



# Time to Play: a History of Play Therapy at the Women's and Children's Hospital

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An exhibition curated by Alex Del Gaudio

(Volunteer, WCHN History & Heritage Collection)  
As part of the 2022 South Australia's History Festival

For decades now, Play Therapy has been an integral service provided for child patients at the Women's and Children's Hospital (WCH). Even for adults, spending time in a hospital can seem frightening and unfamiliar. Paediatric patients feel this even more so – especially if they are in pain or ill, and don't know what to expect.

*Because of this, it is important that hospitals provide a form of emotional and behavioural therapy which allows children to communicate in a language that they universally understand – play.*

Forms of Play Therapy were introduced at the former Adelaide Children's Hospital in the late 1930s, when the profession was young. The Hospital's first Play Therapist (called an Almoner) was brought over from the United Kingdom to establish a dedicated department that would rapidly expand in the ensuing decades.

Today, the Women's & Children's Hospital Foundation funds and supports the Play Therapy program at the WCH to aid and comfort child inpatients and children visiting the Hospital for appointments.

*This program not only involves children playing with toys but incorporates storytelling, music making, arts and crafts as other forms of play therapy to engage children and help them understand what is happening in their treatment.*

Rather than eliminating unpleasant feelings altogether, the goal of the Play Therapy programs is to allow children to 'feel what they feel' and give them a safe space to communicate this without becoming overwhelmed.

The exhibition *Time to Play* focuses on the different facets of Play Therapy and traces the establishment of this Hospital's Department and its subsequent flourishing into what it is today.

*Play Therapy is much more than just fun and games!*



*Play Leaders, WCH, c1995.*

Left to right: Jenny Gomersall, Barbara Mynhart, Janet Cleveland, Sue Macklin, Rosie Gugenberger

SOCIAL WORK STAFF 1937 - 1987	
Mara Aboline 5.2.1973 - 1.2.1974	Dale Bagshaw (Gower) 1964 - 1966
Jane Anderson (Pearce) 1977 - 1982	Felicity Gunner (Fowler) 10.8.1970 - 31.12.71 and 22.9.1973 - 10.1972
Janie Barbour 29.4.1974 -->	Claire Haskell 2.1982 - 5.1989
Penny Kilby (Blackmore) 26.11.1973 - 26.10.1976	Tony Hawley 1984 - 9.1987
Sue Bowen (Brookman) 1946 - 1947	Elizabeth Hogben 17.11.1952 - 21.2.1973
Lorna Bull 3.1964 - 6.1966	Natalie Ibarra (locum) 6.1987 - 9.1987
Robyn Burnard (Radford) 2.2.1960 - 9.7.1960	Janet Kelly (Jamison) 1969 - 1971
Elizabeth Cavalier 7.2.1949 - 12.3.49 and 26.2.1951 - 19.1.1952	Sue Kristall 1987 - 1988
Charlie Coombs 11.1978 - 1.1982	Elizabeth Lee-Gray 19.7.1971 - 27.8.1971
Mary Cornish (Trembath) 3.1949 - 26.2.51	Trish Lewis (Parker) 6.1.1969 - 17.4.1970
Rosemary Crabb 1.5.1985 - 12.9.1986	Joan Lupton May 1937 -
Barbara Dahl (deceased 1985) 1972 - 1976	Susan McBratney (locum) 26.2.1968 - 12.7.1968
Fran de Cure 5.1970 - 11.12.87	Michael Masters 10.2.1982 - 20.4.1987
Alwyn Dolling mid 1974 - 1977	Clyda May (Cherry) 1976 - 1981
Rosemary Douglas 5.12.1960 - 23.12.1960	Jillian Meaney (Smith) 26.2.1963 - 19.7.1963
Sandra Edwards (locum) 7.1973 - 10.1973	Lesley Mineall 2.7.78 -->
Miss Eu mid 1960	Ada Moody (deceased 1986) 1942 - 1949
Kate Gilliflan (Hannaford) 13.3.1967 - 24.12.1968	Annette Morton (Grant) 1947 - 1948

