

Policy Brief



Ensuring the Right to Play and Participate in Artistic Activities for Hospitalized Children

Implementing UNCRC Article 31 in Health Promoting Hospitals

23/01/2025

Series Editor:

Prof Dr Oliver Groene

Contributors (in Alphabetical order):

Dr. Silvia De Faveri, Research and Learning Manager, RED NOSES International

Kornelia Kiss, Head of Culture and Health at Culture Action Europe, co-author of the CultureForHealth report

Dr. Ilaria Simonelli, Coordinator of the Task Force on Children's and Adolescents' Health Promotion, Vice Chair of the International Health Promoting Hospitals and health Services Network

Carmen Valero, Programme Manager | International Programme Department Advocacy and Strategic Partnerships, RED NOSES International

Key Messages

- › There is substantial evidence supporting the benefits of arts for health and well-being. Incorporating arts and play into healthcare promotes a more holistic approach to patient care, addressing not just physical symptoms but also emotional and psychosocial needs, in line with the WHO definition of health.
- › Integrating arts, creativity and play into healthcare is a complementary approach that can enhance traditional medical treatments, rather than replacing them. Play and artistic activities in hospitals not only have psychological benefits before or during medical interventions, but can also support the physical rehabilitation of children recovering from illness or injury (e.g. improving mobility, strength, and endurance)
- › Children need safe spaces to play in hospitals that are non-judgmental, non-competitive and give them the opportunity to relax and disconnect from the medical treatment. Moreover, they should be involved in and co-create the planning of arts and play activities and any other child-related services. If health, hygiene and other considerations allow it, children (and their carers) shall be enabled to play together in groups, enabling social interactions as much as possible,
- › Ensuring the right to play for children is beneficial for the healthcare staff as well. Play and artistic activities decrease the children's levels of fear, perceived pain and stress, diverting their attention to positive emotions, which facilitate the work of healthcare staff during medical procedures.

Introduction

Children have a fundamental right to play and participate in cultural and artistic activities, as enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)¹. These activities are crucial for their development, well-being, treatment and recovery, and can be especially important in high-stress situations such as when children are hospitalized.² Nevertheless, these rights and their benefits are often overlooked and under-valued in healthcare settings.

This policy brief aims to highlight the importance of upholding Article 31 of the UNCRC in hospital settings. The brief discusses the rights and benefits for hospitalized children, presents inspiring practices and suggests recommendations for integrating these into the policies and practices of Health Promoting Hospitals.

How does this Policy Brief relate to the work of the HPH network?

The International Health Promoting Hospitals Network has promoted the constitution, in 2004, of a Task Force dedicated to the Health Promotion with Children and Adolescents. The Task Force promotes children's and adolescents' health by involving them in the development and evaluation of healthcare policy and services. The Task Force aims to promote good practices and support the monitoring systems of children's right to health in healthcare settings by addressing their needs and by facilitating knowledge exchange. The topic of Play and Arts in hospitals represents a strategic approach for supporting the well-being of children and for improving the awareness and knowledge of professionals in this specific area.

The Psychological and Emotional Impact of Hospitalisation on Children

Hospitalised children often struggle to cope with the environment and medical procedures, which can feel painful, confusing, and overwhelming. Being in an unfamiliar place and undergoing procedures they don't understand, can cause anxiety and make them feel a loss of control³. As a result, children may experience fear, loneliness, anger, sadness, and boredom⁴, potentially leading to Pediatric

¹ Unicef (1989), Convention on the rights of the child (1989); The Convention on the Rights of the Child: The children's version | UNICEF

² World Health Organization. (2019). What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review. Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report, No. 67.

³ Coyne I. Children's experiences of hospitalization. *Journal of Child Health Care*. 2006;10(4):326-336. doi:10.1177/1367493506067884

⁴ Wilson ME, Megel ME, Enenbach L, Carlson KL. The Voices of Children: Stories About Hospitalization. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*. 2010;24(2):95-102. doi:10.1016/j.pedhc.2009.02.008

Medical Traumatic Stress, which can have lasting effects on their physical and mental health⁵.

A review of 28 studies found that up to 28% of children admitted to pediatric intensive care units experienced a decline in emotional well-being post-hospitalization, often becoming more anxious and less confident⁶. Children with serious illnesses, such as cancer, are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues, including phobias, bedwetting, anxiety, worrying and sadness.^{7,8} Repeated hospitalizations can make it even harder for them to manage stress and maintain a positive outlook.

