



**"This has been
a lifeline, genuinely
made a huge difference
to my daughter's life
and is improving her
emotional and
mental wellbeing
beyond measure."**

**SPREAD
A SMILE**

Spotlights of Impact
2024 - 2025

Welcome

We are **delighted to present** **Spread a Smile's Impact Report.**

In the following pages, we share inspiring stories and feedback about our work. Together, they illustrate the transformative impact of Spread a Smile and the thousands of lives we have touched.

We are grateful to Mila, Jacob and Donna for sharing their stories (on pages 18 and 38). We also extend heartfelt thanks to the parents, carers, children and medical professionals who took part in our surveys. This year marked the first time we invited young patients themselves to complete an impact survey, a step we will continue annually to ensure their voices are at the heart of our work.

Thank you for your support. We hope this report inspires you and encourages you to help Spread a Smile bring even more joy, laughter and hope to children facing life's toughest challenges. We couldn't do it without you.



Lucy Jackson, Chief Executive



Laura Walter, Director of Services



The need we address

In the 12 years since our founding, Spread a Smile has grown into an impactful organisation, supporting families during some of their most challenging times.

Our mission is to provide a **bespoke entertainment programme that brings joy and laughter to seriously ill babies, children, and young people**. We define seriously ill as anything that is chronic, life-threatening or life-limiting, and negatively impacts on quality of life including late effects from previous conditions.

Serious illness, even if short-term, can provoke a great deal of anxiety in children and their families. Chronic health problems may persist for months or forever, and will create significant changes to and limitations in usual activity. When a diagnosis is made, young people often report feelings of stress and anxiety – a diagnosis can be overwhelming and traumatic. During treatment, there will be anxiety, fear, pain,

ongoing loss of normal routines and following treatment, we know that support decreases suddenly and significantly, and children and families often feel isolated, experiencing late effects and PTSD. Young people with serious illness who responded to a survey reported 48% higher anxiety than those of similar ages in the population at large (Office for National Statistics, 2023a).

In hospitals during treatment, play is seen as a means of bringing some normality into an otherwise atypical setting for childhood. It is also often used to help children understand and cope with hospitalisation, illness, and treatment. Research from the UK and USA has highlighted that children emphasise the role of play in their healthcare and find it to be the **'best thing' about being in hospital**.



Play is also essential to healthy childhood development because **it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and young people**. It also offers an ideal opportunity for parents and carers to engage and connect with their children. **Play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognised by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child.**

In hospitals during treatment, play is seen as a means of bringing some normality into an otherwise atypical setting for childhood.

Through our in-person and virtual visits and our family events, **Spread a Smile provides and enables normal childhood experiences to children who wouldn't otherwise have them.** This has a positive impact on mood, **reduces anxiety, builds confidence and resilience** and gives children a sense of control, when so much control has been taken away from them.

It provides families with a positive shared experience and improves the hospital experience for everyone. Play is a cherished part of childhood that over the longer term, offers seriously ill children important developmental benefits and parents and carers the opportunity to fully engage with their children when opportunities are much reduced.

In a report published by Together for Short Lives in 2025¹, it was estimated that there were 99,000 seriously ill children in the UK – a figure that has tripled over the past 20 years and is projected to grow by another 50% in the next decade. These children are affected in multiple negative ways.

Prolonged and repeated hospitalisation, time at home or endless days feeling ill significantly reduces their opportunities for play and socialisation. These children often face multiple negative impacts:

- **Developmental delays:** Key milestones, such as walking and talking, are often delayed due to prolonged illness.
- **Loss of normality:** Time spent in hospital or at home leads to the loss of familiar structures, such as school, home life, and social connections, affecting their sense of community and support.
- **Emotional toll:** Long hospital stays, monotonous routines, and the intense focus on treatment can cause anxiety, low mood, fear, distress, and a sense of isolation.
- **Physical and cognitive changes:** Treatments like chemotherapy and steroids can alter physical appearance, mood, and cognitive abilities.

The Transformative Power of Play



¹ Together for short Lives Built to last? The state of children's palliative care in 2025

The Challenge in Hospitals

Despite the clear benefits of play, hospitals often lack the resources to provide regular entertainment and recreational activities for young patients. In 2004, the Department of Health's National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services set a minimum standard for health play provision in the NHS. However, 20 years later, research reveals that many UK hospitals still do not employ health play specialists or provide even basic play and arts resources².

