

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS:

Kuwait and Taiwan's Approach to Child Life

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Child life practice is a beautiful testament to the universal language of compassion, transcending borders, cultures, and linguistic barriers. It also presents practitioners with diverse challenges worldwide. In this article, Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLSs), Alice Chiu and Maryam AlBahar, both graduates of Boston University Wheelock College's Child Life and Family-Centered Care program, delve into our experiences as CCLSs in the non-English speaking countries of Taiwan and Kuwait. We explore how specialists navigate language and certification hurdles and offer insights into the distinct educational and certification pathways in each region's distinct educational and certification pathways. Despite facing obstacles in work and funding, CCLSs in both areas demonstrate unwavering commitment to their cause. Through our perspectives, this article illuminates the resilience and dedication of international CCLSs, highlighting opportunities for advancement and innovation within our respective domains.

Alice Chiu, CCLS, Taiwan

Language Barriers

As a CCLS in Taiwan, I encounter unique challenges when bridging language barriers, particularly when communicating with non-English speaking children and families. Terms like "poke" are commonly used in English to describe medical procedures, but their translation into Mandarin

may not convey the intended meaning and could even evoke fear in children. Instead of saying "poke," which may be misconstrued as "making a hole" in Mandarin-speaking contexts and can sound intimidating, I prefer to use softer language such as "the straw will touch you" while preparing children for procedures. Despite these obstacles,



Alice (right) and Maryam (left) at their Child Life Pinning Ceremony, Boston University



Alice with her very first patient as a CCLS in National Cheng Kung University Hospital

I remain committed to embracing the ethos of child life by transcending linguistic barriers and employing descriptive language to help children comprehend medical equipment and procedures effectively.

Certification Barriers

Divergent paths in education and certification criteria worldwide offer valuable insights into the profession's landscape in each region. In Taiwan, while there are Certified Child Life Specialists, only a fraction currently hold positions due to stringent licensing requirements. All healthcare members providing services directly to patients and families must be licensed, making it challenging to introduce the role of a child life specialist to healthcare teams and families. Despite completing training and certification to qualify as CCLS in the USA, Taiwanese CCLS are often employed as "research assistants" to provide child life services within the Taiwanese healthcare system.

Continuous employment is not guaranteed, and the payment may not offset the high investment required for overseas child life training, which underscores challenges in expanding the profession's impact and funding high training costs.

Opportunities for the Future

Despite these challenges, child life specialists in Taiwan demonstrate remarkable resilience and dedication. Our efforts are bolstered by funding from the Raising Children Medical Foundation, dedicated to creating a child-friendly healthcare environment. However, we are restricted to part-time contracts due to resource constraints, offering only 100 hours per month. Consequently, we lack benefits typical of full-time positions, such as paid time off and opportunities for professional development. These limitations strain our ability to attract aspiring child life specialists and hinder our capacity to provide comprehensive support, leaving hospitalized children without proper procedural preparation and therapeutic play opportunities.

Amidst these challenges, I remain hopeful about the future of child life development in Taiwan. Since establishing the first child life specialist in 2012, Taiwan has gradually embraced this unique role in healthcare. My experience at National Cheng Kung University Hospital showcases a growing acceptance of child life specialists as I pioneer new approaches and earn the trust of my colleagues. Introducing innovative ideas, such as utilizing Buzzy during pokes, underscores the potential for impactful change in pediatric care.

Maryam AlBahar, CCLS, Kuwait

Current Child Life Landscape in Kuwait

The landscape of child life in Kuwait faces many formidable challenges that significantly impact practitioners' experiences and the sustainability of the field. Salaries in Kuwait have long trailed behind those in the USA, with many practitioners earning only a fraction of the noted average CCLS salary. Despite incremental

progress in areas like increased recognition in hospital and educational settings and recent salary improvements, job opportunities remain scarce. The prevailing perception of child life as merely “playing with children” persists, even as education and certification among CCLS professionals rise. Exacerbated by low retention rates, practitioners frequently exit the profession within a few months to a few years, attributing their departure to unforeseen job demands, disparities in compensation, and limited opportunities for career advancement or clarity in progression pathways. These challenges are magnified by funding limitations, possibly from a misunderstanding of the profession’s nature, insufficient government support, and financial management challenges.

Certification Barriers

Alongside these professional and systemic challenges, language and cultural barriers further complicate the landscape for child life practitioners in Kuwait. The transcendent power of therapeutic play and family support helps overcome existing barriers, but these barriers can sometimes be insurmountable. Drawing from my experience at a child life organization in Kuwait, with Arab and non-Arab expatriate child life staff, language barriers posed significant challenges to my colleagues’ education, examination, and skill development journeys. The language barrier in their education resulted in unsuccessful attempts to pass the certification exam for all but one practitioner, who passed on a second attempt. This scenario prompts reflections on the possible injustices international uncertified child life specialists may face in accessing equal opportunities for higher education, employment, and career advancement despite their years of service.

The complexities of child life practice in the Middle East add another layer to the challenges faced by practitioners with different approaches to accreditation utilized in each country. In Qatar, a structured approach mandates government-issued medical licensing for child life practitioners, mirroring the standards set in Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, in Kuwait, the absence of a dedicated regulatory body or health ministry law specifically governing child life results in the responsibility for defining staff criteria falling upon non-child life board members and managers of a singular child life organization. This arrangement has led to ambiguity and challenges in establishing local standardized qualifications, with both certified and non-certified, experienced and new practitioners holding similar and equal positions as CCLS. Although the region has a unique landscape of child life practice, it presents opportunities to develop further the profession across various sectors, including private and public domains, and in diverse settings such as schools and other healthcare facilities.

Opportunities for the Future

Despite these hurdles, I see a fertile ground for innovation and leadership in child life in Kuwait and the broader Middle East. The introduction of specialized programs, like the Master of Clinical Psychology with a child life track in Saudi Arabia, underscores the region’s dedication to professional advancement and talent cultivation. A child life organization in Kuwait’s recent



Alice (right) and Maryam (left) at their Child Life Pinning Ceremony, Boston University

investment in education and training programs for young staff interested in pursuing certification in child life reflects a commitment to enhancing the profession's standards and expertise. Their recent strategic efforts include improving benefits and salaries to bolster staff retention and ensure the sustainability of child life services. As awareness of the CCLS role increases, private schools and healthcare settings have shown a growing interest in hiring child life staff, eager to create nurturing environments for practitioners and their children. My journey, as one of only two Kuwaitis with a master's in child life, signals a positive trend toward local expertise, opening the door for others and exemplifying a positive trajectory towards local expertise and recognition.

Together, our narratives underscore the resilience and determination of child life practitioners in overcoming challenges and driving positive change in our respective regions. We hope our stories offer glimpses of a future where child life services flourish, enriching the lives of children and families across the globe. Despite these obstacles, CCLS's commitment to supporting children and families underscores the importance of continued advocacy and innovation within the field and shapes the future of child life practice worldwide.

