



THEODORA
Children's Charity
Much more than Laughter



Theodora Children's Charity 2023 Impact Report

**“Dr Ding Dong is really silly
and I love that! She makes me
smile when she visits.”**

Arabella, age 6



[Click here to read Arabella's story](#)



Welcome!

Thank you for taking some precious moments of your time to explore the impact of your support.

The last 12 months saw us reach over 15,000 children for the first time since before the pandemic. It is an incredible privilege to bring moments of playful joy to children and young people in hospital. We have achieved this together and we are so grateful!

Your support also offers joy and relief to thousands of worried parents, and brightens the atmosphere at work for our wonderful NHS staff.

We recognise that the challenges children in hospital face are ever changing. To respond to the largest numbers of children experiencing mental health difficulties and trauma that we have ever encountered, we've worked with external organisations to provide tailored training on these topics, so Giggle Doctors are well equipped to communicate and play with all children and young people they meet.

I would like to extend a huge thank you to our funders who have made this precious work possible during the last year. We dedicate to you the colourful and joy filled adventures we have offered with your support, and we look forward to many more playful encounters as we celebrate our 30th anniversary year in 2024.



André Poulie
Co-Founder and Volunteer Director





**In 2023, our
Giggle Doctors have...**

...given giggles to

15,381



children and young people

...visited

14

hospitals and specialist
care centres

...spent over

3,000

hours visiting children



To put it in perspective, that's...



...an increase of

200%

compared to
2022



...and represents an average of

20

children and young people per visit

not to mention siblings, parents and carers, and hospital staff who benefit from a visit too!

Leo's Story

“We first met the Giggle Doctors when we were new to treatment. It was the 11th of May, which was our third visit to clinic. It was all new to Leo and he wasn't keen on clinic stays - he was very unsettled, clingy and would rather be anywhere else.



“Leo watched the Giggle Doctors talking to the other children from a distance. He was intrigued but not 100% confident to interact with them himself. When they were leaving, he wanted to wave.

“Dr Teapot tried to high five Leo, but he kept missing, which Leo found hilarious. Then Dr teapot couldn't get the rubbish in the bin (again hilarious) and he walked into the door! Leo kept his signed postcard on the fridge and told everyone who came round about Dr Teapot, his blue hair, the high five and the rubbish. We had to re-enact these games for weeks!!

“This first encounter was so needed, it really brought Leo out of his shell when in clinic. I think from that moment he realised clinic visits could be fun and it wasn’t a scary place to be. Once Dr Teapot left, he started talking to the play team leader and building those relationships.

“The second time we saw Dr Teapot and Dr Boogie Woogie he was absolutely over the moon. He was so excited waiting for them to come round. Dr Teapot got down to his level and engaged with him in a way Leo didn’t stop laughing. They blew bubbles, Leo’s t-shirt laid dinosaur eggs and they made animal noises. Another postcard which is on the fridge and Leo will repeat and tell us what Dr Teapot did that day.

“As parents, it’s heart-warming and makes those long days so much easier seeing Leo so engaged and happy when they are around. The Giggle Doctors have made such a big impression on Leo in the short amount of time he has seen them, it’s honestly incredible what they do. If only we could have them 5 days a week. Laughter really is the best medicine!!! 🍷🍷



Words by Rachel, Leo’s Mum

Southampton Children's Hospital



Eliana has spent more than 8 of her 19 months in Southampton Children's Hospital.

Living in the hospital, access to regular play with the play team and Dr Ding Dong has given her vital opportunities to develop her communication and resilience, and kept her smiling through complex ongoing medical care.

“I can honestly say, the Giggle Doctors lift everyone’s spirits, parents, siblings, and staff, as well as the patients. One parent is still talking about how funny the visit was with her son, and what a joy it was to see him laughing and joking around in this hospital environment.

I absolutely treasure this charity, and the wonderful experience Giggle Doctors give to a child or young person. They really do help the mental health of everyone they meet, as you cannot fail to feel happy after their visits.”

**Louise Oliver, Play Leader
Southampton Children’s Hospital**



“It makes me more relaxed when I can see Arabella happy, enjoying herself and acting like a child of her age compared to having to worry about treatments and being unwell.”

Hannah, Arabella’s mum



[Click here to read more about our work at Southampton](#)

What do staff at our hospital partners say about the impact of Giggle Doctor visits?

84%

said Giggle Doctor visits make children's experience of hospital 'much better,' with 100% agreeing Giggle Doctors have a positive impact.



