



Child Life: Empowering Children and Families to Cope With Life's Challenges

The Need for Child Life Services

Children today confront a wide variety of stressful and potentially traumatic events that may overwhelm their natural ability to cope and heal. Difficult or unexpected experiences, such as chronic illness, hospitalization, the death of a loved one, or the aftermath of violent acts or natural disasters are upsetting for everyone involved. Children are particularly vulnerable, and parents or other responsible adults may feel unsure of their ability to help children to successfully understand and manage these experiences.

Because children process information from the world around them much differently than adults, they have distinct needs for managing the effects of stress and trauma. Without the assistance of a professional who understands their unique perspective, children of all ages may experience emotions such as fear, shame, confusion and loneliness, which can inhibit their natural development, and have lasting negative effects on their wellbeing.

Child life specialists are trained professionals with expertise in helping children and their families overcome life's most challenging events.

What is a Child Life Specialist?

Child life specialists are experts in child development, who promote effective coping through play, preparation, education, and self-expression activities. They provide emotional support for families, and encourage optimum development of children facing a broad range of challenging experiences, particularly those related to healthcare and hospitalization. Understanding that a child's wellbeing depends on the support of the family, child life specialists provide information, support and guidance to parents, siblings, and other family members. They also play a vital role in educating caregivers, administrators, and the general public about the needs of children under stress.



Services Provided by Child Life Specialists

The American Academy of Pediatrics affirms that child life is "an essential component of quality pediatric health care," and as such, child life services have become a standard in most pediatric hospital settings. Child life specialists typically work as members of an interdisciplinary team, which may include physicians, nurses, social workers, therapists, counselors, teachers, parents and others.

Child life specialists focus on the psychosocial needs of children, collaborating with parents and other members of the team to:

- **Ease a child's fear and anxiety** with therapeutic and recreational play activities
- **Encourage understanding and cooperation** by providing non-medical preparation and support for children undergoing tests, surgeries, and other medical procedures
- **Advocate** for family-centered care
- **Engage and energize** children and families by coordinating special events, entertainment, and activities
- **Consider** the needs of siblings or other children who may also be affected by a child's illness or trauma
- **Direct** pre-admission hospital tours and resources, and consultations with outpatient families
- **Support** families confronting grief and bereavement issues
- **Provide education and resources** for parents and members of the interdisciplinary team

Where do Child Life Specialists Work?

Child life specialists are vital members of a multidisciplinary team in most large pediatric facilities, as well as many smaller pediatric inpatient units. They often service specialty areas like the emergency department, surgical and intensive care units, and outpatient units. Some child life specialists are also available to meet the needs of children of adult patients.

Although child life has its traditional foundations in hospitals, an increasing number of child life specialists are applying their unique expertise to help children in other environments, including outpatient healthcare facilities, doctors' offices, hospice care, specialized camps, schools, court systems, and funeral homes.



Need More Information?

If you are interested in obtaining child life services for your child and family, ask your physician or an organization administrator if child life services are available. For more information on the child life profession, please visit the Child Life Council Web site at www.childlife.org.

Professional Standards of Practice

Child life specialists are skilled professionals who have earned a minimum bachelor's or master's degree, with an educational emphasis on human growth and development, education, psychology, or a related field of study.

They adhere to a code of ethics and standards established by the Child Life Council, a national professional organization which also administers the rigorous process for obtaining the Certified Child Life Specialist (CCLS) credential. All Certified Child Life Specialists must complete a supervised 480-hour clinical internship, pass an examination, and adhere to a minimum standard for continued professional development in order to maintain their certification.

Why Are Child Life Services Important?

Research has shown in recent years that stress can be a major inhibitor in the ability of a patient to heal and to stay healthy. Child life specialists help children to effectively manage stress and to heal faster. The efforts of child life specialists also reduce the need for potentially dangerous sedatives and pain medication for children by helping them to prepare for and cope with pain.

About Child Life Council



The Child Life Council, Inc. is the leading membership association serving child life professionals as they empower children and families to master challenging life events.

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Founded as a nonprofit organization in 1982, Child Life Council provides members with professional development programs and resources, advances best practices, and distributes information about the needs of children experiencing stress and trauma.

Contributions and sponsorships help support professional development programs, research, and educational materials. Child Life Council provides a unique link to children in hospitals across the United States and Canada, particularly for corporations or individual donors who wish to make a difference in the lives of children.

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