Our Mission

To provide a bespoke programme of play and entertainment that brings joy, laughter, and meaningful connection to seriously ill babies, children, and young people. Through our dedicated work in NHS hospitals and hospices, we aim to enhance emotional wellbeing, inspire moments of happiness, and restore the vital role of play in childhood, especially where illness has taken it away. We are equally committed to supporting the families of seriously ill children to ease their journey and ensure they never face it alone.

Our Uniqueness

While several other charities support seriously ill children, **Spread a Smile stands out for our long-term commitment and personal approach.**

Many families share that support for their children often ends once treatment is over, but **we remain steadfastly present.** From gifts and Christmas hampers to invitations to our special events and outings, **we continue to bring joy and create lasting memories.** This continuity of care **helps families feel valued and supported, not just during treatment but well beyond.**

We are there for families throughout their entire journey, **providing bespoke services for each child and young person, depending on their individual needs.** All of our entertainment and interactions are **completely child-focused and child-led**, with our entertainers and Visit Managers being **skilled and sensitive at 'reading the room'** and interacting in a way that makes each child/young person **feel valued and heard.** We check in regularly with families registered with us, as well as our NHS hospital partners, to ensure that we are providing entertainment services that are fit for purpose and of the highest quality.



"Spread a Smile is fantastic, our patients and families love them. It's clear that they make a real difference to people's lives."



Our Services and Partnerships

Based on our understanding of the needs of young people and the medical professionals who care for them, we work in three core ways:

Entertainer Visits

We deliver in-person and virtual hospital visits to children under the care of our NHS hospital partners from our team of professional entertainers, each supported by highly-trained Visit Managers. Whatever each child's situation,

age or preferences, **we create an experience that helps make their journey in hospital and their treatment easier.** Our entertainers also support specialist clinics, such as oncology or haematology. You can see a full list of our hospital partners on pages 42–43.

Outings and Events

We offer an extended programme of family-focused events to **bring families together, creating memories and reducing isolation.** Examples include our Summer and Winter Parties each for 500+ guests; afternoon teas; and theatre trips. We also deliver treats to hospitals at Christmas, Easter and Valentine's Day. **Siblings are included in as much of our work as possible** as we recognise the profound impact a serious illness in the family can have on them too.

Art Initiatives

We create colourful murals on hospital wards and windows to make the hospital environment a more welcoming place. Ideas for murals are conceived by children, hospital staff and our team of artists. **Our hand-painted, bespoke immobilisation masks** and moulds support young patients undergoing radiotherapy treatment, making the whole process **less frightening** and helping them become **more accepting** of their treatment.

From April 2024 –
March 2025,
we delivered...

From April 2025 –
March 2026,
we plan to deliver...

Connections with
patients, siblings,
family members
and hospital staff

45,098

71,000

In-person bedside
visits

11,539

18,411

Unique number of
children supported
on hospital visits

8,580

11,900

Understanding our Impact

Play is more than just a source of joy for children – it is recognised as a fundamental human right.

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child underscores the vital role of play in a child's life. It is a key measure for monitoring physical, emotional and cognitive development.

However, when children enter medical settings, they are often exposed to significant risks to their wellbeing. Structured play, facilitated by specialised professionals, can serve as a powerful intervention in such circumstances. Research shows that it helps maintain a sense of continuity with life before illness³ or provides an imaginative escape from the challenges of their reality⁴. Children with a chronic or life-threatening disease may face

obstacles that negatively impact play and play development, possibly impeding developmental milestones, beyond the actual illness itself⁵.

A 2023 review of 25 academic studies, involving 1,629 children, evaluated the impact of creative and play-based interventions in hospitals. The findings were clear: **therapeutic play significantly improves children's hospital experiences and emotional wellbeing**. Among the children studied:

- **57%** showed a reduction in anxiety levels
- **67%** experienced positive effects on pain and emotional outcomes, such as reduced sadness or anger.

³Romito et al, 2021

⁴Tanaka et al, 2010; Bukola and Paula, 2017

⁵Healthy Play, Better Coping: The importance of Play for the Development of Children in Health and Disease, Science Direct, December 2018





The evidence supporting creative and play-based interventions is overwhelming. By reducing anxiety, alleviating pain, and improving emotional resilience, **our activities transform the hospital experience for children.** Spread a Smile's work ensures that children facing some of the most challenging times in their lives are given **opportunities to laugh, play and express themselves - meeting an essential need that goes beyond traditional medical care.**

In many cases, **play teams rely on Spread a Smile visits** to ensure that young patients under their care receive access to normalising play experiences that they may not be able to offer. Spread a Smile visits can act as a 'reset' for children experiencing negative emotions and high anxiety in hospital, bringing them back to a calmer and more positive state, which can help them to **engage better with healthcare professionals and cope with procedures, treatments and hospital admissions/appointments more effectively.**



"Patients' reactions change significantly when Spread a Smile visits. You can see the difference in their mood, they become more relaxed and engaged."

