

The Role of Play Therapy in the Early Recovery and Development of Children: A Comprehensive Review

Dr. Janki Patel¹, Ms. Soumya A², Ms. Binal Patel³

ABSTRACT

Play therapy is a developmentally appropriate intervention that supports the early recovery of children experiencing hospitalization, trauma, chronic illness, or disaster-related stress. By using play as a therapeutic medium, it promotes emotional expression, reduces anxiety and pain, improves treatment cooperation, and enhances social and developmental outcomes. Evidence from randomized trials, systematic reviews, and case studies demonstrates its effectiveness in fostering both psychological well-being and physical recovery. Despite promising findings, the literature highlights the need for standardized intervention protocols and stronger empirical evidence to evaluate long-term outcomes. Overall, play therapy represents an essential component of holistic pediatric care, facilitating comprehensive recovery while addressing the emotional and developmental needs of children.

KEYWORDS: *Play therapy, Early recovery, Pediatric care, Child trauma, Hospitalization, Emotional well-being, Therapeutic play, Psychological recovery.*

Executive Summary

Play therapy serves as a critical, developmentally appropriate intervention designed to address the psychological and physical needs of children facing medical crises, natural disasters, or chronic illnesses. This report synthesizes evidence from recent clinical studies, systematic reviews, and case presentations to evaluate the efficacy of play therapy in promoting early recovery. Findings indicate that therapeutic play significantly reduces anxiety and post-operative pain in hospitalized children while fostering emotional regulation and social skills in those recovering from trauma.

Clinical applications range from managing acute conditions, such as diarrhea and oncology symptoms, to mitigating the long-term effects of disasters like earthquakes and floods. While qualitative evidence strongly supports the healing power of play, there is a noted need for more rigorous, quantitative research to standardize outcomes across diverse pediatric populations. Ultimately, play therapy is not merely a supplementary activity but a core component of holistic pediatric care that facilitates recovery by providing children with a medium to communicate, process, and master their experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Play therapy is defined as a systematic mental health intervention that utilizes the therapeutic relationship and play—the primary language of children—to prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development. Primarily targeting children aged 3 to 12 years, it offers a developmentally appropriate alternative to traditional "talk therapy," acknowledging that younger clients often lack the cognitive and verbal capacity to express complex emotions. In the context of early recovery, play therapy serves as a bridge between a child's internal emotional world and the external stressors of illness or trauma. It allows children to explore feelings, thoughts, and experiences in a safe, affirming space. By "playing out" inner and real-life experiences, children build insight and the capacity for emotional regulation. This review examines how these therapeutic processes translate into tangible recovery outcomes across various pediatric settings.

Methodological Approaches in the Literature

The current body of literature on play therapy employs a diverse array of methodologies to capture its multi-faceted impact:

- **Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs):** Emerging research, such as the protocols developed by Patil et al., utilizes RCT designs to quantitatively measure changes in cognitive, motor, and socio-emotional development scores in hospitalized children. These studies represent a significant step toward establishing the empirical efficacy of play-based interventions.
- **Systematic Reviews:** Comprehensive appraisals of existing literature, including those by Godino-Iáñez et al. and Saputra et al., aggregate findings from multiple studies to highlight the consistent benefits of play therapy in hospital settings, specifically regarding

pain management and conduct.

- **Case Presentations and Single-Subject Studies:** Detailed case studies provide deep insights into the recovery of individual children, such as a 5-year-old girl treated for anorexia and depression through focused family play therapy, or the use of play-based occupational therapy for children with cancer.
- **Qualitative Observations and Community Empowerment:** Studies focusing on disaster recovery often rely on observation, interviews, and pre-post test designs to evaluate the role of teachers and community members in delivering therapeutic play to trauma survivors

FINDINGS AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

1. Physical Recovery and Clinical Outcomes

Play therapy has demonstrated a surprising impact on physical health indicators. In children with acute diarrhea, the combination of therapeutic play and emotional soothing care was found to enhance cooperation with medical treatments, alleviate clinical symptoms, and improve nutritional status and sleep quality. Furthermore, systematic reviews indicate that play therapy can diminish post-operative pain and improve the overall conduct of hospitalized children. These findings suggest that by reducing stress and increasing cooperation, play therapy directly contributes to physiological stabilization and faster clinical recovery.

