

'Playing all day'

"What a great job you have, playing all day" that's generally the comment I get when I introduce myself as the community play specialist. Having worked in the health sector for more than 10 years it's obvious that the families I currently support and have supported in the past believe as I do in the importance of 'play'. In a particularly stressful situation Children's natural instinct is to play.

You are in a situation where you are not sure what to say to your child, it may be that they have a serious illness; it may be that you are sick, it may be that they are living with a relative that is sick or dying. You want to find out how they feel, you want to make sure they know all about the procedure they are about to have, you want to make sure they are not the forgotten ones amongst all of the information and sea of emotions.

As the play specialist, I make sure your child and you have support on the journey, whatever the situation may be.....

Who are community play specialists?

Community Play Specialists are qualified to support families and children* through the use of direct play in their own home or community setting – providing a 'bridge between treatment in the hospital and community'. Play with a purpose, Specialist Play that allows the child to express themselves in a safe way with regards to their treatment or state of mind regarding their illness/treatment.

Play specialists use 'play' to prepare children for procedures ranging from blood tests, check ups, surgery, insertion of tubes, and much more.

Play specialists with the adequate training can support children faced with their own mortality, they can utilize play to support them come to terms with their end of life and planning their funeral. They can support siblings, using play to prepare them for their sister/brother's death, anticipation grief, death and bereavement.

Play Specialists use a variety of methods to support the child through a procedure, ranging from specialized dolls, correct medical equipment, pictures etc... Diversion therapy is provided to enable the child to cope better with the procedure, it is not used to distract them away from the procedure altogether, but to make it a more pleasant experience and more bearable.

Following any procedure it is important to assess how the child 'coped' with the experience therefore post procedural play is carried out.

Like anything, a formal assessment is carried out on the child first to assess the level of support required, children can regress during treatment/illness or any form of hospitalization therefore it is important to provide the right tools to enable the child to develop their skills and continue with the development during treatment.

Siblings and indeed the child under going treatment can sometimes have behaviour changes, specialized play will be used to support the family 'cope' with these changes.

The play specialist works closely with the family, wherever possible providing the tools for them to carry out the job, empowering them to support their child.

Specialist play may include:

Medical play
Sand therapy
Clay
Art
Music
Dance
Guided Imagery
Child centred play therapy

*Child and young person up to the age of 18 years

What are the benefits?

- Ongoing support in the home/community
- Psychosocial support
- Preparation for future procedures carried out in a secure environment to the child.
- Empowering families
- Emotional support for families
- Sessions carried out in child's own world of knowledge. i.e play
- Communication between all professionals
- 'Fun' could be created out of something that could be serious
- Ongoing assessment
- 'Whole' family support