Healthcare Professional

*"The service Spread a Smile offers has been literally life-changing for our daughter. She's always spent long periods of time at home, too unwell for school and it had a profound impact on her mental health. She saw no one, sometimes for weeks on end and we had very little structure to our days. **Your team make her feel seen, valued, heard, loved and important.** They're there for her regardless of where she's at mentally and physically. Equally as a mum, it's been wonderful to see these smiley faces every day. They give me a real boost and the time to have a break. The team take the reins for half an hour, and I can catch my breath knowing she's having the best time. **The impact you've had is huge and we are forever grateful** for your virtual sessions that have given her a much-needed community."*

Parent

SPOTLIGHT ON

Our Partnerships

Partnerships are at the heart of what we do, ensuring we can better serve our beneficiaries. Collaboration strengthens our impact and helps us reach more families in need.

We are proud to collaborate closely with **Children with Cancer UK** in supporting children diagnosed with cancer. Approximately 50% of the young people we assist are affected by cancer, and it's been a privilege to work alongside them. Their generous funding has made possible both in-person and virtual hospital visits, as well as the delivery of our Summer and Winter Parties. Additionally, we've had the pleasure of inviting their families to other events and providing them with Smile Hampers.

"I deeply admire the incredible work that Spread a Smile does. Through shared initiatives, we have witnessed firsthand the profound impact they have on families facing unimaginably difficult times. Together, we are strengthening our shared mission to bring comfort and care to those who need it most. We are proud to collaborate with Spread a Smile on this journey."

Amar Naher
CEO, Children with Cancer UK

We also cherish our partnership with **Camp Simcha**, with whom we share a strong, supportive relationship. Together, we offer support to their families and provide entertainment for their family events, bringing smiles and joy when it's needed most.

We partnered for a second year with **Flynne's Barn** – a place where young people living with cancer can come together to find peace and forge friendships – which hosted us for a wonderful residential trip in the Cumbrian mountains. Through this partnership, we were able to invite five young people and their families for a four-day stay.

"It's fantastic to collaborate with Spread a Smile. The surroundings and tremendous support the team provides has a tangible impact."

Katherine Bonner
Flynne's Barn

"We deeply appreciate their support and the partnership in this joint work."

Daniel Gillis,
CEO, Camp Simcha

We are also proud to work with The Brain Tumour Charity and delivered our first joint family event in February 2025 with more planned for later in the year.

We're also incredibly proud to collaborate with and support six hospice partners; Alexander Devine Children's Hospice in Maidenhead, Demelza Hospice Care for Children in Kent, Forever Colours Children's Hospice in Buckinghamshire, Helen & Douglas House in Oxford, Noah's Ark Children's Hospice in London and Rennie Grove Peace Hospice in St Albans.



SPOTLIGHT ON

Mila

We met Mila Rundic when she was 18. She shared her story with us.

The impact of my cancer diagnosis can only be described as total upheaval. It felt like my life had completely stopped. I was constantly going between my house and the hospital, monitoring symptoms and unable to see friends for fear of infection. **Treatment and medication were my sole focus and I had little energy for anything else.**

Now in remission, I look back at that time and wonder how I made it through. Then I remember. It was because of glimmers. Little glimmers of hope that **life can continue to have joy, even in the toughest of situations.** Spread a Smile were these glimmers; **whenever they came to visit the Teenage and Young Adult floor there was a visible shift in atmosphere.** You could see other patients and their parents or guardians sharing smiles while the musician played the patient's favourite song or an artist made an impressive balloon model. My mum and I shared looks of disbelief at the magician's tricks, completely wrapped up in the magic of the moment. **These moments were a break from the anxiety, busyness and intensity of the moment.** Having something to do made the time feel lighter.

Regular art sessions online with Spread a Smile while having chemo and recovering from its side effects have been the highlight of my week and have acted as a form of mindfulness for me. The team has always let me choose what we work on in each session and I have been amazed by the different styles of drawing and collage we have been able to do.

Spread a Smile

Spread a Smile takes a bleak day and fills it with so much colour.

On my birthday, as I was not well enough to attend an in-person party, they organised an amazing online magic birthday party for me. Later on, I was able to attend some in person events such as seeing Wicked, Newsies and Sister Act in the West End. Attending these has meant that **I have some amazing new memories to treasure since being ill and these have helped me to feel more hopeful for the future.**

Spread a Smile takes a bleak day and fills it with so much colour. It is this colour which I remember now, it has almost completely replaced the bleakness. **My experience of hospital and cancer treatment wouldn't be the same without them. The smiles they have spread are hope at a time when hope feels very far away. When everything felt scary, they brought glimmers of warmth, joy and familiarity to life,** and that's what I think I really needed most.