Annabel Mullins (Castine) 1966 - 1969	Eveline Findale 1970 - 1973
Ingrid Osterman (Whitehead) 7.1.57 - 30.5.59	Jill Thyer (Griffiths) 11.3.1965 - 20.6.1967 and 15.7.1968 - 18.4.1969
Kitty Peak (Glichrst) 1967 - 1970	Marilyn Tudor
John Pengilly 15.1.79 - 6.1981 and 1983 -->	Shirley van der Wolff 2.1977 -->
Pat Pieterek 1976 - 1985	Pauline Verity 1.1985 - 12.1985 and 12.1987 -->
Graeme Pitt 1981 - 1984	Chris Walsh 12.5.1975 - 20.5.1977
Margaret Plunkett 7.12.1959 - 30.1.1960	
Elizabeth Pridham 2.1.1971 - 2.6.1978	
Margot Rischbieth (Rosser) 4.1.1971 - 19.11.1974	
Sandra Saunders 20.10.1976 - 12.1978	
Beryl Schild 1978 - 1989	
Lorna Seedsman (Hurford) 16.6.1959 - 9.2.1962	
Sue Settle 3.1972 - 11.1972	
Cecily Sheppard (Dolman) 2.1976 - 5.8.1981	
Jane Simpson 1.1986 - 30.6.1987	
Kathy Smallcombe (Grealey) 2.1983 - 27.4.1987	
Margaret Sullivan 14.1.1952 - 14.12.1982	
J.C. Teo 24.5.1965 - 31.12.1965	
Nelen Thompson (Stoekel) 1970 - 1971	

*List of staff working in the first 50 years of the Adelaide Children's Hospital Social Work Department, 1987*

## **It is a right of childhood to play; it is a child's symbolic language of self-expression.**

Without an opportunity to sit and play, a hospital may seem like a scary place! But since 1937, different types of games and toys have been provided here for children to enjoy.

*Engaging children in play at a hospital provides them with comfort and reassurance when they may be experiencing unfamiliar and potentially frightening experiences. This kind of play time is often called 'Play Therapy'.*

Joan Lupton was the first Play Therapist at this Hospital. She came to the Adelaide Children's Hospital (ACH) in 1937. In those days, her role was called an Almoner.

Since then, Play Therapy has grown to become an important care service in a paediatric hospital, working across all the children's wards and supporting other departments of the Hospital.



*Ms Joan Lupton, Almoner and founder of the Social Service Department (later Play Therapy), ACH c.1960s*

# Evolution of Play Therapy at the Women's and Children's Hospital

**1937**

**Joan Lupton** signs on at the Adelaide Children's Hospital (ACH) as Almoner.

With her appointment, a new Social Service Department is created. Lupton is the first Almoner in Adelaide!

**1941**

By 1941, there are **six Almoners** in Adelaide.

Branching off from Social Work, the role of an Almoner was to study and treat social disabilities affecting a patient's health, and ensure patients received the full benefit from their medical treatment.

**Mid-1940s**

**Barbara Auld** becomes the ACH's first handicraft instructor, encouraging children to use creative expression to reduce their anxiety and stress.

**1961**

**JULY: The Play Therapy Department** is established at the ACH.

## 1966

Occupational therapist **Rosemary Barnitt** describes her field as:

*"a form of medical treatment concerned with the child and his [sic] ability to meet the demands of his environment".*

At this stage, the ACH Occupational Therapy department has an office dedicated to the play therapists who assist their work.



*Miss Rosemary Barnitt, Occupational Therapist ACH, 1966*



*Tony Dawkins playing with a soft toy to prepare for a Cranial Xray procedure, ACH, 1960s*

## 1962

Almoner **Margaret Sullivan** describes the role of Play Therapists in the new Department.

Play Therapists are in charge of listening to problems and finding a way to minimise or relieve them. She refers to this as 'Social Work'.



*Margaret Sullivan, retired Social Worker, ACH, c1987*

## 1975

The **Association for the Welfare of Children in Hospital (AWCH)** is founded.

## 1981

Adelaide hospitals are commended by the **AWCH** for their bright, well-stocked playrooms and waiting areas compared to other hospitals interstate.

## From 1985

From the mid-1980s, Sue Macklin begins working at the ACH.

She describes her play coordinator duties as working to distract children, relax them, and help them pass the time in Hospital using activities such as games, puzzles, arts and crafts, storytelling, dancing, and play theatre.



*Play leader doing craft with a patient, ACH, 1986*

## Today

There are now **11** Play Therapists working across the WCH!

## 1984

By now, the ACH Occupational Therapy department houses the Hospital's Therapeutic Toy Library and Play Therapists were working in the individual children's wards.

