



THEODORA
Children's Charity
Much more than Laughter



Theodora Children's Charity Impact Report 2021

A Message from our Chief Executive



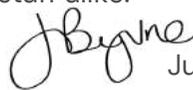
2021 has been a challenging year for Theodora Children's Charity, but it has also posed exciting opportunities for innovation and development.

Throughout 2021, it's been wonderful to see our new digital programme of Virtual Visits and Giggle-a-Grams become a more established part of our work! The Giggle Doctors have risen admirably to this new challenge.

Feedback on our digital work has been incredibly positive, and we're looking forward to continuing to strengthen this work in 2022, aspiring to reach

as many more children as we can during this challenging time.

In May 2021, Dr Geehee carried out our first hospital visit in person since March 2020. It's been so uplifting to hear about the connections Giggle Doctors have been able to make, and the joyful interactions they've brought to children, families, and hospital staff alike.


Judi Byrne
Chief Executive



1050
children
visited in
hospital



86

Hospital Visits
carried out,
despite ongoing
Covid-19
restrictions



“ I love the Giggle
Doctors coming in
because for me I love
it when the kids are
having a good time.

Colin Armour,
Curriculum Specialist for Drama
St Piers School, Young Epilepsy

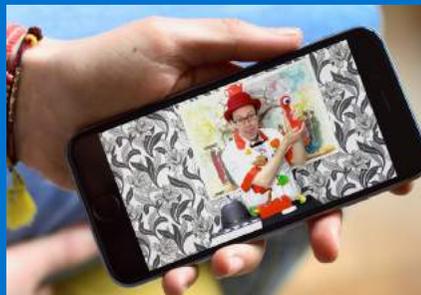
64
Virtual Visits
delivered



“It was so good I think he would have watched for longer!

Claire, Parent

67
Giggle-a-Grams
delivered



Giggle Doctors during Covid-19

2021 has been a year of adapting and rebuilding firm foundations.

Since 1994, the Giggle Doctors have been visiting children in hospitals, hospices, and specialist care centres all over England. The NHS asked us to suspend our programme in March 2020 because of the pandemic.

Developing Digital Content

Between March and October 2020 we worked with our team of Giggle Doctors to record new videos for our [YouTube channel](#), so those missing out on visits could still have a giggle. We also piloted pre-recorded Giggle-a-Grams and live Virtual Visits, before establishing these as a central part of our work during 2021.

Reaching Children Virtually

Covid-19 has made children in hospital even more isolated. To help support them with a chance for play, we had to work hard throughout 2021 to build new audiences online so we could reach more children when they needed us most.

Training Disrupted

Restrictions on travel and gathering in person, as well as the impact of Covid-19 on our fundraising has meant that ongoing developmental training had to be paused. It has also meant that training our Junior Giggle Doctors, hasn't been possible since 2019.

“From the beginning the visits have been joyful, from playing hide and seek to a cow chewing up my room to saving the day as superhero Lemon Squeezy.

And there have been **benefits to working virtually** – there are some items we can't take into hospitals due to infection control, such as fluffy toys, but **in a Virtual Visit anything is possible!**

And **best of all, if a child couldn't make it, we sent them a personalised Giggle-a-Gram, so they never missed out.**”

Dr Easy Peasy on Virtual Visits and Giggle-a-Grams



Virtual Visits and Giggle-a-Grams

Our new digital programme

We introduced live Virtual Visits and pre-recorded Giggle-a-Grams so we can reach children in a truly personalised way wherever they are.

A chance for play!