SPOTLIGHT ON

The Paediatric Intensive Care Unit at Great Ormond Street Hospital

Debbie Tropp is one of the Spread a Smile Visit Managers. She has been part of the Spread a Smile team since 2015. Her main role is managing weekly visits to the intensive care wards at Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH): the Paediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU), Cardiac Intensive Care Unit and the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. On each visit, she's joined by one of our talented singers, guitar-players or fairies and we visit babies, children and teenagers.

We tailor each PICU bedside visit to the needs of the child, with sensitivity and care. Some of the patients we see are extremely vulnerable and unwell and their parents are highly anxious. Our visits are slow and calm; we take our time, and adapt to changes in a child's situation or an unexpected visit from a doctor. We have visited PICU at GOSH every

week since October 2019, and we receive lots of requests from medical staff as we enter the wards. Doctors now sometimes wait for us to finish entertaining, not wanting to disturb us! Recently a nurse saw us and shouted out, 'The smiles are here!', and another day a doctor smiled when we arrived and said, 'I love fairy day'.

"The smiles are here!"

”

Photo: Debbie Tropp (left) and Sar Bergman

We sing soothing songs to babies, children, teenagers and their family members. Some children are heavily sedated or are having end-of-life care. **Parents sometimes video their children during these visits to keep as memories. They tell us how important our time with their children has been.**

On a visit to GOSH in March, we visited a very unhappy toddler who was shouting to his mum about wanting to go to the playroom. We weren't sure he wanted us, but our singer, Rosie, started singing Paw Patrol and he started to protest a little less; by the end of The Wheels on the Bus, he was snuggling into his mum. As we continued to play, he calmed down and seemed to fall asleep. By the time we moved to the child in the next bed, he was calmly lying down. We played for the other three babies in the bay and, as we left, he was sitting up in bed, playing calmly. **The atmosphere in the bay had completely changed; the nurse gave us a huge thumbs up.**

We're always mindful that **our music resonates throughout the ward, spreading smiles not only to the child we're singing to but also to others nearby.**



“

**"All the mums
and all the
nurses smiled
and clapped in
delight"**

During one visit, one of our singers, Collette, was singing to a little baby, with his mum and sister, and three nursing staff. Also in the bay was a 13-year-old who made it clear she wanted no part of it, and a five-year-old whom we had previously visited. By the time Collette had finished, all the children, all the mums and all the nurses smiled and clapped in delight – even the teenager!

On another visit, our singer, Tamara, sang to a very young child who was lightly sedated and not opening her eyes; the nurse noticed that her blood pressure went down as she listened. At the end when we said goodbye, she slightly lifted her hand to wave. We knew we had made a difference.

Debbie Tropp, Spread a Smile PICU Visit Manager

Our 2024 Impact Surveys

We are committed to understanding our impact and adapt our services to best serve the young people and families that we support. We asked three cohorts of people; parents and carers, healthcare professionals and patients, who have accessed our services in the last year, to complete our online survey, hosted on the SmartSurvey platform.

Survey to Parents and Carers

118 parents/carers completed the survey.

ABOUT OUR VISITS

97%

said that visits can improve the mood of their child

93%

agreed that visits make the hospital environment less scary for their child

97%

said that a visit provides a distraction from treatments and/or procedures

96%

said that a visit reduces anxiety

96%

said that visits have a positive impact on their child's mental health and emotional wellbeing

ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE OF THE SPREAD A SMILE TEAM

96%

Caring and respectful nature of team

97%

Being sensitive to how my child is feeling

89%

Overall experience of Spread a Smile

Spread a Smile has made a difference to the whole family...

"You have even made the hardest days better for us all as a family."

"Spread a Smile have brought us so much joy as a whole family!"

"There are truly no words to express how fabulous you have been to us as a whole family."

Parents noted how Spread a Smile services have made a difference to their child...

"Spread a Smile feels like an extension of our family, every

member treats us with love and welcomes us to every event."

"This has been a lifeline, genuinely made a huge difference to my daughter's life and is improving her emotional and mental wellbeing beyond measure."

"Self-esteem boosted significantly, sense of purpose and ability to think ahead now is improved as a direct result of this. Thank you!!"

"She never holds a pencil or shows any focus outside the sessions but she systematically knows as soon as the art lesson starts she wants to join in."