Challenges facing our healthcare system, such as increasing mental health issues among children and young people, staff shortages, and burnout, require new approaches. More investment in preventive, cost-efficient, and cross-sectoral solutions should be integrated into hospitals to promote more patient-centred care approaches.

Despite the recognized importance of play and cultural activities for children's wellbeing and recovery, many hospitals lack standards, practices and resources related to ensure that these rights can be adequately and consistently upheld. This results in a gap between the principles of the UNCRC, the evidence at international level and the reality faced by hospitalized children.

⁵ Price J, Kassam-Adams N, Alderfer MA, Christofferson J, Kazak AE. Systematic Review: A Reevaluation and Update of the Integrative (Trajectory) Model of Pediatric Medical Traumatic Stress. *J Pediatr Psychol.* 2016;41(1):86-97. doi:10.1093/jpepsy/jsv074

⁶ Rennick JE, Rashotte J. Psychological outcomes in children following pediatric intensive care unit hospitalization: A systematic review of the research. *Journal of Child Healthcare.* 2009;13(2):128-149. doi:10.1177/1367493509102472

⁷ Zahed, G., & Koohi, F. (2020). Emotional and behavioral disorders in pediatric cancer patients. *Iran J Child Neurol.* Winter, 14(1), 113-121.

⁸ Li HCW, Chung OKJ, Chiu SY. The Impact of Cancer on Children's Physical, Emotional, and Psychosocial Well-being. *Cancer Nurs.* 2010;33(1):47-54. doi:10.1097/NCC.0b013e3181aaf0fa

The evidence of the impact of Arts and Play on hospitalised children

Play and art approaches offer significant benefits during hospital stays, helping to alleviate the emotional and psychological challenges children face^{9,10,11}. In this section we will present some evidence of the impact of play and the arts on the mental health and wellbeing of hospitalized children.

Play and Health

Play is a fundamental component of children's development and well-being, and its significance extends profoundly into healthcare settings. The relationship between play and health in children is multi-faceted, encompassing physical, emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions. In everyday life, play contributes to a child's physical health by promoting active engagement in activities that build motor skills, enhance coordination, and improve cardiovascular fitness. Regular physical play is essential in combating sedentary lifestyles and the associated risks of childhood obesity, diabetes, and other chronic conditions¹². Moreover, play is a natural mechanism through which children explore their environment, learn new skills, and gain confidence in their physical abilities.

In pediatric healthcare settings, the role of play becomes even more critical. Play, which is specifically designed to address the psychological and emotional needs of hospitalized children, plays a pivotal role in mitigating the stress, fear, anxiety and sense of powerlessness that some children may experience during hospitalisation. Through activities such as medical play, where children use toys to simulate medical procedures, they can gain a better understanding of their treatment and reduce their fears. This type of play helps demystify the hospital environment, allowing children to express their anxieties and develop coping strategies¹³.

⁹ Koukourikos K, Tzeha L, Pantelidou P, Tsaloglidou A. The importance of play during hospitalization of children. *Mater Sociomed.* 2015;27(6):438–41. doi: 10.5455/msm.2015.27.438-441.

¹⁰ Klassen JA, Liang Y, Tjosvold L, Klassen TP, Hartling L. Music for pain and anxiety in children undergoing medical procedures: a systematic review of randomized controlled trials. *Ambul Pediatr.* 2008;8(2):117–28. doi: 10.1016/j.ambp.2007.12.005.

¹¹ Sextou P, Monk C. Bedside theatre performance and its effects on hospitalised children's well-being. *Arts Health.* 2013;5(1):81–8. doi: 10.1080/17533015.2012.712979.

¹² Ginsburg, K. R. (2007). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds. *Pediatrics*, 119(1), 182-191.

¹³ Godino-Iñáñez MJ, Martos-Cabrera MB, Suleiman-Martos N, Gómez-Urquiza JL, Vargas-Román K, Membrive-Jiménez MJ, Albendín-García L. Play Therapy as an Intervention in Hospitalized Children: A Systematic Review. *Healthcare (Basel).* 2020 Jul 29;8(3):239. doi: 10.3390/healthcare8030239. PMID: 32751225; PMCID: PMC7551498.

