partnership and we use those donations to keep the playroom stocked with toys and arts and craft supplies. It's a lot of crayons, we can never have enough!"

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