Parents noted how we provide a valuable distraction...

"They come out of the parties forgetting if only for a while of their daily struggle."

"When she had nothing to look forward to, Spread a Smile was her saviour, providing great distraction, hope, laughter and lots of fun virtually with other children. Thank you for going above and beyond for our family all many other sick children."

"You really help my daughter to focus on something else than her appointments."

Parents noted how we made their child feel a sense of normality and connection...

"It filled me with joy to know that he is treated as a boy rather than a sick child."

"It massively helps all of us feel less 'medical'."

"Simply meeting other children at gatherings and sharing stories have helped with anxiety around every aspect of treatment."

"Spread a Smile events allowed us to mix with other families with children having medical care and speak with these parents."

"They just provide a space where my child feels included and special when sometimes the rest of the world doesn't feel welcoming and kind."

Parents noted the impact of our work...

"These visits can have a profound and very lasting positive impact, especially re softening the acquired tough exterior."

"Around the same time as we found Spread a Smile our son stopped self-harming. I'm sure it's not just coincidence."

"This would have been a darker, more depressing journey without Spread a Smile."

"For my daughter it's the perfect distraction from the bad stuff and just allows her to re-set. She also knows that the bad stuff doesn't happen when the Spread a Smile team are there. They make her feel safe in an environment that feels anything but safe and mean she doesn't stay in a traumatised state for long."

Parents appreciated the joy that we spread...

"We had hardly anyone over a quiet bank holiday weekend... It was amazing to suddenly hear singing and fun."

"The ward becomes full of laughter during visits."

"Spread a Smile made her forget the boredom and loneliness she was experiencing."

"She laughed so loud at Mr Magic that staff from around the ward came to see what was happening. You can't beat that."

Parents expressed true gratitude and appreciation for our work with their child...

"We don't know what our days would be like without Spread a Smile!"

"I feel like it's designed by people who truly understand what it is to be a child/family in hospital/having treatment."

"I can't imagine how lonely it would have been without you. Everything you do is exceptional!"

"Everyone at spread a smile is incredible and what you offer is priceless!"

"You guys are smashing it."

Our inclusion of siblings is valued...

"Being a sibling to an ill sister or brother is harder than others can imagine, they have to take a back seat quite regularly so to be involved in treats/events too is just amazing."

"Our daughter can be a happy little girl without worrying about her brother and if his medical needs will disrupt her day out or not."

"H has been by A's side throughout her treatment, though she is only 3. Being able to take both girls to Frozen was a dream come true, and both girls still talk about it now."

"The art classes have brought them back together after long periods of separation and helped recreate that bond."



Survey to Children and Young People

This was our first survey of the young people we met during our hospital visits. 273 children and young people aged 4-25 years completed the survey.

Before their Spread a Smile interaction...

17% of young people described themselves as feeling 'happy'.

After... this had increased to 93%



98% said that Spread a Smile had made their time in hospital better.

The young people expressed their gratitude...

"You are amazing. Thank you."

"Thank you so so much!!!!!"

"Thank you Spread a Smile, **you cheered me up and helped me feel better and less nervous.**"

"Thank you very much. I really enjoy it and can't wait to see them when I am here at the hospital."

"Great energy and a lovely boost - thank you."

They shared their joy with us...

"Proud of myself because I did a magic trick."

"Brightened up the day."

"A real treat, cheered me up."

"They literally made our day."

"This is perfect."

"It was so lovely!!! More of it."

"Music was absolutely amazing."

They requested more visits...

"Come back and sing again as I really enjoyed myself and thank you."

"Loved the magic."

"Come again."

"Stay longer!!!! And bring more doggies."

"Come more often!"

Survey to Healthcare Professionals

98 medical professionals – predominantly play specialists and specialist nurses – completed the survey.

100%

felt that Spread a Smile visits can improve the mood and overall hospital experience for their patients

100%

felt that Spread a Smile has a positive impact on the mental health and wellbeing of their patients

99%

said that we enhance the overall mood on the ward and make the hospital environment seem less scary

95%

noted that we may help to reduce anxiety

77%

noted that we may help to reduce pain

95%

noted that we help their patients to socialise and interact with others

76%

noted that we provide a distraction from treatments and/or procedures

These key elements were rated as either **Outstanding** or **Very Good**:

Caring, kind and respectful nature to patients, families and staff: **98%**

Experience of visit(s): **98%**

Professionalism of team: **98%**

Communication with team: **97%**

Quality of entertainment on visit(s): **97%**

Spread a Smile brings joy and laughter to patients and families...