Additionally, play in hospitals supports the physical rehabilitation of children recovering from illness or injury. Structured play activities, including physical games and exercises, can be tailored to meet specific therapeutic goals, such as improving mobility, strength, and endurance. These activities not only aid in physical recovery but also contribute to the overall well-being of the child by providing a sense of normalcy and joy in an otherwise clinical environment)¹⁴.

Socially, play fosters connection and communication between hospitalized children and their peers, as well as between children and healthcare staff. Group play activities, help children feel less isolated and encourage the development of friendships. These are both vital for a child's emotional health, as they promote feelings of belonging and support within the hospital setting¹⁵.

By addressing the emotional, cognitive, and social needs of children in hospital through play, healthcare providers can create a more supportive and holistic healing environment¹⁶.

Arts and Health

There is increasing global recognition of the benefits of integrating arts into healthcare. [A 2019 WHO Health Evidence Report](#), compiling over 3,000 studies, highlighted the positive effects of arts in preventing ill health, promoting health, and treating illness. Arts activities help reduce loneliness, aid emotional regulation, and alleviate depression, anxiety, and pain, while also supporting rehabilitation by improving emotional states. Similarly, [a 2022 Culture for Health scoping review](#) emphasized the profound impact of arts and cultural activities on hospitalized children, enhancing their well-being, social inclusion, and quality of life. Both reports also note that arts-based interventions are cost-effective, as they improve patient outcomes, reduce the need for more intensive treatments, and shorten recovery times, ultimately lowering healthcare expenses.

¹⁴ Ginsburg, K. R. (2007). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds. *Pediatrics*, 119(1), 182-191

¹⁵ Whitebread, David & Neale, Dave & Jensen, Hanne & Liu, Claire & Solis, Lynne & Hopkins, Emily & Hirsh-Pasek, Kathy & Zosh, Jennifer. (2017). The role of play in children's development: a review of the evidence. 10.13140/RG.2.2.18500.73606.

¹⁶ Perasso G, Camurati G, Morrini E, Dill C, Dolidze K, Clegg T, Simonelli I, Lo HYC, Magione-Standish A, Pansier B, Gulyurtlu SC, Garone A, Rippen H. Five Reasons Why Pediatric Settings Should Integrate the Play Specialist and Five Issues in Practice. *Front Psychol.* 2021 Jun 29;12:687292. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.687292. PMID: 34267710; PMCID: PMC8275832.

While arts and play therapy are widely recognised as highly effective medical approaches to supporting children's well-being in hospitals, arts and play activities in health care services led by non-therapeutic - but still specifically trained - professionals, are less established. Therapeutic and non-therapeutic artistic services offer a different set of benefits that complement medical interventions. Therapeutic interventions focus on achieving specific therapeutic outcomes, whereas arts and play-based activities provide children with the opportunity to engage freely without specific goals. Children can express themselves freely, without being defined by illness. Indeed, non-therapeutic artistic and play-based activities create "illness-free zones," fostering normalcy, dignity, and empowerment in children. These zones can be physical spaces, or can be created by the artist or art facilitator when patients are required to stay in bed.

The University of Florida- Center for Arts in Medicine, the United Kingdom and Scandinavian countries have long been pioneers in integrating Arts and Health approaches into healthcare practices. The model of 'Arts on Prescription' and 'Social Prescribing,' originated in the UK and is now part of the National Health System¹⁷. Social Prescribing models consist of healthcare professionals referring patients to non-clinical services like arts, nature, and social activities. These programs have demonstrated significant benefits in promoting health, enhancing emotional well-being, and supporting the prevention and treatment of long-term conditions¹⁸. Recent research highlights the effectiveness of Social Prescribing in addressing mental health issues, particularly among vulnerable groups like adolescents and young adults, who are at higher risk of experiencing depression, anxiety, and stress exacerbated by social isolation and lack of support networks¹⁹. In the meantime, the concept is being piloted and implemented in many other

¹⁷ National Academy for Social Prescribing. (n.d.). International Programme. National Academy for Social Prescribing. International Social Prescribing - National Academy for Social Prescribing | NASP (socialprescribingacademy.org.uk)

¹⁸ Polley, M. J., Fleming, J., Anfilogoff, T., & Carpenter, A. (2018). Making sense of social prescribing. London: University of Westminster.

