

# BREAKING NEWS: Play is Medicine

Integrating Play Therapy into  
Paediatric Care in Conflict Settings

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**Holly Clark, MS, CTRS, CCLS**

Play Therapy Consultant

MSF Sweden Innovation Unit



**Every day, MSF saves children's lives — but surviving is only the beginning of their journey.**

In our wards, we see children who no longer play. They flinch at sudden sounds and withdraw from touch. Their bodies recover — but their sense of safety does not.

**Play is essential for a child's wellbeing.**

It supports healthy physical, cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional development.

After trauma, play provides a safe way to process experiences, reduce stress, and rebuild a sense of trust, mastery, and confidence.



**At MSF, we understand that medical care and psychosocial care go hand in hand — healing the body and restoring emotional safety are inseparable.**

In conflict and crisis, play might seem inconsequential — yet it's often the first step towards healing for children and their caregivers.

# BREAKING NEWS

Play therapy is not an add-on —  
it's essential paediatric care

# The Need – Why Integration Matters

A child's recovery depends as much on how we deliver care as what we deliver.

Across MSF's projects, many children are raised in crisis environments. Exposure to displacement, violence, and instability disrupts attachment and development, altering how a child's brain manages stress and relationships.

When these children enter our hospitals or nutrition wards, the unfamiliar sights and routines can unintentionally re-traumatize them.

**Integrated play therapy — as part of broader psychosocial care — can address this.**

Embedding play and connection in daily routines creates a foundation for physical and psychological recovery.

**Treatment spaces become environments of care, connection, and hope.**



# The Solution – Play as Therapy

## TRAUMA-INFORMED PLAY THERAPY

At MSF play therapy is grounded in the principles of trauma-informed care:

- ✓ Safety
- ✓ Trust
- ✓ Choice
- ✓ Empowerment
- ✓ Collaboration

Providing small, consistent moments where children can regulate their emotions, express fear, and regain agency.


When integrated into psychosocial care, play therapy strengthens attachment, improves cooperation during procedures, and fosters resilience — both for children and their caregivers.

This has been demonstrated in research and field experience.



# Integration in Action – MSF Kenema, Sierra Leone



A man with short dark hair, wearing a red short-sleeved shirt with a white tie at the back, stands on a balcony. He is looking out over a long, covered walkway of a building complex. The walkway has a metal railing and a roof supported by wooden beams. In the background, there are other buildings with red roofs and greenery. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting daytime.

**Karim Osman Kenewah**

**Mental Health Supervisor**



00:02.83



# From Pilot → to Platform

## Healing Through Play

THE EVIDENCE IS CLEAR

Play therapy works at MSF,  
and integration is the next  
step



# Integration Resource – Play Therapy Toolkit (PTT)

**Co-developed by MSF Sweden Innovation Unit and Operational Centre Brussels**

Practical, field-friendly tool designed for MSF contexts, inclusive of:

- ✓ Play therapy concepts
- ✓ Therapeutic & developmental activities
- ✓ Low-resource toy-making instruction
- ✓ Trauma-informed practice guidance
- ✓ Play space setup checklists
- ✓ Case examples from MSF missions

**UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 31**

***Every child has the right to play, even in crisis settings.***

# Call to Action

## **LEARN –**

Explore the MSF Play Therapy Toolkit at [msf-siu.org](https://www.msf-siu.org)

## **ADAPT –**

Embed play therapy into paediatric and MHPSS contexts to help children reconnect and recover

## **ADVOCATE –**

Champion trauma-informed, rights-based care at every level of MSF practice

**The right to play is the right to heal**



# Thank you!

Even small, structured moments  
of play can make a meaningful  
difference in crisis settings



VISIT the  
SIU website



DOWNLOAD the  
Play Therapy Toolkit



Holly Clark, MS, CTRS, CCLS  
Play Therapy Consultant  
MSF Sweden Innovation Unit



# REFERENCES

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