## 2010

The Women's & Children's Hospital Foundation creates the Arts in Health program for the WCH and begins its support of the Play Therapy Service.

The Arts in Health program is focused on easing children's distress and distracting them from pain and discomfort by encouraging their creativity through artwork and activities.



## Play in a hospital provides comfort and reassurance at a time of unfamiliar and potentially frightening experiences

*Friendly faces create an environment that says, “this is a place for children”. Play mixes together development and learning to help children understand a new environment.*



*Play leaders engaging patients in various fun activities, ACH, 1986*



*Children finger painting in an Occupational Therapy session, ACH, c1983–84.*



## All shapes and forms

In the past play therapy could come in the form of a rabbit, a dog, or even a pony! Animals can provide comfort, and a friend to bond with. This can teach children how to connect with other people, too.

*Today the WCH Foundation supports a separate Animal Assisted Therapy program where trained dogs and their handlers assist in patient rehabilitation.*



*Patient Toby Stribling cuddling  
a bunny, ACH, date unknown*



*Zoo Day, WCH, 1998.*

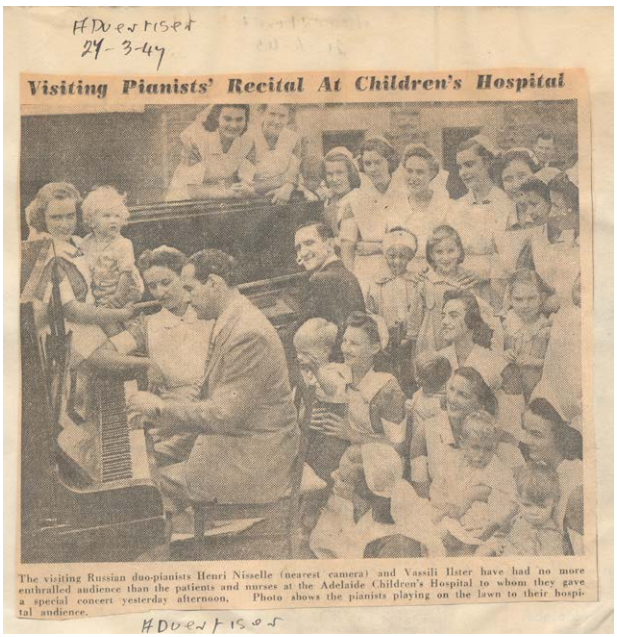


*Guide Dogs visit, WCH, 16 October 1998*

Sometimes play therapy can come in the form of a guitar, or a drum. Music can provide a way for children to express and feel their emotions when they're not always able to say them out loud.



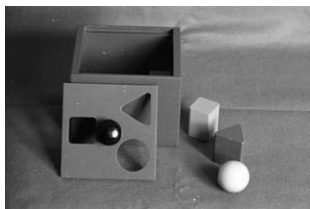
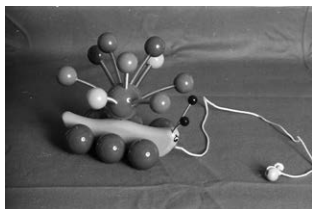
*The Wiggles entertaining patients on the Play Deck, WCH, 4 July 2001*



*Pianists Henri Nisselle and Vassili Ilster performing for patients on the lawn, ACH, 29 March 1949*

## Which toy will a child reach for first?

What toys allow children to fully express and explore their thoughts, feelings, experiences and behaviours? Children often communicate their lived experiences through play. Each toy has an expressive value.



*Portraits of toys used in Occupational Therapy, ACH, 1980-81*



*Patients posing with Troll dolls, WCH, 1996*

## **“The jolliest indoor games for boys and girls demand a floor” H.G. Wells (Floor Games, 1911)**

*Play therapy is more than just playing – it’s emotional learning. When Play Therapists connect with children in a hospital, it sends the message that their new environment means them no harm.*

In 1911, the author H.G. Wells wrote a book titled *Floor Games*, describing the games he played with his sons on the floor. Without realising it, he inspired a new form of children’s therapy.

Inspired by Wells, a British paediatrician in the early 1930s used sand trays laid out on the floor to encourage children to create sculptures and scenes. This helped them to communicate how they were feeling – without using words.