¹⁹ Mental Health Foundation. (2021). Children and young people. Retrieved from <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/c/children-and-young-people>.

countries worldwide, such as Finland²⁰, Sweden²¹, Denmark, Poland, Lithuania and Germany²².

Case studies on Social Prescribing from all around the world are documented in a publication by the National Academy of Social Prescribing (UK) and the WHO, giving examples from²³:

› England	› Finland	› China
› Scotland	› Italy	› Taiwan
› Wales	› Germany	› Indonesia
› Northern Ireland	› Austria	› South Korea
› Republic of Ireland	› Poland	› Australia
› Canada	› India	› France
› USA	› Iran	› Denmark
› Portugal	› Japan	› Greece
› Spain	› Singapore	› Nigeria
› Netherlands	› Malaysia	› The Phillippines
		› Hong Kong

²⁰ Laitinen, L., Jakonen, O., Lahtinen, E., & Lilja-Viherlampi, L. M. (2020). From grass-roots activities to national policies – the state of arts and health in Finland. *Arts & Health*, 14(1), 14–31.

²¹ Jensen, A. & Sandbord, B. M. (2022). Region Skåne’s Arts & Health Strategy 2022– 2030. The whole person – the whole life. *Nordic Journal of Arts, Culture and Health*, Volume 4, No. 2-2022, p.1-2.

²² Interreg Baltic Sea Region. (n.d.). Arts on Prescription. Interreg Baltic Sea Region. <https://interreg-baltic.eu/project/arts-on-prescription/>

²³ National Academy for Social Prescribing. (n.d.). International Programme. National Academy for Social Prescribing. International Social Prescribing - National Academy for Social Prescribing | NASP (socialprescribingacademy.org.uk)

Inspiring practices

Arts at the bedside

Arts at the bedside activities support and enhance health through creative experiences. This field integrates literary, performing, visual arts, and design into healthcare and public health contexts. In the University of Florida- Health Shands Children's Hospital artists regularly engage in arts activities with the patients and cooperate with healthcare staff- receive referrals on whom to visit²⁴. They usually engage in interactive or co-creative art practices with the patients if the patient wishes to. Artistic activities that benefit the healthcare staff are organised as well, and patients that returned to their home environment also have the possibilities to follow arts workshops online afterwards. Working in these difficult environments however can be hard on the artists as well, and supporting meetings are set up to promote the mental health and psychosocial support of the artists.

Healthcare Clowning – accompanying children before, during and after invasive procedures

Over the past decades, humor, as part of art and play approaches, has been acknowledged as being essential to mental and physical health²⁵. With humor at its core, the art of healthcare clowning has emerged as a professional artistic discipline and is increasingly recognized as an effective approach to improving the mental and physical health of hospitalized children^{26,27}. Using skills such as improvisation, music, storytelling and elements of circus arts, clown artists establish a unique connection with each child, engaging them in playful activities. Through this interaction, the artists empower children by offering them a sense of control and agency in their environment, allowing them to choose whether to participate actively and make choices during the play, which fosters confidence and emotional resilience.

²⁴ University of Florida Health. Support Programs. Last accessed on January 2025 via <https://ufhealth.org/locations/uf-health-shands-childrens-hospital/patients-and-families/support-programs>

²⁵ Dionigi, A., Flangini, R., & Gremigni, P. (2012). Clowns in Hospital. In P. Gremigni (Ed.), *Humor and Health Promotion* (pp. 213–228). New York: Nova Science Publishers Inc.

²⁶ Sridharan, K., & Sivaramakrishnan, G. (2016). Therapeutic clowns in paediatrics: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *European Journal Paediatrics*, 175, 1353-1560. (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27605131>)

²⁷ Zhang, Y., Yang, Y., Lau, W. Y.T., Garg, S., & Lao, J. (2017). Effectiveness of pre-operative clown intervention on psychological distress: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health* 53, 237-245.

Numerous studies indicate that healthcare clowning significantly enhances children's hospital experiences by alleviating anxiety, reducing pain, and improving overall well-being before, during and after medical procedures²⁸. Healthcare Clowns visits uplift children's moods, reduce depression in chronically ill patients²⁹, and contribute to a more positive hospital environment³⁰. Both the [WHO Health Evidence Report](#) and the [Culture for Health report](#) recognize healthcare clowning as an effective artistic intervention, particularly in stressful medical situations³¹. Healthcare clowns use their skills to transform intimidating settings into emotionally supportive spaces, benefiting children, families, and healthcare providers.