*"The ward becomes **full of laughter** during visits."*

*"The whole ward lights up when Spread a Smile visits. It's incredible to see the **children's faces light up with joy**."*

Spread a Smile provides distraction and escape...

*"It gives the patients and families a much-needed distraction from their worries and concerns. It's **a welcome break from the daily routines of hospital life**."*

*"Spread a Smile really lifts the children and families' spirits. It provides **a welcome dose of fun and excitement**."*

"Pet therapy has helped some patients with their anxiety as well as promoting children to mobilise during their physio sessions. The entertainers have helped distract children prior, during and post procedures."

Spread a Smile has a positive impact on patients' mood and wellbeing...

*"Patients' reactions change significantly when Spread a Smile visits. **You can see the difference in their mood**, they become more relaxed and engaged."*

*"Spread a Smile are amazing at bringing joy and laughter to the ward. **It's wonderful to see the positive impact on the children's emotional wellbeing**."*

*"**Spread a smile has a hugely positive impact on our patients and families**. It provides isolated patients with laughter, joy and excitement whilst being confined to their cubicles. The pamper days have provided comfort, relaxation and joy to parents at times of stress and anxiety."*

"Sometimes children don't feel like they can come out of their bed spaces or even sit up, but then when Spread a Smile come, we can see the children sometimes sitting up in bed and wanting to take part. This is a huge accomplishment."

Spread a Smile creates a positive and welcoming atmosphere...

"The impact Spread a Smile has across our hospital is immense. It creates a more **positive and uplifting environment for everyone.**"

"They are amazing as soon as they walk in. **Their energy is infectious** and immediately creates a more positive atmosphere on the ward."

"The families and children really love our visits from Spread a Smile. It's **something they always look forward to.**"

"Spread a Smile is fantastic, our patients and families love them. It's clear that **they make a real difference to people's lives.**"

Spread a Smile supports the work of healthcare professionals...

"We went through a period of very tough staffing, limited resources and diminished play spaces and Spread a Smile were alongside us the whole time to still bring smiles. **Together we navigate the precarious world of sick children and their families. The impact of what they bring to the partnership is phenomenal.**"

"In a few minutes they can create smiles and memories which can change the mood in an instant. **It isn't a cure but it certainly is a medicine.**"

Spread a Smile is highly valued by healthcare professionals...

"Spread a Smile is so important for our patients. It provides a **vital service that complements our medical care.**"

"The services we have from Spread a Smile have been **integral to our work.** They are a **valuable asset** to the hospital."

"Spread a Smile has had a huge impact not only on our patients, but also on our staff. It's **a morale booster for everyone who works here.**"

"I cannot express the positive impact that Spread a Smile services have on our inpatient wards in a few words."

The communication is exemplary, the adaptations to individual patients is flawless, the enthusiasm and professionalism is always delivered with smiles and pure kindness.

Nothing is ever too much trouble.

Thank you is not enough on behalf of all the staff."

Learning from Feedback

Based on feedback we received through our surveys last year, we made some changes to how we work:

Due to the unpredictable nature of illness, virtual visits are sometimes cancelled at short notice by the patients and families we support. To make the most of these available slots, we now keep a list of children and young people who would benefit from a last-minute virtual visit. This flexible approach allows us to offer timely support to more patients in a way that suits their needs and circumstances.

We have expanded our dedicated services for teenagers, including a teen-focused residential and an increased number of family events tailored to their needs.

We've moved our in-person visits to young patients at The Royal Marsden Hospital from weekdays to weekends. This change helps support children who spend long periods in hospital and often feel particularly isolated at weekends, when fewer clinical staff and play specialists are on site, and when it can be more difficult for family members to visit.

We adjusted the timing of our virtual group visits to take place after school, making it easier for siblings to join in. This change was introduced at the end of the year, and we're now monitoring its impact on attendance and engagement.

SPOTLIGHT ON

Peace Children's Centre, Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust

The Peace Children's Centre in Watford is a multidisciplinary NHS facility dedicated to supporting the health and development of children and young people, particularly those with complex or long-term needs. The centre is designed to be welcoming and accessible, with a focus on reducing anxiety for children and families.

Dianne Wootten is the Senior Play Specialist at the Peace Children's Centre and she tells us the meaning and significance behind the mural we painted.

"Marina was a delight to work with – quiet, professional, and respectful of the space, allowing staff to continue their work without disruption."

"The mural looks STUNNING and brightens up the room. Everyone who uses the room comments on it,

and the feedback from children who see it during procedures like blood tests is incredibly positive. It often serves as a talking point, helping hesitant children feel more comfortable entering the room. We use the characters in the mural to spark conversations, sometimes leading to discussions about feelings, which is especially useful when exploring emotions during procedures.