2. Psychological Recovery from Trauma and Disaster

Natural disasters leave children with profound psychological scars, including anxiety, fear, and a lack of self-confidence. Evidence from earthquake survivors in Cianjur indicates that play therapy helps children escape psychological trauma and return to age-appropriate developmental stages [2]. Group play therapy is particularly effective in community settings; training teachers to facilitate these sessions significantly reduces post-disaster trauma and anxiety levels in early childhood [6].

Repetitive play allows children who have escaped wars or floods to gain control over their lives by processing the trauma in a controlled environment [10]. This "healing power of play" enables children to find meaning and co-regulate emotional expressions following

community-wide disasters [3].

3. Mitigation of Hospitalization Stress

Hospitalization is inherently stressful for children due to separation from family, invasive procedures, and the loss of autonomy. Play therapy acts as a mediation tool that reduces the pressure of clinic life and enhances overall well-being [4], [15]. It supports developmental milestones during long-term stays, ensuring that the hospital environment does not hinder a child's natural growth [15]. Research indicates that play stimulation activities are not only useful for psychological comfort but also promote "good recovery" by fostering a more favorable environment for learning and development [13].

4. Social and Emotional Skill Development

Beyond symptom management, play therapy is instrumental in rebuilding social and emotional skills. Child-centered play therapy is particularly effective for children recently discharged from the hospital, helping them navigate the transition back to daily life [7]. It enables children to master new skills and emotional responses, allowing them to communicate needs and desires that they might otherwise struggle to articulate [17], [19]. This is especially crucial for children with insecure attachments or those who have witnessed domestic violence, as play therapy provides a medium to explore conflicted relationships in a safe setting [20].

LIMITATIONS OF THE EVIDENCE

Despite the strong clinical endorsement of play therapy, the evidence base faces several limitations:

- **Lack of Quantitative Data:** Many studies are qualitative or descriptive, lacking specific quantitative improvements in psychological or physical health [1], [2], [3], [10].
- **Methodological Weaknesses:** Some research relies on personal experience and observation rather than standardized clinical measures [10].
- **Early Stage of Research:** As noted by Russ (2003), clinical research into the treatment efficacy of play therapy has "only begun," and the field still lacks comprehensive, demonstrated efficacy across all applications [18].

- **Relevance Gaps:** Some studies focused on hospitalized children have been found to have low relevance when specifically addressing the impact on early recovery, focusing instead on broader developmental support [12].

RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The current literature points to several critical gaps that future research should address:

- **Standardization of Protocols:** There is a need for standardized play therapy protocols that can be consistently applied and evaluated in various clinical settings (e.g., oncology vs. acute infection).
- **Long-term Outcomes:** Most current studies focus on the immediate effects during or shortly after hospitalization. Longitudinal studies are needed to determine if early play therapy interventions lead to better long-term psychological resilience.
- **Empirical Evaluation:** Integrating clinical and developmental research to bridge the gap between theoretical benefits and empirical evaluation is essential for wider adoption in medical curricula [18].
- **Caregiver Integration:** While parental involvement is known to improve effects [6], more research is needed on how to effectively train and integrate caregivers into the therapeutic process in various cultural and socioeconomic contexts [17].

CONCLUSION

Play therapy is a vital intervention for children's early recovery, offering a unique blend of psychological support and physical health benefits. By utilizing play as a primary medium for communication and emotional processing, therapists can help children navigate the complexities of hospitalization, trauma, and chronic illness. While current research is increasingly moving toward rigorous empirical testing, the existing body of evidence—from clinical trials to disaster recovery observations—unanimously highlights the significance of play in restoring a child's sense of control and facilitating holistic recovery. Integrating play therapy as a standard component of pediatric care is essential for ensuring that the developmental and emotional needs of children are met alongside their physical medical requirements.