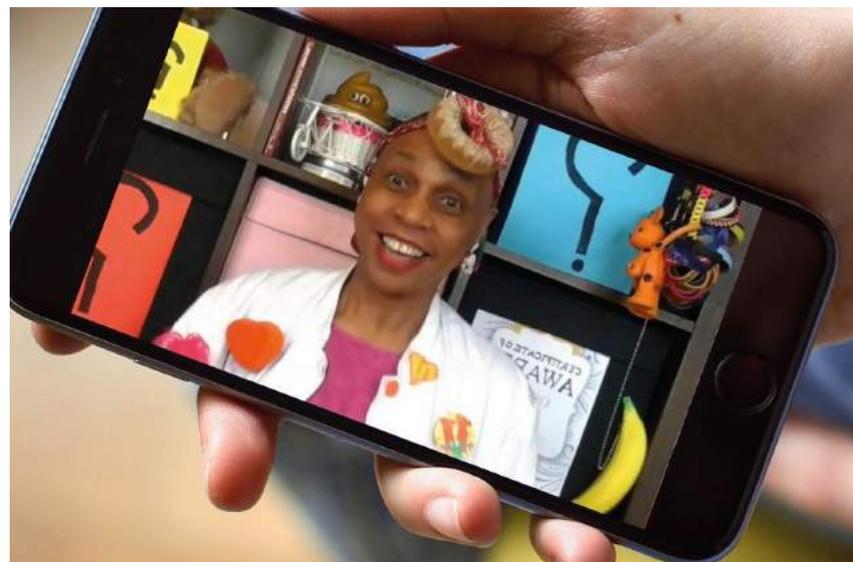
Virtual Visits and Giggle-a-Grams provide a much needed opportunity for play for children in hospital, or receiving treatment and recovering at home.

Accessibility

It is important to us that Virtual Visits and Giggle-a-Grams are free for anyone to book, and that families can book as many times as they like.

A tailored interaction

Our booking form is carefully designed to gather information about a child's particular interests. This means that each Virtual Visit or Giggle-a-Gram is tailored to the age, interests, and communication needs of the individual child. This personal approach helps our Giggle Doctors touch the lives of children all over the country in a truly meaningful way.



After a Virtual Visit or Giggle-a-Gram...

100% of parents said they **would book a Virtual Visit or Giggle-a-Gram again**

100% of parents said that **their child's experience of hospital had been improved**, with 78% saying it had been made '**much better**'

Over 60% of parents reported an **increase in playfulness** and an **improved mood** in their child

Having a Virtual Visit also contributed to:

- Reducing stress and anxiety
- A reduced feeling of isolation
- A greater sense of control

Supporting Children's Mental Health

We've collected evidence that when children get to play with a Giggle Doctor whilst in hospital, their experience of being there improves in many ways; including helping to reduce their stress and anxiety.

This evidence, supported by recent literature such as Efrat-Triester et al. (2021) and Lalantika et al. (2020), was a key inspiration for taking our work digital. It helped form the foundation for the impact we wanted to have through our Virtual Visits and Giggle-a-Grams, and how we planned to achieve this.

Winter 2021 



Learn about Aliyah's story

"It's meant a lot to have the Giggle Doctor visits, especially due to lockdown. I'll be forever thankful for the Virtual Visits service which kept Aliyah being the bubbly girl she is, even when she was isolated due to her health."

Aliyah's mum, Sabana



We recently spoke to Aliyah's mum about the impact of the Giggle Doctor Virtual Visits on Aliyah

"Last year, Aliyah, aged 5, was undergoing chemotherapy at The Royal Marsden in Sutton for Lymphoma Stage 2 Cancer. It was here that we were given information about the Giggle Doctors and Aliyah had her first Virtual Visit in September.

She enjoyed it so much that they became a regular part of Aliyah's routine, sometimes she would see a Giggle Doctor several times a week. The Virtual Visits gave her the opportunity to play just as children want to play, and offered her something different to what I could offer at home. What I found really amazing is that each Giggle Doctor has a different personality and they would each draw out a different part of Aliyah's personality too.

She loved singing with Dr Fab, playing hide-and-seek with Dr Easy Peasy and the Giggle Doctors always responded to what she wanted to do on the day!

After Aliyah left hospital, she needed to shield, meaning that she couldn't go back to school and was isolated at home. It was great that we could continue to book the Virtual Visits, she was asking for the Giggle Doctors nearly every day. She loved it and even celebrated her birthday with the Giggle Doctors! The Virtual Visits gave Aliyah the confidence to speak with different adults, and to understand that they aren't scary, because she's been so used to doctors and nurses probing her and giving her medication.

Read more stories from our children and their families on our website. Just click [here](#).

