

BREAKING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

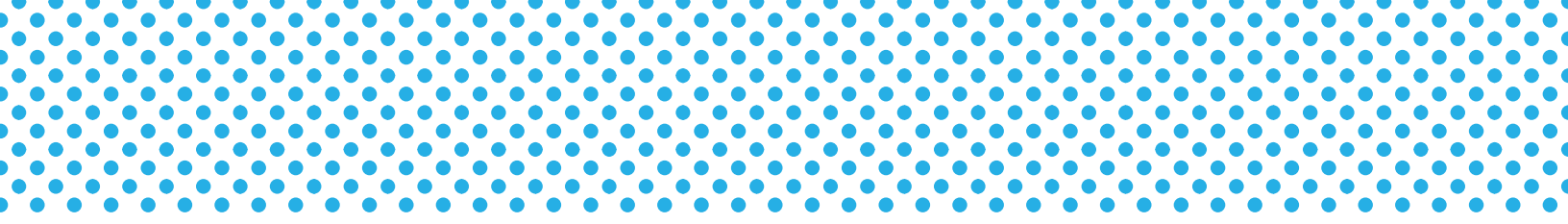
The Vital Role of Interpreters in Healthcare Settings

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As child life specialists, our role is to help patients and families understand the hospital setting. Through developmentally appropriate preparation and education, we explain diagnoses and procedures in a way that our patients and families understand. But what happens when it's not just the hospital setting that is unfamiliar to patients and families but our language? Using medical interpreters, we can communicate with our patients and families in a way that they can understand and ensure we are providing equitable care for all patients and families. This article briefly reviews the role of medical interpreters and how child life specialists can collaborate with them to better serve patients and families.

What makes a medical interpreter unique? On top of knowing another language, medical interpreters also take courses and training on medical terminology and anatomy. When I've worked on unusual surgical cases with our medical interpreters, they often spend time studying the procedure before interpreting for the physician and family so that they can prepare to interpret a wide variety of words and concepts. They learn the surgery and terms so they will understand what the doctors are saying. The role of a professional medical interpreter is to create a bridge between medical providers and our patients and families. They make sure that patients and families are hearing and understanding what the medical





staff is saying and that families have a voice with the medical team. Interpreters help create a safe space for families to share their worries and concerns, and they empower the patient and promote their participation by giving the patient and family an opportunity to actively participate in their care (Iftikhar, 2022; Krystallidou & Pype, 2018). A study found interpreters were associated with improved health outcomes for patients in the ICU (Duronjix et al, 2023). The use of medical interpreters is essential for patient- and family-centered care.

There are a couple of options for a professional medical interpreter, including a person who physically comes to the hospital or clinic room or an interpreter who supports via video chat or telephone. There are often connection issues with the video interpreters, and they have a limited view of the room, which can make interpreting for multiple people difficult. Similarly, a telephone interpreter helps provide language, but they can't see the staff or patient and family so they can't assess for confusion and misunderstanding in the same way as an in-person interpreter. However, using a professional medical interpreter to translate is preferred over using family members or friends for a variety of reasons. With family members or friends, there are concerns for conflict of interest, confidentiality, privacy, and the family member or friend's comfort with discussing hard topics or needing to be the bearer of bad news (Iftikhar, 2022). It is often an uncomfortable position for families to have to rely on this individual for interpretation as well as support.

At our institution, we have two Spanish-speaking medical interpreters on staff, and the hospital brings in other interpreters as needed. The interpreters at our hospital are very familiar with child life and are often a referral source for our child life team. Frequently, interpreters will work with a family throughout multiple visits and can be a helpful source of information for staff about the patient and family. For one chronic patient,

the interpreter was able to share with staff that the family understands some English and is working on learning more. This was helpful to know because the family will often stop during conversations and want to clarify the English word and its meaning. The interpreter's role works both ways, helping patients and families understand medical staff and helping medical staff to understand their patients and families better.

Interpreters are present through a variety of medical encounters and can recognize when a patient or family might benefit from additional child life support. When I first meet a family, the interpreter will often share with me the patient and family's past experiences that might be helpful for me to know. For example, when I was called by staff to come support a patient in ophthalmology clinic, the interpreter shared with me upon my arrival that the patient has a speech delay and communicates by pointing or taking his mother to what he wants. They also shared that the patient had left the clinic room multiple times already in the visit. When I was introducing myself to his family, I was able to pull toys out of my bag at the same time and block the door, allowing me to be proactive and provide distraction while also building trust. Connecting is harder when you don't speak the language, and the interpreter can help to make rapport building easier.

Interpreters also help hospital staff provide better care for their patients. A key part of our work as child life specialists is assessment and identifying if the patient understands what is happening. While I can read body language to know when a patient may be anxious, working with an interpreter is essential so I can understand their concerns and identify if there are misconceptions that need to be clarified. Interpreters also monitor the patient and the family during the visit to assess their level of understanding with what hospital staff are saying (Raymond, 2014). An interpreter can help assess how much English a child understands, which is

especially helpful if the child might be left alone during their admission or if we are talking about separating from family to go back to surgery with the OR nurses. Depending on what culture a family is from, I've also found that parents of patients with developmental disabilities may not know what information might be helpful to share about their child, and they benefit from assessment questions to learn more about a child's triggers and adaptive support needs. While I know the right questions to ask in my native language, the interpreter can ask these questions in a way that the family will understand best.

Interpreters can also provide insight into a patient and family's culture. When I was working with a patient and family from a country in South America, conversations were had among the team about whether it might be appropriate to introduce the facility dog to this patient. The interpreter was able to help the team understand that dogs are often wild and dangerous in the country this patient was from and why it might not be a good idea to expose them to our facility dogs since the plan was for this young patient to eventually return to his home country. The interpreter also shared with the larger care team that red was a sacred color in some South American cultures, so staff should be respectful of red clothing and potentially not remove red

bracelets prior to surgery if possible.

From my experience working with interpreters in a variety of settings in the hospital, I've begun to rely on their support and expertise. When I introduce myself to an interpreter, I'll often explain why I'm there and what kind of support I'll provide. I've found that there isn't an equivalent for child life specialist in many other languages, so I'll often use more common words like "hospital teacher" or person to help with distraction and make it easier for the interpreter to share what I'm saying. I will also ask if the interpreter is familiar with the family. It can be helpful to identify if the family understands any English and whether they can read or write. Reading and writing aren't as common in some other cultures, and handouts won't be helpful if the patient and family do not read in their native language. As child life specialists, we often emphasize to the team that the value in interdisciplinary care is that we all have different expertise that we bring to the table. As child life specialists, we bring our knowledge of child development and coping strategies. Interpreters are crucial too as they bring their expertise in the family's language and culture and are an essential part of providing patient and family-centered care in the hospital setting.



Tips for working with Interpreters

- Look at and speak directly to the patient or family, not the interpreter. The interpreter is a voice, you are interacting with and caring for the patient and family.
- Speak slowly and take breaks between short statements so that the interpreter has time to repeat what you are saying
- Give the interpreter time and space to share if they assess that the patient or family might not understand what is being discussed
- Watch for non-verbal communication such as facial expressions, gestures, and changes in tone.
- Avoid using family and friends as interpreters
- Plan for interactions to take longer and allow for that time for the interpreter to effectively help you communicate with your patients and families.

Adapted from Dibble (2019), Randall-David (1989) and Iftikhar (2022)

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