The presence of clowns benefits parents and medical staff in unique ways. For parents, clowns reduce stress by bringing joy to their children and providing emotional relief. For medical staff, clowns support patient communication and create a positive environment, allowing professionals to focus on their duties. They also uplift the work atmosphere, boost team spirit, and foster a more compassionate hospital environment.

Live music in Hospital settings

Live music is increasingly recognized as a powerful tool in hospitals to support the emotional well-being of patients. Various projects have shown significant positive outcomes for patients, their families, and healthcare professionals.

A scoping review of live music interventions in pediatric hospitals shows that live music helps reduce stress, pain, and the negative experiences of hospitalization in children. The review emphasized the importance of incorporating play, participation, and flexibility in the design of the sessions.³² Moreover, another study highlighted how for hospital staff, music therapy enhances the overall care

²⁸ Sridharan K, Sivaramakrishnan G. Therapeutic clowns in pediatrics: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *Eur J Pediatr.* 2016;175(10):1353–60. doi: 10.1007/s00431-016-2764-0.

²⁹ Alparlan Ö, & Bozkurt G. (2017) The effect of a clown model implemented in hospital on the anxiety and depression level of ill children and their mothers. *Arts & Health, 10(2), 138-150.* (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17533015.2017.1334679>)

³⁰ Barkmann, C., Siem, A., Wessolowski, N., Schulte-Markwort, M. (2013). Clowning as a supportive measure in paediatrics – a survey of clowns, parents and nursing staff. *BMC Pediatrics, 13, 166.* (<https://bmcpediatr.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2431-13-166>)

³¹ Dionigi A, Gremigni P. A combined intervention of art therapy and clown visits to reduce preoperative anxiety in children. *J Clin Nurs.* 2017;26(5–6):632–40. doi: 10.1111/jocn.13578.

³² Kuuse AK, Paulander AS, Eulau L. Characteristics and impacts of live music interventions on health and wellbeing for children, families, and health care professionals in paediatric hospitals: a scoping review. *Int J Qual Stud Health Well-being.* 2023 Dec;18(1):2180859. doi: 10.1080/17482631.2023.2180859. PMID: 36880806; PMCID: PMC10013212.

environment by reducing workplace stress and creating a calmer, more empathetic atmosphere, ultimately benefiting both caregivers and patients³³.

Staff and Child Joint Art Sessions³⁴

Joint art sessions where hospital staff and pediatric patients create art together are designed to enhance the well-being of both children and staff. These sessions foster a supportive environment, reduce stress, and promote emotional well-being for everyone involved.

A designated area in the hospital, such as a playroom or a common area, is equipped with art supplies like paints, markers, canvases, and clay. The sessions are scheduled regularly, for example, once a week. Hospital staff, including nurses, doctors, and administrative staff, are invited to join pediatric patients in creating art. The sessions are led by a child life specialist or an art therapist who guides the activities.

Staff and children work together on individual or group projects. They can create paintings, sculptures, or other forms of art, with themes that encourage positive expression, such as "What Makes You Happy" or "Dream Landscapes." After the session, participants share their artwork and experiences, fostering a sense of community. Completed artworks can be displayed in hospital corridors or common areas, creating a positive and colorful environment that benefits everyone.

Playing music to patients before operations/major intervention

Numerous studies highlight the powerful impact pre-recorded music can have on patients before and after surgery. This simple, cost-effective approach has been shown to reduce anxiety and pain levels during and immediately after surgery^{35,36}, while also positively influencing cortisol levels and blood glucose³⁷. By helping to calm patients and promote emotional balance, music offers significant benefits for patient well-being, making it a valuable addition to healthcare settings.

³³ Susan E Mandel, Beth A Davis, Michelle Secic, Patient Satisfaction and Benefits of Music Therapy Services to Manage Stress and Pain in the Hospital Emergency Department, *Journal of Music Therapy*, Volume 56, Issue 2, Summer 2019, Pages 149-173, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jmt/thz001>

³⁴ Rollins, J.A. (2005) Tell Me about It: Drawing as a Communication Tool for Children With Cancer. *Journal of Pediatric Oncology Nursing*, 25, 203-221. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1043454205277103>

³⁵ Bradt J, Dileo C, Shim M. Music interventions for preoperative anxiety. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*. 2013 Jun 6;2013(6):CD006908. doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD006908.pub2. PMID: 23740695; PMCID: PMC9758540.

