

# PLAY POLICY POSITION STATEMENT

## INTRODUCTION

Starlight is the UK's leading charity for children's play in hospitals and hospices. We work to ensure every child<sup>1</sup> can experience the power of play to support their mental and physical health during treatment and recovery from illness.

This position statement sets out what we mean by the power of play and why it matters so much in the treatment and care of children. In doing so it provides a summary of our more in-depth play policy, which also cites the evidence to support what we say and do.

## PLAY IS A TOP PRIORITY FOR CHILDREN – IT SHOULD BE INTEGRAL TO THEIR HEALTHCARE

But while their play is always a top priority for children, it is rarely so for the services that provide for them. This may seem understandable when children are ill and needing healthcare, when everything else is overshadowed by getting them the treatment they need. What Starlight understands is that children's capacity to play is vital to their mental health and psychological safety; never more so than when they are sick and facing frightening procedures in strange environments. Play should therefore be integral to their treatment and care.

## ALL CHILDREN HAVE THE RIGHT TO PLAY

Starlight champions children's right to play. We know play is vital for children's mental and emotional wellbeing, their learning and development; and for their physical fitness and growth. But of all the rights children have as young people, their right to play is one of the most easily overlooked, undervalued, and undermined.

## PLAYING IS THE JOY OF CHILDHOOD

First and foremost, playing is joyful: and this simple joy, which the adult world tends to both adore and take for granted, is vital to children's well-being and resilience. It enables them to share in moments of delight, surprise, wonder, laughter, friendship, excitement, adventure, mischievousness, silliness, and nonsense. This is the intrinsic value of play that makes it so powerful in so many ways.



<sup>1</sup>Throughout this statement, 'child' and 'children' should be understood to mean any person or persons from birth to 17 years-old, and in some circumstance young people up to the age of 25.

---

## PLAYING IS HOW CHILDREN PARTICIPATE AND COMMUNICATE

Starlight respects children as individuals and acknowledges their unique experiences. We view children as active participants in their own care and treatment, who want to, and have the right to be involved, listened to and heard. Playing and being playful is the natural, instinctive way for children to participate and communicate and this becomes especially important when they are sick and receiving care.

---

## PLAYING MAKES THINGS BETTER, AND SAFEGUARDS CHILDREN AGAINST TRAUMA

Playing helps children to be and feel well. It brings people together, eases tensions, creates connections and builds attachments. Playing can distract children when they might be scared, making difficult medical procedures and other stressful healthcare experiences less traumatic. In this sense, playing has therapeutic and healing effects, supporting children to cope, to be more engaged, and to have some control in otherwise overwhelming circumstances.

---

## CHILDREN WHO ARE SICK NEED EXTRA SUPPORT TO PLAY

Children have a remarkable capacity for playing: they seek opportunities to play wherever they can. However, where conditions are not supportive, children can struggle to play. In the healthcare system, children face some of the most scary, frustrating, and restrictive circumstances. They risk missing out on the benefits of play, just when they need them most. Adult society has an obligation to mitigate this risk through specialised play services.



---

## WE WORK ACROSS THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM TO PROMOTE AND PROTECT CHILDREN'S PLAY

Health professionals, managers and policymakers have key roles in creating the conditions for play in healthcare settings and supporting children with therapeutic play during medical procedures. Starlight works with all parts of the children's healthcare sector, using a rights-based and evidence-informed approach to promote a kinder, gentler, more playful culture of paediatric care – and a more holistic understanding of children's well-being and the vital role of play.

### OUR AIM

Our overarching aim is that every child's right to play is protected and provided for as an integral part of their healthcare. Our plans and activities to achieve this aim are underpinned by this position statement and the fuller play policy on which it is based.

