

The Power of Play – Support for Children with Brain Tumours



Helping Children with Brain Tumours

Clowns in the Sky is a small charity that helps children with brain tumours. We fund play activity trolleys. Here we take a look at how our work is helping children at the Children's Hospital, Oxford at the John Radcliffe.

Care at the John Radcliffe

The John Radcliffe is a regional centre for the treatment of brain tumours (and indeed all sorts of childhood cancers). Children are referred from across the Thames Valley for treatment and pre and post operative care for life-threatening illnesses.

Care is based in Kamran's and Robin's wards. The wards are light and spacious. They have a play room in each ward with toys, games, and art & craft material, and open play spaces where children can run, ride cycles or play ball games. All the toys and games on the two wards are paid for by charitable donations.



Because of the treatment children with brain tumours go through they can't always leave their beds to get to play rooms and the toys in them. That's why it's so important that there's a way for the toys to come to them. That's why Clowns in the Sky has provided Kamran's and Robin's wards, along with the

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Treating Brain Tumours

Children with brain tumours may go through surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy or combinations of these. There's no 'typical' experience as the treatment for every child is unique. However, it's not unusual for children to spend weeks at a time in hospital preparing for and recovering from treatment, and for this to happen many times over the course of their treatment.

This takes them away from their friends, routines, homes – in fact almost everything that's reassuring and normal. This, along with fear of the illness itself puts a massive emotional strain on children. The treatments themselves are tough and physically exhausting meaning that children undergoing treatment are often physically and emotionally drained.

Radiotherapy department at the neighbouring Churchill Hospital, with a fully stocked art and craft trolley each to make it easier for sick children to play.

The Importance of Play

There are reasons why play is important for children with life-threatening illnesses. In fact it's a crucial part of their treatment.

Play is one of the few things in hospital that happens on a child's own terms – it's something they control and that they're in charge of. In a strange place with things happening to them over which they have no control, that sense of control is incredibly important.

Play also provides an outlet for feelings of fear, anger and frustration. This can help play specialists and nurses recognise these emotions in children and help them to deal with them.

Quite often these anxieties, and the pain involved in treatment, can mean children need anaesthetics and sedatives. The use of play as a distraction from pain and anxiety can, in some cases, reduce the need for sedation. This reduces the strain on children's bodies, leading to health benefits for children.

In fact play, far from being a 'nice-to-have' is a key part of children's treatment. It's little known outside of the NHS, but the importance of play is considered such an important part of a child's therapy that children's hospitals frequently employ trained Play Specialists to manage this part of a child's care. These professionals often use play and toys, for example, to help prepare children for their treatment by using play to explain what's going to happen to them during treatment.

"Play provides an outlet for feelings of fear, anger and frustration"

Are the Trolleys Useful?

A toy trolley, funded by Clowns in the Sky, is available in Kamran's ward. It's available for all children to use, but it's proving especially popular with under-twelves.

Senior Play Specialist Christine Turner often uses the trolley on Kamran's ward. She and the nursing staff have used it with children for games and art and craft activities which have really given the children an outlet for their creativity.

"Play can, in some cases, reduce the need for sedation"

Christine feels that the trolleys have made a real difference to children on the ward. Describing how the trolleys make a difference, Christine says:

"The trolleys are an asset to the ward meaning the nursing staff can access art and craft materials easily to keep the children busy, particularly at times when play staff are not working such as evenings and weekends. Art and craft is very therapeutic so it is important that resources are available for when the child feels well enough to attempt an activity."

Christine Turner, Senior Play Specialist, the
John Radcliffe

Future Plans



After a successful introduction of the trolleys, Christine and her colleague Erica Watson, another Senior Play Specialist, are continuing to ensure the toy trolleys are available and restocked with toys, and used well. With no budget available for toys or play materials at the hospital, Clowns in the Sky hopes to continue to support the hospital's work.

You Can Make a Difference

You really can help these children. Perhaps your school, college or sports club fundraises to support charities? Or does your company or employer support charities?

If so, and if you'd like to help us put a smile on poorly children's faces, please email Liz Ainley (liz@storypods.co.uk) or Dave Denny (daviddenny62@yahoo.co.uk). We'd love to talk to see if we can work together.