82%

said Giggle Doctor visits reduce children's stress and anxiety levels, and

31%

said Giggle Doctor visits reduce their own stress and anxiety levels too!

40%

agreed that Giggle Doctor visits help them to do their jobs even better.

Training for Impact

We're constantly looking for ways to make sure that we have a positive impact on as many of the children that we meet as possible, and one way we do this is by regularly upskilling our Giggle Doctors.

In our 2022 impact report, we featured an article about the increased number of children and young people with mental health difficulties Giggle Doctors were encountering - a reflection of the national picture which was echoed by the hospital staff we work alongside. As a result, we organised specialist training with Theatre Troupe to give Giggle Doctors the tools they need to support these children with safe, positive play.

Another focus we ran training on was communicating with children with a range of needs. We refreshed Giggle Doctor's knowledge of Intensive Interaction, a technique which helps them communicate and connect with the children with the most complex communication needs (Dr Scribble and Dr Gubbins pictured below with trainer Amandine Mouriere).

All Giggle Doctors also accessed Makaton training (a simple form of sign language), learning crucial hospital vocab, nursery rhymes, and of course a couple of jokes!



THANK YOU to our Donors



Cherubs Nurseries are a Midlands-based nursery group who have chosen Theodora as their annual charity partner twice.

What drew you to Theodora Children's Charity?

We were initially introduced to the Giggle Doctors at the Nursery World Awards ceremony we attended in 2018, where they had selected Theodora Children's Charity as the charity partner.

We were inspired by the story and felt a real synergy between what we do at Cherubs Nurseries and the work of the Theodora Giggle Doctors. The charity's commitment to bringing joy and laughter for children in hospital is something that is so vital and with some of the children we care for experiencing hospital stays, we knew it was something we had to support. Even more so because the Giggle Doctors visit many of our local hospitals!



Your support has helped Giggle Doctors have an impact on thousands of children this year. How does that make you feel?

This feedback is exactly the reason we chose to support the Giggle Doctors - the real life and meaningful impact their visits have is genuine and far reaching. It's something we are so proud to have been able to support.

How would you sum up what it's like to be a donor?

We don't usually support the same charity or cause twice within a certain time period. However, when the opportunity arose to support the Giggle Doctors again in our 30th anniversary year it was a partnership that just felt so right.

The opportunity to compound our initial donation in 2019 of £10,000 with another donation in 2023 of almost £17,000 (thanks to match-funding) is a massive highlight in our history books. We are such advocates for making every day brighter than the last for children and when the going gets tough it's charities like you that are there to make a lasting difference.

***Extract from interview with Harry Mills,
Chief Brand Officer, Cherubs Nurseries***

“*I have supported Theodora Children's Charity for 20 years, ever since I read an article about them in the Sunday Times back in 2003.*

I enjoy supporting the charity in different ways, through a sponsored beard shave and one Christmas I did a "no bad words day" at 50p per bad word, saying that I'd double whatever was in the tin. This was a bad move as my family were more than happy to donate and constantly added their 50p's which I doubled to a goodly sum!

Having watched a television documentary about Giggle Doctors it confirmed how specialised and wonderful what you do is - carry on the excellent work."

Phil, annual donor since 2003



[Click here to read the full interview with Harry](#)

Meet Dr Teapot!

How long have you been a Giggle Doctor and what first drew you to the role?

I've been a Giggle Doctor for over ten years. The idea that I could use my skills as an actor and entertainer to bring about a real positive change really appealed to me. It is, quite simply, the best job in the world. You might say it's just my...cup of tea!

Just this year, you've personally visited over 1,000 children. How does that feel for you?

It's incredibly rewarding to think about the impact these visits have, not just there and then, but also the prolonged effects of a Giggle Doctor visit. I often see children and families many times, and hear things like 'Oh, they haven't stopped talking about when they last saw you...' which is incredibly humbling.

A child's face lighting up when they see you again is a very special kind of magic.



Why do you think play matters in hospital?

Play in hospitals lets children be children, even where they're in a strange clinical environment away from home. It allows them to focus on something other than the pain and worry of a hospital stay, and to do what children do best...play!

[Click here to read Dr Teapot's full story!](#)



What is the change you most often notice in the children you visit from the moment you arrive to when you leave?

Giggle Doctor visits often create a very noticeable lift in mood. When we arrive, we can often sense the feelings of worry, or even just boredom from being in hospital so long. Through our specialist skills and training, we can transform the atmosphere and bring a real feeling of joy and fun to the wards.