REFERENCES

1. Effects of Therapeutic Play Combined With Emotional Soothing Care on Clinical Outcomes, Nutritional Status, and Sleep Quality in Children With Acute Diarrhea," *British journal of hospital medicine (London, England : 2005)* vol. 53, no. 107, 2026. DOI: [10.31083/BJHM53107](https://doi.org/10.31083/BJHM53107)
2. Indira et al., "Kegiatan Bermain sebagai Terapi bagi Anak-Anak Penyintas Gempa," *Prima Abdika*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2024. DOI: [10.37478/abdika.v4i2.4098](https://doi.org/10.37478/abdika.v4i2.4098)
3. Mountain, "Play Therapy – respecting the spirit of the child," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, vol. 21, 2016. DOI: [10.1080/1364436X.2016.1228616](https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2016.1228616)
4. Saputra et al., "Play Therapy as a Mediation in Hospitalized Children," *Jurnal obsesi : jurnal pendidikan anak usia dini*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2023. DOI: [10.31004/obsesi.v7i1.3896](https://doi.org/10.31004/obsesi.v7i1.3896)
5. Godino-Iáñez et al., "Play therapy as an intervention in hospitalized children: A systematic review," *Healthcare*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2020. DOI: [10.3390/HEALTHCARE8030239](https://doi.org/10.3390/HEALTHCARE8030239)
6. et al., "The Role of the Teacher in Reducing Post Disaster Trauma in Early Childhood," *KnE Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 18, 2023. DOI: [10.18502/kss.v8i18.14243](https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v8i18.14243)
7. Shahraki et al., "The Effect Of Child-Centered Play Therapy On The Social And Emotional Skills Of Children Discharged From Hospital."
8. Chatoor et al., "Anorexia nervosa and depression in a 5-year-old girl: Treatment with focused family play therapy and medication," *The International journal of eating disorders*, vol. 52, 2019. DOI: [10.1002/eat.23129](https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.23129)
9. Cochran et al., "Child-centered play therapy: A practical guide to therapeutic relationships with children."
10. Raynor, "The Role of Play in the Recovery Process," 2002. DOI: [10.1093/oso/9780195135732.003.0007](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195135732.003.0007)
11. Irem et al., "THERAPEUTIC USE OF PLAY IN PEDIATRIC REHABILITATION: AN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PERSPECTIVE."
12. Mohammadi et al., "Effect of play-based occupational therapy on symptoms of hospitalized children with cancer: A single-subject study," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Oncology Nursing*, vol. 4, 2017. DOI: [10.4103/APJON.APJON.13.17](https://doi.org/10.4103/APJON.APJON.13.17)
13. Patil et al., "Effectiveness of Play Therapy Programme in Promoting Early Child

Development of under-5 Children visiting Tertiary Care Hospital in Rural Settings: Study Protocol of a Randomized Controlled Trial," *F1000Research*, 2024.

DOI: [10.12688/f1000research.142194.1](https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.142194.1)

14. Patil et al., "Effectiveness of Play Therapy Programme in Promoting Early Child Development (ECD) of under-5 Children visiting Tertiary Care Hospital in Rural Settings: Study Protocol of a Randomized Controlled Trial," *F1000Research*, 2024.

DOI: [10.12688/f1000research.142194.3](https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.142194.3)

15. Thakur, "The Healing Power of Play: Enhancing Development in Hospitalized Children Through Play Therapy," 2025. DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.15074729](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15074729)

16. Ray, "Play Therapy," 2020. DOI: [10.63134/stlu5721](https://doi.org/10.63134/stlu5721)

17. Bartlett, "Play Therapy: Not Just for Children?", 2014.

18. Russ, "Play in Child Development and Psychotherapy," 2003. DOI: [10.4324/9781410609397](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410609397)Short, "Play therapy: Working creatively with children," 2015.

19. Rye, "Play therapy as a mental health intervention for children and adolescents," *The journal of family health care*, 2008.

***Author for Correspondence**

Dr. Janki Patel

E-mail: jankiniravpatel@gmail.com

^{1,2}Professor, Ganpat University, Kumud & Bhupesh Institute of Nursing, Ganpat Vidyanagar, Mehsana- Gandhinagar Highway, Mehsana, Gujrat- 384012

³Associate Professor, Ganpat University, Kumud & Bhupesh Institute of Nursing, Ganpat Vidyanagar, Mehsana- Gandhinagar Highway, Mehsana, Gujrat- 384012

Received Date: 08 July 2026

Accepted Date: 13 July 2026

Published Date: 21 July 2026

Citation: Dr. Janki Patel, Ms. Soumya A, Ms. Binal Patel. The Role of Play Therapy in the Early Recovery and Development of Children: A Comprehensive Review. *International Journal of Pediatric Nursing and Gynaecology*. 2026; 4(2): 57-63p.