Feedback: Virtual Visits and Giggle-a-Grams

“*Fantastic idea and really good to see my daughter distracted and happy...Thank you!!*”
Parent

“*He's a very anxious boy, and that particular video really reached him in a meaningful way and he was giggling and he was smiling which is massive – I cannot tell you how impressive that is – he is very withdrawn for a lot of the time. So that was a good thing, that was great...*”
Colin Armour, Curriculum Specialist for Drama
St Piers School, Young Epilepsy

“*I love it as not all seriously ill kids are in hospital but still having a very difficult time*”
Parent



Hospital Visits

Resuming visits safely during Covid



Throughout 2021, resuming hospital visits in person has been a gradual process, with additional Covid-19 infection control measures still in place across all our partners.

As a charity, we updated our risk assessment to take account of the additional infection risks posed by Covid-19. We've kept in regular contact with each of our 26 hospital, hospice and specialist care centre partners. As Covid-19

restrictions changed, we were invited to resume in person visits in 6 hospitals.

Despite Covid restrictions on visit length, ward access and number of Gigggle Doctors, we've still visited

1050

children in person
in 2021

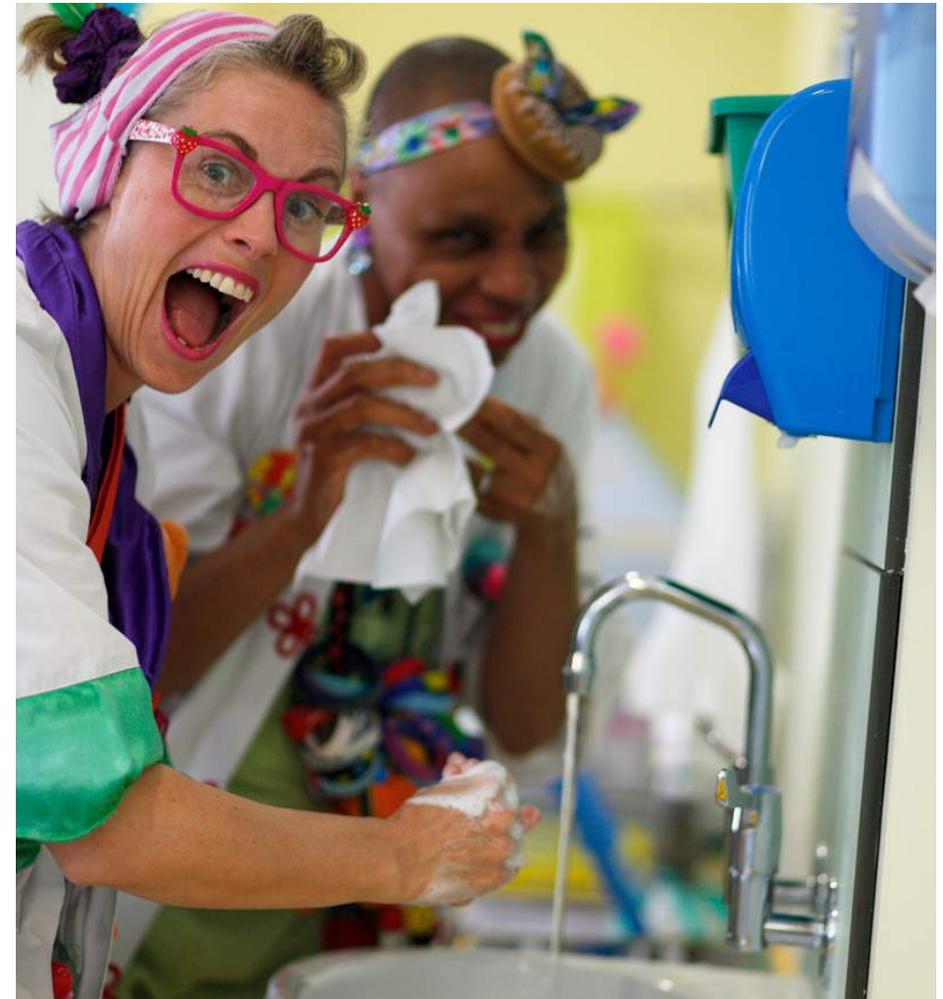
New ways of working

Even before Covid-19, we followed strict infection control procedures. All our Gigggle Doctors undertake training about infection control, including washing their hands and disinfecting props between working with each child.