*Boy participating in occupational activities in the gym, ACH, 24 June 1981*



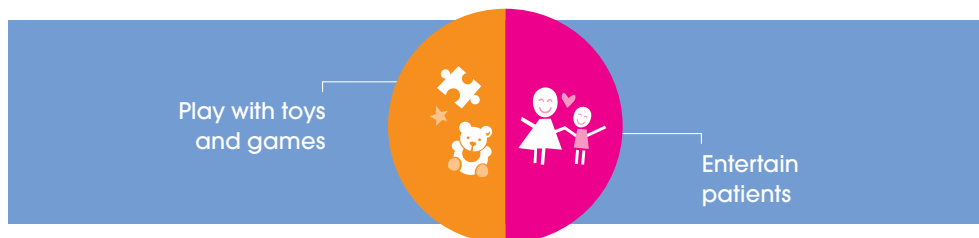


*Children playing games on a ward, ACH, early 1980s*

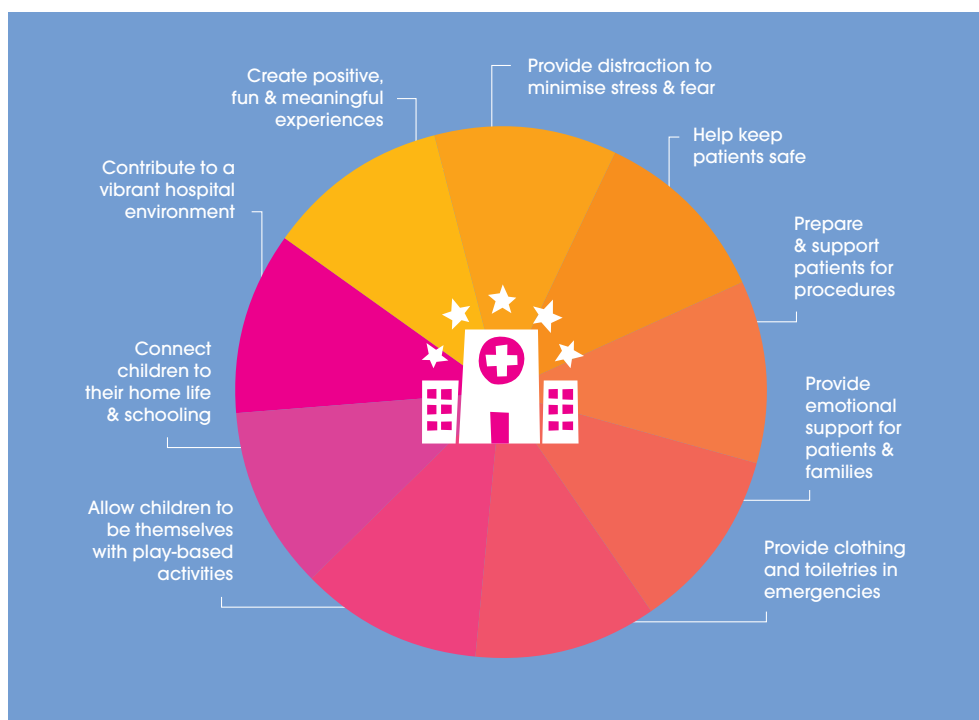


*Occupational Therapists engaging patients in floor games, Adelaide Medical Centre for Women and Children, 1989*

## What people think Play Therapists do:



## What Play Therapists actually do:



Women's &  
Children's Hospital  
Foundation



Government of South Australia  
Women's and Children's  
Health Network



Women's  
& Children's  
Hospital



## Our Play Therapy service today

*Today there are 11 Play Therapists working across the WCH. Each patient is nurtured and supported as an individual with Play Therapists taking into consideration their unique needs, interests, cultural values and developmental abilities.*



Current Play Therapists at the WCH Hospital celebrating Superhero Day, 30 March 2022  
Left to Right: Kim, Chelsea, Amanda and Eileen (back row), Kylie and Linda (front)

The Women's and Children's Hospital is a busy place; busily concerned with the serious business of medical care. Play Therapy recognises that, for the children receiving this care, there must still be **time to play**.



This exhibition was planned and exhibited on the lands of the Kaurna People. We acknowledge Aboriginal people as the traditional custodians of Country and respect their ongoing and deep spiritual connection to the land, sea, air, waters, community and country. We pay our respect to their elders, past, present and emerging.

**For more information contact:**

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Cover & above Image: detail of *'Bring a Bear to Show you Care'*, WCH, Christmas 1999



**Health**  
Women's and Children's  
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**SOUTH  
AUSTRALIA'S  
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1-31 MAY 2022

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