We see physical changes too. Often a nurse will comment that a patient's vitals have improved during a visit, heart rate has lowered and their willingness to undergo a procedure has increased.



Long Read: The Importance of Play for Children with SEN and Developmental Conditions

The importance of play in children's lives cannot be overstated (1). Through play, children explore the world around them, learn how to communicate and how to relate to one another and build meaningful connections with friends and family. It boosts their mood, nurtures their mental wellbeing, and helps their bodies grow fit and healthy (2).

This is true for all children, including those who have Special Education Needs (SEN), Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD), or other developmental conditions which impact their neurological or physical development and growth. The ways in which these children can play or *like* to play may differ from what we conventionally think of as playful behaviour. Consequently, they need access to different sorts of playful opportunities in order to enjoy play and engage in it fully. A lack of appropriate opportunities creates a barrier for children with developmental conditions to access all the essential benefits of play (3).



Children receiving treatment and care in hospital also encounter barriers to play due to both the hospital environment and their medical conditions. For children with developmental conditions, the barriers to play which they experience in hospital intersect with the barriers to play which they already face outside of hospital (4). Whilst it might be tempting to consider these as discrete barriers to be overcome one at a time, in reality they have to be considered and solved together because conventional opportunities for play *in hospital* may not be appropriate for a child with a developmental condition, and conventional approaches to play for *children with developmental conditions* may not be appropriate for those in hospital.

Giggle Doctors' child-led approach to play provides one solution to overcome these intersecting barriers to play. They focus on connecting with the child and empowering them to direct the playful encounter. Giggle Doctors undertake extensive training to help them understand what they might expect from a child in hospital or a child with a developmental condition, giving them a toolkit for play which they can draw on. However, their approach is entirely improvised based on the individual child in front of them, responding to the individual needs, interests, preferences, and mood of the child or young person they are meeting at that moment.

The following short case studies explore the impact of Giggle Doctors taking a child-centred approach to play in different scenarios with a child or young people with developmental conditions.

Dylan

Dylan, aged 15, is non-verbal and uses a passive wheelchair to support his whole body. When Dr Mish Mash and Dr Geehee arrive, Dylan is passive, looking ahead, and his mum is calm and smiling by his side. Although he isn't able to reply, the Giggle Doctors speak to Dylan, coming close and moving slowly so he has time to focus on them. They sing a song with his mum, and he follows with his eyes when Dr Mish Mash holds coloured lights near his mum's face. Then he starts to smile. When the Giggle Doctors leave, the room has a positive atmosphere and Dylan shows his active engagement with his surroundings by focusing his gaze, and his positive mood through smiling at his mum and verbalising.



Emilie

Emilie, who has a developmental condition, is a gregarious 8-year-old. She is outgoing and playful and immediately engages with the Giggle Doctors when she meets them. She takes a great interest in Dr Bungee's red guitar, which he pretends he cannot find. She helps him find the guitar and then shows him how to play it. She shows pleasure and pride by announcing, "See!" with arms crossed and a pleased smile. She sings several songs with Dr Bungee and afterwards spends a long time investigating and playing the guitar over the course of the day. Afterwards, carers said they didn't know she liked music and they looked forward to helping her to explore this interest further, drawing on the inspiration of Dr Bungee's visit.

Immediate outcomes like positive mood or physical activity and engagement are easiest to see in these case studies which focus on the moment of the encounter – and there’s enormous value in the chance to just have fun! However, anecdotal feedback we receive from families hints at a range of longer-term benefits, such as those alluded to by Eliana’s mum. There is also a wealth of literature which explores measurable benefits for medical teams and the tangible contributions playful interventions such as Giggle Doctors can make to supporting children’s medical journeys and experiences of hospital (5). A unifying theme which links Giggle Doctoring to these academic studies is the need to see beyond a child’s medical condition and when appropriate, set it aside entirely and focus instead on each child as an individual.

To read the full article, including additional case studies and endnotes, please follow the link below to the article on our website.



Click here to read the full article online.



THEODORA
Children's Charity
Much more than Laughter



Follow us on social
media!
@giveagiggle

We are proud that whether in person or virtually, Giggle Doctor visits are free for all children and their families, because everyone deserves a giggle!

Thank you to everyone who has supported us by sending donations, as you have seen, your impact is far reaching. Please help us continue to #giveagiggle [by clicking here to donate.](#)



Theodora Children's Charity
Suite 212 Spaces,
70 White Lion Street, London N1 9PP

Registered charity: 1094532