In light of Covid-19 however, hospital guidelines have become even more stringent.

Gigggle Doctors have adapted to:

- Wearing face masks and other PPE
- Testing for Covid-19 before each visit
- Not using any props which children also touch
- Altering visit routes as required to comply with hospital guidance



The impact of a Giggle Doctor visit

In November 2021, we spoke to members of staff from partner organisations where we have been able to resume visits in person.

Everyone we spoke to agreed that **playing with a Giggle Doctor improves a child's mood**, which contributes to them having a **more positive experience of hospital**.

In addition, some noted there can be **medical benefits**:

“ ‘...after a medical procedure you may see the Giggle Doctor so their skills can be used to help children with medical conditions, **to promote recovery...**’ ”
Jo, Health Play Specialist

This is supported by research indicating a link between improved mood amongst children in hospital and better recovery (Lopes-Júnior (2020)).



Additional Impacts

Giggle Doctor visits have an impact beyond the children they see. They contribute to a **positive atmosphere** on the ward and can help **improve mood** for staff. This **supports staff mental health**, something which has become of even more critical importance than ever with the impact of Covid-19 (Ford M. 2021).

“ *...she had all the parents laughing, all the staff laughing, all the patients laughing and it just completely changed up the atmosphere of the whole department.* ”

Natalie Cummins,
Play and Youth Service Team Lead,
Chelsea and Westminster Trust

Junior Giggle Doctors

Giggle Doctors undertake extensive training before they're fully qualified

Trainee Giggle Doctor Year 1

- Trainee Giggle Doctors undertake:
- A minimum of 12 hospital based visits alongside a Senior Giggle Doctor
 - Have 3 observed 'Progress Visits' from one of our Artistic Coordinators
 - Attend 4 training modules equivalent to 12 days training



Junior Giggle Doctor Year 2

- Junior Giggle Doctors undertake:
- Regular 'duo' hospital visits over a 9-12 month period with a Senior Giggle Doctor
 - Have 3 more observed 'Progress Visits' from one of our Artistic Coordinators
 - Attend ongoing training modules



Graduate to
Senior Giggle
Doctor!

What does a Giggle Doctor need to learn?

Although they are highly trained performers when they arrive, Trainee and Junior Giggle Doctors must complete key elements of Theodora training in order to become a fully fledged Giggle Doctor. Artistic Coordinators are responsible for training and supporting Trainee and Junior Giggle Doctors as they progress and learn on the job by carrying out hospital visits with Senior Giggle Doctors. They also attend training on:

- Developing **artistic techniques** such as improvisation, comedy, music, magic, play, and much more
- Learning about **infection control** and how to work safely within the **hospital environment**
- **Child Safeguarding**
- **Child development** and working with children aged 0 to 18
- Working with children with **Special Educational Needs**



Junior Giggle Doctors

The Impact of Covid-19

All in person visits to hospitals were suspended in March 2020, when our Junior Giggle Doctors were halfway through their two years of training.

Our partners still have strict guidelines in place to prevent the transmission of Covid-19, meaning even at the end of 2021, most are not able to have more than one Giggle Doctor visit at a time. As Junior Giggle Doctors must be accompanied by a Senior Giggle Doctor, this means our Juniors cannot return to work yet.

With each visit, a Giggle Doctor is able to visit between 10 and 15 children, we can't wait for our Junior Giggle Doctors to join them as soon as possible.

Could you support a Junior Giggle Doctor?

Theodora Children's Charity invests over £10k in each Giggle Doctor during their 2 years of training. Any donation you make could help towards this total, meaning your gift can help us bring giggles to the children who need them.

£10 could pay for a bubble camera which blows bubbles automatically, which means it is in line with Covid-19 restrictions.

£40 could cover the cost of costume items for a Giggle Doctor to wear under their Giggle Doctor coat.

£70 could pay for a Junior Giggle Doctor to access essential NSPCC Safeguarding training and have their DBS check updated.

£145 could pay for a Junior Giggle Doctor to carry out a hospital visit to 10-15 children.