³⁶ Guerrier, G., Bernabei, F., Lehmann, M., Pellegrini, M., Giannaccare, G., & Rothschild, P. R. (2021). Efficacy of Preoperative Music Intervention on Pain and Anxiety in Patients Undergoing Cataract Surgery. *Frontiers in Pharmacology*, 12, 748296-748296. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fphar.2021.748296>.

³⁷ Mottahedian Tabrizi E, Sahraei H, Movahhedi Rad S, Hajizadeh E, Lak M. The effect of music on the level of cortisol, blood glucose and physiological variables in patients undergoing spinal anesthesia. *EXCLI J*. 2012 Aug 28;11:556-65. PMID: 27350774; PMCID: PMC4920039.

Recommendations to integrate arts and play in health services

Advocate for and Foster Artistic and Playful Interventions in Pediatric Healthcare

Awareness of the important role that the arts and play can have in patient care is not yet widespread among healthcare professionals, decision-makers, and the broader society. Our Healthcare systems tend to focus on clinical treatments and physical health over emotional wellbeing, which is often viewed as secondary in medical care.

Recommendations:

- › Hospitals should explicitly recognize and uphold children's rights to play and participate in artistic activities.
- › Hospitals should integrate artistic and playful activities into standard treatment protocols, making them a recognized component of holistic patient care.
- › Hospitals should integrate both pre-job and on-the-job-training on the importance of play and artistic activities for medical staff in an experiential way, promoting their use in everyday work.

Ensure Funding and Sustainable Support for Artistic and Playful Activities in Pediatric Healthcare

Insufficient financial, human and educational resources are dedicated to establishing and maintaining play and artistic programs in hospitals, limiting their scope and consistency.

Recommendations

- › Healthcare Strategies should allocate specific funds within healthcare budgets to establish and maintain play and artistic activity programs. This can also include cross-institutional funding between the health, social and cultural sectors. Research

demonstrates that providing children with artistic and cultural activities in healthcare settings can help hospitals save on medical costs³⁸³⁹.

- › Hospitals should allocate the necessary resources such as spaces, material, and staff time to support the implementation of artistic and playful activities in paediatric care.
- › Artistic and playful approaches need to be of consistent high-quality to ensure the right impact and the wellbeing of everyone involved. Hospitals and artistic organisations should ensure adequate training, fair payment, and psychosocial support to medical professionals as well as artists, play and cultural professionals working in healthcare settings.

Foster Cross-Sectoral Partnerships and Co-Creational Approaches

The Health and the Arts sectors often operate in isolation from each other and the people they engage with. The lack of sustainable, co-creational and cross-sectoral partnerships has led to missed opportunities that have the potential to enhance the care and well-being of paediatric patients.

Recommendations:

- › Hospitals and artistic organizations should establish clear collaboration frameworks to efficiently set common goals, co-create and exchange information, ensuring successful and sustainable partnerships. Such practices and standards should be co-created by artists and healthcare staff together with patients and family members.
- › Hospitals and artistic organisations should establish standards and guidelines to evaluate the impact of the implemented approaches, including feedback from children, parents, artists and healthcare staff.

Ensure Accessibility to Arts and Play Activities to all Children in Hospital

The access to play and artistic activities can vary widely between hospitals, and even within departments, leading to inconsistent patient experiences.

³⁸ Kocherov, S. et al. (2016). Medical clowns reduce pre-operative anxiety, post-operative pain and medical costs in children undergoing outpatient penile surgery: A randomised controlled trial. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, 52, 877-881. (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jpc.13242/full>)

³⁹ Mozayeni, S., Citera, M., & Amirmostofian, P. (2020). Cost-Benefit Analysis of Mood Uplifting Paintings in Hospitals. *Journal of Organizational Psychology*, 20(1), 9-22. <https://doi.org/10.33423/jop.v20i1.2757>

Recommendations:

- › Hospitals should develop and implement guidelines for the provision of play and art approaches across hospitals, ensuring that all pediatric patients have access to these activities regardless of their condition or location within the hospital.
- › Hospitals should ensure that each child receives the most appropriate artistic and or play intervention, tailored to their age group, needs and cognitive capacities.

