

# 7 Facts About Child Life Specialists



One of the most important duties of a child life specialist is clarifying potentially confusing procedures and medical terminology. (iStockPhoto)

It's every parent's nightmare to learn that his or her child has been diagnosed with a chronic or life-threatening illness. But many children spend extended [periods of time in hospitals](#) each year. While growing up in a hospital setting is far from ideal, child life specialists are trained professionals who work to make the experience as positive as possible. Here's a look at the child life profession and the role it plays in a child's medical experience.

## 1. What is a child life specialist?

Child life specialists work closely with children and families in medical settings, serving as emotional support and helping develop family coping strategies. With a background in child development, psychology and counseling, child life specialists help explain medical jargon to kids and prepare them for procedures.

"Our main goal is to help decrease the stress and anxiety experienced in the hospital setting, and we're doing that first and foremost by helping them understand what's happening," says Shawna Grissom, the director of child life at [St. Jude Children's Research Hospital](#) in Tennessee, where she oversees a program of 21 child life specialists and a music therapist.

## 2. Where do they work?

While most child life programs exist in hospitals with large pediatric departments, child life specialists work in a variety of settings in order to provide the best care possible for children and families. For example, St. Jude's child life program allows child life specialists to travel to a child's school and give a presentation to the patient's peers about his or her illness and time in the hospital. Other child life specialists work specifically in one hospital department.

Molly Spragins, a child life specialist at [Duke Children's Hospital and Health Center](#) in North Carolina, works on the pediatric bone marrow transplant floor and helps kids with long-term coping. "We try to teach them skills on how to cope with the whole process, because the whole process from start to finish could easily be two to three years of isolation and physical changes," she says.

Child life specialists also work in adult care units to address the emotional needs of children who have parents undergoing treatment or in critical care.

### **3. What do they do?**

A child life specialist's job varies among medical settings, with duties changing every day. Grissom says one of the most important roles is explaining a child's diagnosis to him or her in a way that's appropriate for the child's age and level of understanding.

They also use their knowledge to explain procedures and medical terminology. "Our job is to really break that down, and so whether that's by utilizing some sort of teaching doll or utilizing real or pretend medical equipment, we want to help them understand exactly what is happening step by step," Grissom says.

Child life specialists also provide emotional support to children during procedures. Vicki Harris, a child psychologist who heads Vanderbilt University's Child Studies Program, says many of her students in the master's program pursue careers in child life, and their educational background helps when working with patients. "Some of the procedures young people have to endure are really quite upsetting and traumatic, and we know from research that with appropriate, developmentally on-target preparation, kids can do much better," Harris says. "The outcomes can be more positive for them, their medical teams and their families."

Child life specialists also ensure children are on track developmentally during their stay in the hospital. Through socialization activities in a playroom or designated teen room, child life specialists try to create healthy interactions and friendly environments. Specialists [use art](#) and play to help children express their anxieties about their diagnosis or procedures that they may not be able to verbalize. Child life specialists also advocate for the well-being of teenagers in the hospital, putting on events and programs that promote socializing.

### **4. What are their qualifications?**

As required by the Child Life Council, a certified child life specialist must have at least a bachelor's or master's degree, generally in a related field of study, such as psychology, human growth and development, education or counseling. They must also complete a minimum of 480 hours in a clinical internship under a certified child life specialist. Many internships consist of more than the minimum number of hours, and most require practicum experience before the internship. The final requirement is passing a national examination offered once a year.

Once certified, child life specialists must partake in continued professional development to maintain their certification.

### **5. Who can benefit from child life support?**

Though focus mostly centers on the needs of the pediatric patient, child life specialists also pay attention to the child's family and siblings. A pillar belief is that the medical experience is a family experience, and the emotional needs of all family members should be addressed appropriately.

"We know that chronic illness affects the whole family. Anything we do with the patient, we do the exact same things with the siblings," Grissom says. "... We also find that parents really benefit from some of the explanations we provide for patients at the broken-down level."

By addressing the emotional needs of all involved, the child will have a stronger emotional support system. "You can see the hopefulness and the willingness of children to continue to fight, to take medications, to do the treatments, to do the things they need to do to get better," Grissom says.

### **6. What is their role on the health care team?**

The largest child life departments exist in [children's hospitals](#), but hospitals nationwide use child life services. "It really differs from hospital to hospital how child life is integrated into the medical team," Harris says. "There are some hospitals where child life is a very respected and integral part."

While they're often welcomed as a crucial member of the health care team, sometimes child life specialists are overlooked because they're caring for the patient's emotional health rather than his or her physical health. "I think the department of child life often goes unnoticed, because we're kind of in the background," Spragins says. "But I believe that if you took child life away, children wouldn't heal as fast [and] they would have poor coping skills, which would translate to poor life skills later."

Some confuse child life specialists with pediatric nurses, but their roles are extremely different in a child's care. "There are some really fabulous pediatric nurses, but their expertise is in managing the medical aspects of a child's experience in the hospital," Harris says. "While they can do so in ways that are sensitive and informed by their knowledge of development and emotional well-being, that's a child life specialist's area of expertise."

### **7. What is the future of the field?**

While the child life field continues to grow, many specialists hope child life becomes a standard of care in all medical environments involving children. Grissom says she thinks child life techniques could also be beneficial in other environments, such as dental or court settings. And many hope more research is conducted to collect data supporting the benefits child life has on medical outcomes.

"The contribution a child life specialist makes to a team and to a child's experience has real, measurable outcomes," Harris says. "I don't think people in the field are doing as good a job as they can in demonstrating that [through research], but anecdotally and from the bits and pieces of research we can put together, there is

data there that would substantiate a really critical contribution.”

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