£770 could pay for bespoke design and creation of a Giggle Doctor's unique coat. Made to hospital grade standards these coats not only look fabulous but also adhere to infection control guidelines in hospital.

[Donate Now!](#)



Meet a Junior Giggle Doctor!



1. What made you want to be a Giggle Doctor?

I met another Giggle Doctor who embodied all my values of playfulness and creativity and told me about the work. I then had some experiences as a performance based volunteer with the Flying Seagull project in Greece during the refugee crisis and became interested in the idea of using my skills as a performer in a therapeutic setting or to help children who were in difficult circumstances access the opportunity for play.

2. How did you come up with your name: 'Dr Fancy Pants'?

I wanted something simple – fairly easy to pronounce and cheeky! I really like playing with status and sometimes acting like I think I'm very fancy because when I set myself up in this way there's a funny contrast to the fact that I'm clearly ludicrous!

3. Can you describe a highlight in your training?

The training weeks, along with meeting other Giggle Doctors were amazing, especially hearing from experts like the head of play at Great Ormond Street Hospital. A senior nurse from The Royal Alexandra Hospital in Brighton was also so supportive and excited about having the Giggle Doctors on her ward.

4. What was it like when you suddenly had to stop training in March 2020?

I felt some of the confidence and experience I'd been building on in my Junior and Trainee visits was lost and that I was anxious about forgetting what I'd learnt so far. I missed the visits. It was also a financial loss as a freelancer which was another stress.

Dr Fancy Pants was the first Junior Giggle Doctor to return to hospital visits in December 2021. In 2022, she is excited about using a particularly good new prop she's found and bringing giggles to more children, though the uncertainty of the pandemic still feels very real.

Looking ahead to 2022

Building on what we've learned

In 2021, we rebuilt firmer foundations for our work in hospitals.

Whilst having to pause all of our visits to children in hospital was challenging, it gave us the opportunity to reflect on our working practices with each of our programme partners.

Looking forward to 2022, we will share our learning as we resume in person visits safely nationwide.

We will put in place plans to support the training of our Junior Giggle Doctors to graduation, and to continue developing our Virtual Visits and Giggle-a-Grams programme.



In 2022 we aim to...

Resume in person visits with our partners!

Deliver many more Virtual Visits and Giggle-a-Grams!

Offer at least 2000 children the experience of an in person Giggle Doctor visit!

Resume training so that all our Junior Giggle Doctors graduate!

Consult with children, parents, Giggle Doctors, Health Play Specialists, and other staff to strengthen the impact of our work!

Give the gift of a Giggle in 2022

[Click here to donate now](#)



Appendix 1:

A Review of Academic Research and Literature in Relation to Theodora Children's Charity Giggle Doctors

A note on terminology: The term 'Giggle Doctor' is unique to Theodora Children's Charity. Within academic research and literature, the work carried out by artists like Giggle Doctors is referred to by a number of different terms, for example: therapeutic clowning or hospital clowning. Consequently, in the references cited here you will find a range of terminology used, however, for the sake of clarity and consistency, the phrase 'Giggle Doctor' has been used throughout this review.

Play is so critical to a child's health and development that it is enshrined within Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1). Children receiving treatment in hospital experience reduced opportunities for play due to the fact that they are removed from regular contact with their peers in the home, at school, and in the other settings of daily life. Since March 2020, when restrictions on social contact were introduced to help contain the spread of Covid-19, there have been many further limitations on children's access to play, the long-term impact of which remains unknown (2). Giggle Doctor visits, both in person and via virtual platforms, can have a significant impact on improving children's experiences of hospital treatment, as well as supporting their ongoing health, well-being, and emotional development.

