

Final Essay

Discuss the factors that influence the play experience of a child in hospital. Which factors do you consider to be most impactful and why?

In this essay I will discuss the many factors that influence the play experience of a child in hospital. I will carefully consider the impact they have on a child's health and development and how play fits into child development theory.

As stated In General Comment no. 17, published in 2013, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child defines play as 'a behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children. Play takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise.' There are many different types of play that all have different benefits for child development. For example, there is physical play, this covers all sorts of activities and sports like rugby and football, which help with physical health and hand-eye coordination skills. There is also cognitive play, which is when children engage in activities and challenges that stimulate and further develop a child's thinking, problem solving and teamwork skills. In Imaginative or Fantasy play, children use their imagination to create and explore all sorts of stories and scenarios in their minds to help process difficult situations and develop empathy skills. All types of play are essential to child development. Research has shown that from the first stages of growth, play has a central role in developing strong attachments and helps establish the neural pathways for developing wider attachments with other children and adults (Lester and Russel, 2010).

Play is essential in all stages throughout childhood, and it can help children to process thoughts and emotions effectively, especially when under increased stress or strain. When a child doesn't have access to play, this is referred to as Play Deprivation. The Play Wales information sheet, Play: mental health and wellbeing defines play deprivation as: '...the name given to the idea that not playing may deprive children of experiences that are essential to their development and result in those affected being both biologically and socially disabled. (Play Wales, 2022)

When children are deprived of play it can lead to catastrophic consequences. One of the main consequences of play Deprivation is depression. Depression and unhappiness happens when a child has little to no social interactions with other children. When a child is isolated and separated from their environment and has no opportunities to engage and play with other children it has a negative impact on the brain. Isolation stops the brain from being able to develop key skills like cognitive (problem solving), motor skills, social skills and emotional wellbeing. This can lead to them not being able to make meaningful connections with other children their age or adults.

Although the effects and consequences of play deprivation are big, they can be aided using play therapy. Play therapy is a type of therapy available to children who may have been affected by play deprivation or other issues in their lives. In play therapy sessions, a trained therapist guides a child to find and explore their own creativity and express themselves through playing in various ways and scenarios. The therapist will focus on making the child feel safe and happy in their environment.

Play is an essential tool in the hospital to help a child process all of their thoughts and concerns in a way that is peaceful and relaxing.

While a child is visiting the hospital they most likely will be experiencing a broad range of emotions such as overwhelm, apprehension and especially confusion as they try to understand what is happening and process their feelings about the situation. Phoebe, a child who has been in the hospital when she suffered a rare inflammatory response in her body from a common cold resulting in damage to the spinal cord, said “Sometimes people’s imaginations can get crowded with loads and loads of annoying stuff and then they don’t have any room for good thoughts.” (Cambridge Children’s Hospital, 2025) A child in hospital like Phoebe may have long periods of time away from friends and their usual play opportunities, leading to play deprivation and depression as discussed in an earlier paragraph.

Play can have great effects on a child’s wellbeing in the hospital. By playing in various different ways, play can help reduce stress whilst the child is in the hospital. Any child who is able to can visit the hospital playroom to play and socialise with other children of their age. They can also meet with Hospital Play Specialists who can give the child a wider understanding through play of what may be happening to them after visiting a doctor or nurse, or give support by using play techniques to help release stress and worries. If the child is unable to go to the playroom, a Health Play Specialist may come to visit the ward to play with the child.

I have been in communication with a Paediatric Physiotherapist who works for Hywel Dda University Health Board about the job of the Hospital Play Therapist in the clinical care teams that she works in. ‘Play specialists support children and young people in Hywel Dda within the hospital setting. They utilise play as a form of distraction when children undergo invasive interventions such as during blood tests.’ (Helen Evans, Paediatric Physiotherapist, 2025)

Hywel Dda, as a health board in Wales has a Therapeutic play team who ‘work with children and young people up to the age of 18 who have contact with hospital across all three counties, whether as an inpatient, outpatient, or has ongoing health conditions.’ (Hywel Dda University Health Board, No Date) Karen Thomas, Head of Therapeutic Play at Hywel Dda UHB, said: “Play is arguably the most authentic expression of identity, the essence of who we are. Play is how children investigate the world and explore their place in it, what they think about, and what matters to them. It is where children can be free to express all of their complex feelings. (Hywel Dda University Health Board, 2023)

A key factor that has a large influence on a child’s play experience is the policies of the country they live in. Wales and many other countries have implemented policies requiring Local Governments to ensure there are enough opportunities to play in the local area. Usually a government will have two main parts to a play policy or play plan. They may have a main play policy for the country, which outlines how the country’s Government recognises play and its effects on child development and how it is going to ensure play is available to children nationwide, and then they may also have a law for a Play Sufficiency Duty or Play Sufficiency Assessment that usually states that local authorities must complete a report on the availability of play in the local area.

