



A Day In The Life Of a Play Therapist

Jessica Hagenson

Jessica Hagenson gets paid to play.

Blowing bubbles, playing board games and colouring in are all in a day's work.

Jessica started at Taranaki DHB as a Play Specialist three years ago. One minute she could be having a card game with a child, the next keeping a teenager company.

But there's a serious side to the job. The children are in hospital for a range of reasons and therapeutic play helps distract them while having a procedure or educate them about their surgery.

Jessica, who works part-time, is based in the Children's Ward but visits young patients throughout the hospital. She says play helps bridge the gap between home and hospital.

She spends a lot of time in Ward 2's assessment unit, where children have procedures such as chemotherapy, blood tests and immunisations. The patients range from babies to 16 year olds.

Jessica uses play before, during and after

treatments. It helps take the children's minds off procedures and gives them a positive experience before leaving hospital. They can choose an item from a treasure box full of goodies when they are discharged.

Photos and dolls, made by local community groups, are used to help explain what happens during surgery. Children can draw on the dolls and take them home.

Jessica takes the age of patients into consideration when talking to them, and makes sure they understand why they are in hospital and what will happen.

Play plans are developed for children who spend a longer time in hospital. Jessica finds out their interests and comes up with a series of activities to keep them occupied during their stay. Ward 2 has a playroom with plenty of games and toys. "The playroom is a safe room where they can go and be kids," she says.

Jessica, who has a background in teaching, loves working with children.

"It's challenging, every child is different and you have to think on your feet. You build up good rapport with them, but the job can be sad. Illness can strike anybody."

Learning the latest lingo and keeping with trends helps Jessica relate to teenagers, who just like to chat sometimes.

It's not just patients that she works with – play therapy also helps children who have parents in ICU or sick siblings. Advising and supporting parents is another part of her role.

Jessica liaises with play therapists in Hamilton and visits them to get fresh ideas. She says children don't need expensive toys to have fun. Her favourite trick is blowing bubbles. "I'm known as the bubble lady. It's one tool I wouldn't be without."

She also dances and sings to patients. "You have to be a bit nutty. If I've made a child's experience in hospital less scary and a little less boring, I feel I've done my job."