Conclusions

The integration of arts and play into pediatric healthcare offers substantial benefits, aligning with a holistic approach to health as defined by the World Health Organization. These activities address not only physical health but also emotional and psychosocial well-being, making them essential for the development, treatment, and recovery of hospitalized children.

Key Benefits of this approach are:

- › **Emotional and Psychological Support:** Arts and play mitigate the anxiety, fear, and stress experienced by hospitalized children, helping them build emotional resilience and confidence.
- › **Physical Rehabilitation:** Structured play and artistic activities aid recovery by improving mobility, strength, and endurance.
- › **Social Inclusion:** These interventions foster peer connections, reducing isolation and creating a sense of belonging.
- › **Support for Healthcare Staff:** Play reduces children's stress and perceived pain, facilitating medical procedures and creating a more positive work environment for staff.

Despite evidence supporting their efficacy, many hospitals and healthcare services still lack the resources, policies, and frameworks to integrate arts and play consistently into care practices, resulting in a gap between the principles of the UNCRC and the realities of pediatric healthcare. In order to overcome these issues it's important to develop the following elements:

- › **Policy Advocacy:** Recognize and uphold children's rights to play and participate in artistic activities as part of healthcare protocols.
- › **Funding and Resources:** Allocate specific budgets, materials, and training to sustain high-quality artistic and play programs in hospitals.
- › **Cross-Sector Partnerships:** Foster collaboration between health and arts sectors to co-create and evaluate impactful practices.
- › **Accessibility:** Ensure all pediatric patients have equitable access to tailored arts and play interventions regardless of their condition or location within the hospital.

By embedding arts and play into pediatric healthcare, hospitals can enhance children's overall well-being, improve recovery outcomes and create a patient-centered environment.

HPH's Recommendations

There are four drivers that the HPH Network recommends to healthcare services and Communities for promoting play and arts in children's health promotion:

- › **For professionals**, it is necessary to promote specific training based on available evidence and know how
- › **For children**, it is necessary to guarantee spaces and opportunities for play and arts activities and their participation in defining strategies in healthcare services policies
- › **For the community**, it is necessary to be aware of the importance of play, arts and leisure for this specific target group
- › **For the International community**, it is necessary to stress the importance of hospitals and healthcare services as places where children's rights are considered and implemented

The HPH Standards represent useful tools to understand how these drivers can find implementation in healthcare services and hospitals, but also in collaboration with Communities. For example, Standard 3 'Enhancing people-centered health care and user involvement' states the importance of teaming up with patients, their families, and caregivers to develop procedures to assess patients' health needs. Children surely have very specific needs that require a diverse way of planning services.

The collaboration with International partners like World Health Organisation, Red Noses International, the Culture and Health Platform and Culture Action Europe on this specific issue represents an asset able to strengthen the HPH Network impact and to empower the knowledge hub required for professionals to become more aware of the impact of access to arts, play and leisure on children's life. Sharing evidence, practices and results can really make the difference in promoting children's health in hospitals.

The International Network of Health Promoting Hospitals and Health Services

The International Network of Health Promoting Hospitals and Health Services (HPH) is a network of over 600 hospitals and health services from over 30 countries that support the implementation of health promotion into the core organizational structure, culture, and decision-making processes of organizations. Initiated by the WHO in 1988, the institutions in our network advocate and assist the advancement of health promotion by collaborating to develop structures, decisions, and policies that aim to obtain positive health outcomes for patients, staff and populations served, and to support sustainable societies. The HPH network is a non-profit, non-governmental organization.

RED NOSES International

RED NOSES International (RNI) is an international non-profit organization based in Austria, dedicated to enhancing mental and social well-being through the art of clowning. With over 30 years of experience, RNI focuses on bringing psychosocial support to hospitalized children, creating moments of laughter and relief in challenging medical environments. In addition, RNI also works with older adults, people in crisis settings, and people with disabilities. With a network of 11 partner organizations across Europe and the Middle East, and further outreaches, RNI's impact extends worldwide. Central to its mission is close collaboration with healthcare, social care and humanitarian institutions and professionals, ensuring the best outcomes through partnership. Through professionally trained artists, RNI integrates humour, play, and creativity into hospital settings, fostering resilience, joy, and human connection for young patients and their families.