Wales was one of the first countries to implement a Play Sufficiency Duty to ensure that every child in Wales has equal access to play. The policy was first published by the Welsh Government in 2002, before in 2006 the Play Policy Implementation Plan was developed to implement the policy's vision. The first Play Sufficiency Assessments (PSAs) were submitted to the Welsh Government in 2013. 'The Play Sufficiency Duty was introduced in two parts. The first part, which states that local authorities must assess whether their local area offers children enough opportunities to play, commenced in November 2012. The second part, which commenced in July 2014, says that local authorities must secure enough opportunities for children to play in their area, as far as is reasonable and practical. (Play Wales, 2022) Play Sufficiency Duty in Wales is a legal requirement stating that every local authority in Wales has to complete a Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) every three years which they must also display a summary of on their website for the public. It also states that Local Authorities must develop a play action plan and submit them to the government every year as well as progress reports. These requirements in Wales have a great benefit on children as they will always receive sufficient play to support their needs. Just this week, on 2nd June 2025, Aberporth Community Council, in my local area, launched a Public Consultation about play to identify needs and priorities for play provision in the area following a great success of the council buying and planning to maintain the village's sports fields. (Tivyside Advertiser, 2025)

Similar to the play policy in Wales discussed in the previous paragraph, in 2008, England set out to implement a National Play Strategy. Developed by the Labour government and Play England Charity, the plan was funded by £235 million and aimed to create 3,500 new play spaces across every local authority area in England which included 35 staffed adventure playgrounds. The plan was aimed to 'embed play in local planning, public space design, housing, education, and community development.' (Play England, 2024) Unfortunately, only 2 years later in 2010, the coalition government abandoned the strategy resulting in a continuous decline of play provision and funding in England. 17 years Later, in 2025, Eugene Minogue, Executive Director, Play England said "Seventeen years without a national commitment to play is nothing short of a generational failure. Millions of children have grown up without the opportunities, experiences and support they should have had if the 2008 strategy had been delivered. We urgently need a new national play strategy that puts play back at the heart of childhood and public policy" (Play England, 2024)

These nationally set policies filter down to inform the priorities of play at a local level, including hospitals. We need our governments to keep placing play as a high priority.

One of the main factors we can see has a large effect on play availability in Hospitals is funding. This lack of funding in many Hospitals is depriving many children of a chance to relieve stress and worries through play after invasive procedures or operations. Starlight charity conducted research into this in 2022. 'Starlight's latest research (2022) shows that many UK hospitals employ no health play specialists or have inadequate funding for even the most basic play resources, such as crayons and pens, arts and crafts, books, and washable toys' (Starlight, 2022)

As part of their research they conducted a focus group on which this was one of the inputs given by an anonymous participant. "We've got a really poorly boy at the moment in palliative care. He desperately needs the playroom to go and play in, but [our hospital] will not open it." (Starlight, 2022) This shows the harsh reality that many hospital workers are facing with limited funding and the effects it's having on the children.

Play in the hospital should be freely available to everyone, everywhere and should be an integral part to a child's care plan as it compliments their treatment to make their health outcome more successful. From small-scale factors like setting or environment to even a child's physical ability, there are still many obstacles to delivering play in the hospital setting that need to be addressed. I think one of the most impactful factors is funding for play. I feel that often play is overlooked by governments even though there are policies in place to try to fix this, it is not enough. Governments need to start putting more money towards play for children, especially in hospitals. They need to put more Health Play Specialists in Hospitals and provide the hospitals with more of a budget for supplies and apparatus for the Playrooms because we've seen the effects that play deprivation can have, and also the benefits that play can have, in all different scenarios. The governments need to keep play as a priority for a healthy childhood instead of an optional extra within their villages, towns and cities. Secondly, I think that it's really important for countries to have a relevant play policy that guides and prioritises play at local authority and community level. We were all born with a natural urge to play, it's essential to our wellbeing. Play matters to us all.

[1990 Words]

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