"The mural has become more than just a decoration—it's a valuable resource that aids in creating stories and easing anxious patients. It has brought joy to the room, the patients, and the staff, and its impact in helping children cope with medical care is clear."

"Thank you again for arranging this and for all the magical things Spread a Smile is doing for children and their families."



"The mural has become more than just a decoration, it's a valuable resource that aids in creating stories and easing anxious patients."

SPOTLIGHT ON

The Mildred Creak Unit at Great Ormond Street Hospital

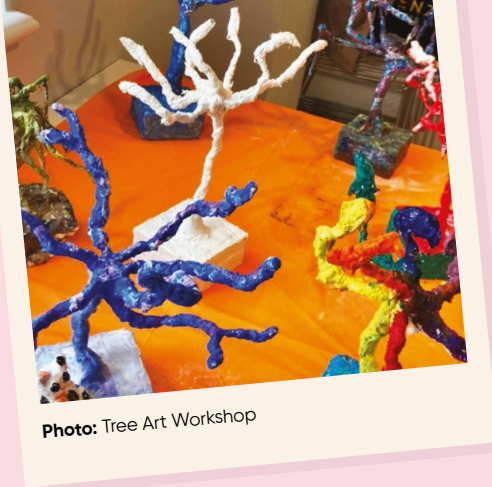


Photo: Tree Art Workshop

The Mildred Creak Unit (MCU) is a small, intensive intervention unit which supports children aged 7-13 facing complex mental health challenges, including eating disorders and behavioural difficulties. It offers a vital lifeline during difficult times.

The need for mental health support is growing: one in five children in England has a probable mental disorder (Mental Health of Children and Young People Survey, 2023). As these numbers rise, the work of the MCU – and our support for it – is more important than ever.

Our Contribution: Art and Connection

Over the year, we delivered 12 two-hour art workshops during school holidays, working with the Unit's Play Specialist and nursing staff to create

a safe, supportive space. These workshops allow patients to nurture their well-being through creative outlets, build confidence and take pride in their accomplishments.

Key aspects of the workshops included:

- **Confidentiality:** We respect patients' privacy, never asking about their conditions or recording names or images.
- **Protected time:** Workshops were uninterrupted, allowing full engagement.

- **Therapeutic benefits:** Activities helped patients express themselves and process emotions without verbal communication.
- **Connection and confidence:** Patients collaborated and decorated their spaces, feeling part of a shared experience.
- **Staff Engagement:** Staff sometimes joined in, strengthening relationships and seeking feedback from us on each patient.
- **Holiday Activities:** The workshops filled time during school holidays, providing normality and a positive focus.
- **Excellent Feedback:** Feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly positive, with requests for activities incorporated into future sessions. Patients told us they looked forward to the workshops, and staff appreciated the respite they offered.

Highlights and Impact

- **Summer Art Programme:** For six weeks, children participated in sessions with professional artists, with themes including Piaget clocks and Pointillism. Each session involved 5-8 children aged 10-16.
- **Long-Term Progress:** One patient, initially non-communicative, gradually engaged in activities and, after six months, was confidently chatting and leading a session. Staff described her transformation as remarkable.

Our Commitment to Mental Health Support

In 2025, we will train eight office staff in mental health first aid, aiming to share this knowledge across the organisation. We're also exploring skills training for our entertainers to better support children with mental health needs.

Our work with the MCU shows the profound impact that creative, play-based interventions can have. **By providing moments of connection and expression, we support emotional wellbeing** and complement the exceptional care from the MCU staff.



SPOTLIGHT ON

Jacob

Spread a Smile first supported Jacob, now 11, during his six-week proton beam therapy at UCLH when he was 9.

Jacob's Mum Donna shared with us the impact of our support.

"One Friday, we met a wonderful Spread a Smile artist who created a personalised sign for Jacob's hospital playthings, featuring a Rubik's Cube he adored. A balloon modeller even crafted a Rubik's

Cube from balloons, which Jacob thought was amazing.

"After that, Jacob looked forward to Fridays, as he knew he'd see the Spread a Smile team. Even though it was the worst time of my life, Jacob says it was the best time because of their support. They helped him find a

"Many people have helped us, but Spread a Smile has made the biggest impact."

routine and cope with what he was going through.

"Marina, a Spread a Smile artist, painted his radiotherapy mask with a space theme. Every time Jacob went under anaesthetic, he dreamed of travelling to a different planet."

"During the Easter holidays, Jacob and his cousin joined an online magic session with the team. It was so much fun, and Jacob still shows off the tricks he learned.

