THE ROLE OF CHILD LIFE AND PLAY IN THE HOSPITAL SETTING

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Role of a Child Life Specialist (CLS)

- 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 (Child Life Council, Inc., 2010)
Schafer and O’Connor (1983, p. 2) describe several elements of play behavior: “Play is pleasurable; play is intrinsically complete; play is person-dominated rather than object dominated; play is variable across situations; play is non-instrumental; play does not occur in novel or frightening situations; and play has flow.”

When children are faced with stressful situations and trauma, they use play as a way to comfort themselves, to bring meaning to their experiences, and to make sense of and bring control to nonsensical situations.

Psychologist and play researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes the mental state children enter into when engaged in play as “flow”. Flow means that the child is in a state of forgetfulness and instead of being lost in nervous preoccupation, the child is able to be absorbed in the play experience.

During this “flow” experience there is a sense of control because the child is able to influence what is happening.
Children Learn through Play

- Bolig, Fernie, & Klein (1986), five functions of play in the hospital are described:
  - To provide diversion
  - To play out anxieties and problems
  - To restore normal aspects to life
  - To aid in understanding hospital events
  - To communicate fear (Bolig, Fernie, & Klein, 1986).
How Do CLS Use Play?

- Procedure Preparation
- Medical Play
- Distraction
- Self-expression
- Normalcy

The purpose of adult-directed play is to increase a young patient’s sense of predictability regarding pending medical procedures and health care experiences, increase a sense of self-control, reduce stress from unrealistic fantasies about medical procedures, increase effective coping skills, and to clear up confusions and misconceptions (Fromberg & Bergen, 1998).
The power of therapeutic play was researched by Girepy & Howe (2003)

- Study comparing play habits of children with leukemia in the hospital vs. healthy children in a child care center
- Children in the experimental group played less than the control group, supporting the view that children who are preoccupied and anxious may have a more difficult time engaging in play activities which could deprive them of opportunities to cope and problem solve
- Emphasizes the importance of observing play behaviors in hospitalized children and providing them with an atmosphere that is safe and conducive to encouraging play behaviors

Li & Lopez (2008), the effectiveness and appropriateness of using therapeutic play

- The effectiveness and appropriateness of using therapeutic play in preparing children for surgery
- Children in the experimental group reported lower state of anxiety scores in the preoperative and post-operative periods than children in the control group
Health Care Professionals’ View of CLS

  - According to doctors and nurses: amusing and entertaining children
  - According to CLS: being a member of health care team

- Lack of understanding could be detrimental to child life services due to the unstable economy and budget cuts
Guidebook to Child Life Services

- **Purpose**
  - To provide CLS with a simple tool to give to the health care team describing the importance of child life services and the research behind why play activities and therapeutic interventions are appropriate and necessary for patients and their families in the hospital.
Guidebook Contents

- Certified Child Life Specialist Credentials
- What Is Psychosocial Care?
- How Do Children Learn Through Play?
- Common Stressors of Hospitalization for Each Developmental Age
- What Is Therapeutic Play?
- Child Life Directed Therapeutic Play
- Procedure Preparation and Medical Play
- What Types of Interventions Will You See a Child Life Specialist Direct?
- When Should Child Life Be Called?
- What Does Child Life Have to Offer to the Health Care Team?
Conclusion

- Research and literature on child development clearly show that children learn through play and use play as a way to process the world around them.
- Child life specialists provide much needed support for hospitalized children by providing ways for them to cope and process the stressful, unfamiliar, and traumatic circumstances.
- The research shows that many healthcare professionals do not have a clear understanding of the role of child life in the hospital setting.
- The field of child life is still in need of more experimental research to further confirm what observations have already shown.
References