There is a growing need to support the mental health of babies, children, and young people as demand for services, outstrips provision (3) and this makes the work of Giggle Doctors even more important. Parents and staff surveyed and interviewed by Theodora Children's Charity have reported observing improved mood and reduced stress and anxiety in children after in person and virtual play with a Giggle Doctor. This is supported by research which shows Giggle Doctor interventions reduce stress (4), and in some instances also help reduce a child's perception of pain (5). Giggle Doctors are not therapists, however, there



can be a therapeutic benefit to their interactions with children: through play, they can support children to express complex emotions and thoughts, and use humour to improve their experiences (6). Publications from the International Play Association (IPA) suggest that the role Giggle Doctors play in this can be deeply significant for children. The IPA identify play as key to children's physical and mental health (7), as well as being the mode through which children express and manage their emotions in relation to 'uncertainties, stresses, and anxieties.' (8) This is of particular significance at times of crisis, such as when in hospital, or during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (9). These factors suggest that opportunities for play provided by Giggle Doctors are more important than ever, since children in hospital, or receiving treatment and shielding at home, currently have the challenges of their medical conditions compounded by restrictions and anxieties relating to Covid-19.

In addition to psychological benefits, there is also a growing body of research demonstrating how artists such as Giggle Doctors can contribute to how children experience symptoms and treatment and aid their physical recovery (10). Lalantika et al. (6) highlight how figures like Giggle Doctors act as 'a bridge between the caregivers, patients and medical staff' (p.3), which contributes to establishing better support systems and consequently a better care journey for the patient. Backing

up the observed decrease in stress mentioned in the paragraph above, there is also evidence showing that cortisol levels are also reduced after interaction with a Giggle Doctor, which in turn can contribute to improving 'the outcomes of medical interventions' (4). Though fewer studies are available, there is also research which suggests humorous distractions can increase pain tolerance to a clinically useful level (10). Giggle Doctors therefore contribute to treating a child as a whole by supporting both their mental and physical health.

Children with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities can particularly benefit from the opportunity to play with a Giggle Doctor. One theme which emerges here is that Giggle Doctors contribute 'towards creating a positive and affirmative environment for children, parents and medical staff that promotes healthy expression and interaction' (6). This correlates with experiences reported by Drama Curriculum Specialist Colin Armour at our partner St Piers School at Young Epilepsy: 'The Giggle Doctors facilitate play and play for our kids is so important because some of them don't know how to play.' (11) A study by Feniger-Schaal et al. (9) undertaken with a kindergarten in Israel demonstrates how Giggle Doctor visits over a period of time contribute to children's social and emotional development by empowering the child to lead play without imposing adult authority. Training in techniques such as intensive interaction helps our Giggle Doctors here at Theodora Children's Charity develop a range of skills and knowledge to call on in order to facilitate the best opportunities for play for children with all kinds of different needs.

Children are the beneficiaries at the heart of our work at Theodora Children's Charity, however, when Giggle Doctors visit a hospital, the impact is felt more widely. Charities such as the Laura Hyde Foundation have been campaigning to draw attention to the impact Covid-19 has had on nurses' mental health since March 2020 (12). On a personal level, Giggle Doctor visits have a physiological impact on nurses, who report an improvement in mood. This also translates into improved

communication, which can in turn benefit patients, making the presence of Giggle Doctors a cyclical benefit (13). This aligns with feedback received from health play specialists in hospitals where we work, who have commented on the improvement to atmosphere brought by Giggle Doctors: '...it benefits the staff as well, it's not just the children, I mean she cheers us all up! [...] and our consultants know her really well, it's part of the routine.' (14) This shows that the work of Giggle Doctors not only improves children's experiences of hospital, but also contributes to supporting staff.

Having a child in hospital is also a very stressful experience for parents and carers. Their stress and anxiety is expressed through the fact that they often over-emphasise their child's experience of pain, reporting higher levels of pain than when children report themselves (5). Studies suggest Giggle Doctors can 'play a significant role' in reducing stress and anxiety for parents (15). These studies give us an indication that for every child a Giggle Doctor plays with, the benefit may easily be felt by their parents, nurses, and even others working in the ward space, extending the impact of each interaction substantially.

Academic literature published in recent years makes it clear that there remains a pressing need for Giggle Doctors to create opportunities for play for children when they need it most. The impact of Covid-19 since March 2020 has only heightened this need, and continues to do so as we enter 2022.

Written by Isabel Squires, Programme and Quality Coordinator
January 2022



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Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the support of our generous donors who continue to make our work possible, as well as the hard work of our Giggle Doctors, our office staff, and our Board of Trustees

Please note, some photographs featured show Giggle Doctor hospital visits before the Covid-19 pandemic

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