"Spread a Smile continued to support us even after Jacob's treatment finished in April 2023. They sent him a Smile Hamper at Christmas and organised a special online party for his birthday. Their kindness has meant so much.

"Many people have helped us, but Spread a Smile has made the biggest impact. They were there for us in the darkest times, and they continue to be part of our lives today. Jacob says, "Spread a Smile are really COOL!"



SPOTLIGHT ON

Our partnership with St. Mary's Hospital

St. Mary's hospital provides specialist care to babies, children and young people, including a specialist haematology service and a dedicated Paediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU).

Spread a Smile has been working with St. Mary's Hospital since 2014, and we now provide a weekly entertainment programme, as well as dedicated fortnightly visits to PICU.

Spread a Smile work in partnership with the St. Mary's play team to ensure that every child and young person receives specialised play and recreation opportunities, providing a variety of entertainment each week to ensure that services are fit

for purpose, and are a good fit for each area of the hospital they visit. For example, every second week, Spread a Smile sends in an artist to work with patients who are isolated due to being immunocompromised or receiving a bone marrow transplant. These children are isolated for weeks or even months at a time, and miss out on many play opportunities and normal childhood experiences. **The artist is able to spend quality time with each patient, working on**

projects that are child-led, giving young patients a sense of control over their environment, and allowing them time and space to relax and get creative.

Tina Halton, Play Services Team Lead, says "Spread a Smile's impact on the patients and families cannot be underestimated. Their entertainers are carefully chosen with care and it shows. **They are the best of the best at what they do; they are abundantly talented but most important are the subtleties of their interactions with each patient.** Being able to engage and impress a teenager who's having a terrible time for a few quiet moments in a magic trick or capturing the mood on intensive care to sing a calm song to a baby who would otherwise be listening to the beeps on a machine is worth its weight in gold.

"Spread a Smile also have a marvellous ability to make the staff smile, without compromising on their total commitment to making each child feel special. The staff love the visit days. It makes their day calmer and helps them to do the medical/nursing roles whilst the children are entertained.

"If they can make it happen, they will!"

"We went through a very tough period recently, with limited staffing and diminished play spaces and Spread a Smile were alongside us the whole time. Together we navigate the precarious world of sick children and their families. The impact of what they bring to the partnership is phenomenal. In a few minutes they can create smiles and memories which can change the mood in an instant. **It isn't a cure but it certainly is a medicine.**

"The charity has grown in both size and scope but hasn't lost its heart at the core. The range of entertainment and events continues to be unique to Spread a Smile, but all possess the same personal touch. **The hospital programme is expertly planned and delivered by people who understand the healthcare field well and really care. What they do appears effortless but in fact takes a lot of effort, dedication and indeed love goes into every visit, virtual session and gift drop. This is the magic! Nothing is too much – if they can make it happen, they will!"**

Spread a Smile brings joy and laughter to seriously ill children in NHS hospitals and hospices across the country.

NHS LONDON

Barnet Hospital
Chelsea and Westminster Hospital
Croydon University Hospital
Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH)
Epsom Hospital
The Evelina Children's Hospital
King's College Hospital
Kingston Hospital
The National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery (NHNN)
Newham Hospital
North Middlesex University Hospital
Northwick Park Hospital
Princess Alexandra Hospital
Queen's Hospital, Romford
Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Woolwich
Queen Mary's Hospital for Children

The Royal Brompton Hospital
The Royal London Hospital
The Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital
St George's Hospital
St Mary's Hospital
The Royal Marsden Hospital
University College Hospital (UCLH)
Watford General Hospital
West Middlesex University Hospital
Whipps Cross Hospital
The Whittington Hospital

NHS SOUTH EAST

East Surrey Hospital
Oxford Children's Hospital (John Radcliffe Hospital site)
St Peter's Hospital, Chertsey
Southampton Children's Hospital
William Harvey Hospital, Ashford

NHS MIDLANDS

Leicester Children's Hospital
Nottingham Children's Hospital

NHS NORTH WEST

Alder Hey, Liverpool
Christie Hospital, Manchester

NHS SOUTH WEST

Bristol Royal Hospital for Children

NHS WALES

Wrexham Maelor Hospital

NHS EAST OF ENGLAND

Addenbrooke's Children's Hospital, Cambridge

HOSPICES

Alexander Devine Children's Hospice, Maidenhead
Demelza Hospice Care for Children, Sittingbourne, Kent
Forever Colours, Buckinghamshire
Helen & Douglas House, Oxford
Noah's Ark Children's Hospice, London
Rennie Grove Peace Hospice, St Albans





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