

THE POWER OF WHY:

An Exploration of Mentorship

By: Danielle Coleman, MS, CCLS
and Senta Greene, MA, CCLS

A short time ago, we chose to embark on a mentorship journey through the ACLP Mentorship Program. ACLP describes mentees as child life specialists who would like support in general or to reach specific goals, and mentors use their expertise, knowledge, and leadership skills to provide this support. However, mentorship is a relationship-based experience that involves a two-way dynamic. It was a leap of faith for us to start this relationship with someone new. Although we were both Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLS), we were from different parts of the country, representing two different time zones, ethnic backgrounds, ages, specializations, and lived experiences. We both understood the power of lifelong learning, professional connection, support, and sustainability.

Our mentor-mentee relationship led to fascinating conversations, critical inquiries about the profession, and a shared commitment to child life advocacy and education. We employed the following questions and experiences to steer our conversations, fostering a more profound understanding of ourselves and each other. This approach facilitated mutual support on both professional and personal fronts. As you dive into this article, we invite you to reflect upon the questions we explored. We hope they inspire you to seek mentorship actively, take on leadership roles within the child life community, and prioritize self-care.



Why did we become CCLS? Why do we choose to stay?

We know one of the first and most compelling questions often asked by a young child is, "Why?" The introduction of this word is a significant milestone in children and adults and punctuates a shift in development and experience. As CCLSs, asking why helps us explore information more deeply before making decisions. Humbly, through a stance of inquiry, we set out to do the same by asking each other why we became a CCLS and why we chose to stay in the profession.

Mentor: Danielle

As our relationship grew with each conversation, Senta and I often reflected on why we chose to become CCLSs and what motivates us to continue in this role. The catalyst for my journey into the child life profession came when I volunteered as a high school student in the hospital playroom. I was fortunate to meet a compassionate CCLS who took it upon herself to mentor me. I learned about the profound significance of play in the hospital environment and the impactful role of advocacy. I never looked back or wavered from my commitment to becoming a CCLS.

My decision to persist in this profession is driven by my desire to apply my skills within the non-profit sector. After working with patients in an outpatient clinic's traditional child life setting for

several years, I sought to expand my horizons by transitioning into the non-profit community. I am dedicated to supporting children and teenagers whose parents face serious illnesses or injuries at Wonders & Worries. In my current capacity, I employ a family-centered care approach, providing education and empowerment to the children and their parents. I aim to enhance communication and resilience within these families' dynamics during adversity.

Mentee: Senta

As I reflected on my career pathway with Danielle, memories of my time working in a residential group home and running peer support groups at Children's Hospital Los Angeles as a child development specialist for children diagnosed with HIV/AIDS came flooding back. Working in these settings under the supervision of a CCLS was a turning point in my career and life. The children I worked with deeply touched my heart, and my experiences supporting their coping strategies and moments of normalization further emphasized the significance of child life across various settings. It also exposed me to the impact of adverse childhood experiences and the importance of advocating for children. Since then, my commitment to bringing the voice of child life into diverse settings has been unwavering. Currently, I work as the Director of Special Projects for the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Ventura and Co-Executive Director of Full Circle Consulting Systems, Inc., a professional learning and development consultancy firm specializing in trauma-responsive practices, DEI in action, and child-family-community engagement.

The opportunity to explore our why, led us to discuss the work of Simon Sinek, an inspirational speaker, and author, who stated that understanding our "why" is a higher compelling purpose that inspires us to know why we do what we do and "how much more we can achieve if we prompt ourselves to start everything we do by first asking why" (2009, 2017).



Why did we join the ACLP Mentorship Program?

From our conversations, we discovered the profession of child life has always been rooted in teaching and, equally important, mentorship. Additionally, throughout our career, we both encountered unintentional and intentional mentors who inspired us to give back and to understand and actualize our why. These mentors were lifelong learners, had a growth mindset, and were creative, innovative, and self-aware, demonstrating essential features of leadership and impact. Most importantly, these mentors inspired us to stay in the profession while translating our skills to other sectors of the mental health community.

Danielle:

I have been fortunate to receive mentorship as a student and work alongside those same mentors as a trained professional. The idea of paying it forward felt fulfilling, especially when the child life profession was facing its challenges due to the recent pandemic. As it turns out, the mentorship relationship became a two-way street of learning and growth because of our diverse backgrounds, ethnicity, age, and shared experiences. I gained a deeper understanding of how the skills of a CCLS can be applied in the community and how the concept of “The Power of Why” can guide my current practice as a CCLS.

Senta:

Mentorship has been an integral part of my professional journey for the past thirty years, both as a mentor and mentee. Looking back, I remember doubting my ability to sustain myself as a CCLS due to the stress and challenges I faced along the way. However, I am proud to say that I persevered and learned that age is no barrier to learning and growth. My commitment to mentorship led me to join the ACLP Mentorship program, where I was matched with Danielle. Throughout our time together, I approached the program with an open heart, mind, and a willingness to learn. I am grateful for the enriching experience we shared and the mutual benefits we

gained from our partnership. I am thrilled that I joined the program and look forward to continuing my journey in mentorship.

Why do you practice self-care?

During our mentoring sessions, we explored the themes of collective care and self-care. One of the key insights we discovered was the importance of permitting ourselves to engage in self-care without feeling guilty or apologetic. This shared stance of empowerment was deep, enlightening, and comforting. By prioritizing self-care, we can sustain our passion, energy, and resilience, ultimately enhancing the quality of care we offer patients and families.

Danielle:

I regularly evaluate feelings of burnout, secondary trauma, or passion fatigue. I consistently question why my enthusiasm for my job may be waning or why I am experiencing decreased compassion. Through self-assessment, I can identify the underlying causes and initiate steps to reignite my passion. Prioritizing self-care involves seeking guidance, advice, and mentorship. By presenting facts and information that prompt reflection on my passion fatigue, I equip myself with actionable steps to counter those thoughts that may disturb my sleep.

Senta:

I believe self-care should be a top priority in our daily routine to lead a fulfilling and healthy life. Permitting ourselves to engage in self-care is a precious responsibility that we owe to ourselves. Being a CCLS requires a lot of emotional energy and commitment. To ensure that I can cope with my responsibilities, protect my peace, and stay committed to my profession, I engage in various self-care practices, from 5-minute journaling to enjoying a cup of tea to setting boundaries.

The demanding nature of child life can take a toll on one’s mental health if not properly managed. Self-care practices, such as self-rejuvenation routines and continuing education, ensure that

a CCLS stays holistically healthy and updated on the latest research and therapeutic interventions. Self-care also nurtures professional growth and confidence in one's abilities. Seeking guidance through mentoring allows for personal growth, skill development, and emotional support, helping CCLSs navigate challenging situations more effectively.

Ultimately, the history of the child life profession is rooted in education, psychosocial care, and mentorship. Mentorship is vital to the growth of the child life profession as it fosters the development of essential skills and knowledge in emerging specialists, ensuring they are well-equipped to support children's emotional and psychological needs. Additionally, strong mentor-mentee relationships cultivate a sense of community and professional identity, which is crucial for the continued advancement and cohesion of the field. Unequivocally, if CCLSs want to continue supporting this profession's longevity and legacy, we must continue to inspire, teach, advocate, seek wellness, and, most importantly, mentor.

