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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2025;389:r1190

<http://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.r1190>

Published: 10 June 2025

Play has therapeutic power in healthcare and humanitarian settings

We have a collective responsibility to enable all children, in every setting, to have opportunities to play, write **Johanna Thomson** and **Sophie Janet**

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Imagine an intervention that could dramatically improve a child's health and wellbeing. That could be provided anywhere, at any time. Something that could be prescribed safely and for free by anyone, without negative side effects, and easily tailored to a child's age and needs. That intervention exists: play.

Play is vital for a child's life and health. Play is any activity that is intrinsically motivated and engaged in for the purpose of joyful discovery.¹ It is essential for normal physical, social, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing.² Through play, children make sense of the world around them, express emotions, and build relationships.

Children will naturally engage in play activities that stimulate brain development.³ Through playful experiences, neural connections are forged, laying the foundation for lifelong learning. Brain development occurs most rapidly in the first five years of life, and play during this critical window influences a child's lifelong trajectory.⁴

Although shaped by sociocultural factors, children's play is universal. Children have an inherent need to play and will seek opportunities to do so even in the harshest environments. Play fosters empathy and helps develop skills in problem solving and conflict resolution, providing the foundation for the collective wellbeing of society.

Despite being enshrined in Article 31 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, the fundamental right to play is not universally upheld.⁵ Play is often seen as frivolous. In many contexts, children are prematurely put to work, exposed to violence, or affected by environmental barriers such as conflict or climate change, which deprive them of safe spaces and time to play. In humanitarian settings, children are more likely to experience environmental constraints.

The right to play is further articulated in the World Health Organization's standards for children's rights in hospital, recommending that all healthcare workers use play as part of care and that hospitals promote research on play.⁶ Play helps regulate stress, decreasing pain and anxiety during procedures and reducing recovery times in hospital.⁷ Play humanises a child's experience by reducing suffering and enhancing communication, understanding, and comfort. It facilitates child centred communication and helps to build trusting therapeutic relationships between healthcare workers and children and their families.

Play is essential to the humanitarian response

Humanitarian crises are a major threat to children's health and wellbeing. Conflict drives 80% of global humanitarian needs, and children are disproportionately affected.⁸ More than one in six children globally now live in conflict affected areas.⁹ These children are vulnerable to illness, psychological trauma, stress, and malnutrition, contributing to toxic stress and compounding the harm to their health and wellbeing.

Play can help restore a child's identity in situations where they have a profound loss of control, helping them process complex emotions of fear, loss, and separation.¹⁰ Play can help mitigate the effects of stress and build resilience, with positive long term effects on mental health.¹¹ Despite the horrific living conditions faced by children in Gaza, where an estimated 50 000 children have been killed or injured since 7 October 2023,¹² kites pieced together with broken sticks and plastic bags continue to fill the skies overhead, a fierce symbol of hope.

In conflict and crisis situations a child's right to play is often deprioritised, overshadowed by the urgent need for food, shelter, and medical care. War and violence disrupt safe spaces for play, and cramped living conditions further limit opportunities during and after conflict. The associated psychological trauma invariably affects a child's ability to engage in play. Caregivers might have difficulty responding to the child's need for play as they navigate their own suffering and bereavement. But the biggest barriers to play are adults—parents, policy makers, and healthcare providers who have forgotten, ignore, or fail to recognise the vital role of play.

Play can be implemented anywhere, at any time. Lack of access to toys is not a barrier. Even simple games like "peekaboo" enhance language development and help establish stable, nurturing caregiver interactions. Talking, joking, and singing can all be incorporated into a child's routine care. Culturally adapted child friendly spaces can offer calm and familiarity in frightening environments. More structured approaches can be implemented at minimal cost, providing suitable safe spaces for play and toys from locally sourced materials.

In 2024, the UN adopted a resolution establishing 11 June as the inaugural international day of play. The day represents a global commitment to ensuring that the necessary funding, policies, and training are in place to uphold this fundamental right. A generation of children are being robbed of their childhood by violence and instability. We have a collective

responsibility to safeguard this essential intervention and ensure that all children, in every context, have opportunities to play.

Competing interests: None declared.

Provenance: Not commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

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