



# Enhancing Pediatric Mental Health

## The Integral Role of Certified Child Life Specialists

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**Abstract:** Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLS) are integral members of the interdisciplinary healthcare team, dedicated to promoting coping skills and enriching healthcare experiences for pediatric patients and families. Through a review of literature and evidence-based practices, this paper explores how CCLS’s expertise and services can be applied as a mental health resource outside of the hospital and medically-related experiences. Incorporating CCLS as a mental health provider enhances the quality of care and fosters compassionate and comprehensive support in any facility serving children and families. Harnessing their specialized training in child development and therapeutic modalities, CCLS contribute to positive coping strategies, increased emotional well-being, and improved mental health outcomes for children and adolescents. Healthcare providers and businesses alike, who embrace and integrate CCLS into mental health initiatives, can improve not only children’s physical health and emotional well-being, but the overall customer experience and satisfaction.

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## Introduction:

According to the 2021 policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics, “Child Life Specialists focus on the optimal development and well-being of infants, children, adolescents, and young adults while promoting coping skills and minimizing the adverse effects of hospitalization, health care encounters, and/or other potentially stressful experiences (Romito, 2021).” Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLS) promote coping and enhance the health care experience for pediatric patients and their families. As valuable members of the pediatric care team, CCLS provide a necessary mental health service, implementing evidence-based interventions in various settings based on child and family needs.

Recognizing the value Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLS) contribute to pediatric healthcare, every business or organization interacting with children can further enhance the comprehensive care of children by integrating Child Life Services into the mental health framework. Focusing on the overall well-being of a child or teen, providers and organizations who provide innovative approaches are better equipped to address and meet the unique needs of youth. Hearts Connected, a leading organization in pediatric psychosocial care, created this white paper to recognize the invaluable contributions of CCLS as qualified mental health providers beyond the health care environment.

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## I. The Role of Certified Child Life Specialists in Pediatric Mental Health:

Certified Child Life Specialists are professionals trained to support children and their families during challenging medical procedures, illness, and trauma. CCLS provide developmentally appropriate preparation and support for medical procedures, creating a reduction in anxiety and distress among pediatric patients (Thompson, 2017). This fosters a supportive and nurturing environment and promotes mental well-being in both medical and non-medical settings. Harnessing their child development expertise, CCLS teach and guide children and adolescents teaching age appropriate coping mechanisms. By providing patients with emotional support for mental health interventions, CCLS add value to pediatric mental health teams by reducing fear and anxiety, minimizing potential adverse psychological impacts of treatment in medical and non-medical settings (Romito, 2021).

**A. Emotional Regulation:** Creating a safe environment for children and adolescents to name, express, and process their feelings, CCLS contribute to emotional regulation, integral to effective mental health interventions (Lieberman, 2016). CCLS facilitate emotional expression through age-appropriate techniques such as therapeutic and medical play, therapeutic activities, art, music, bibliotherapy, and guided imagery. Some CCLS, including those within Hearts Connected, often incorporate other techniques such as breathwork, tapping and CBT skills training, to assist children, teens and young adults with emotional regulation.

**B. Normalization of Hospital Experiences:** For children and adolescents, the healthcare environment can be intimidating and overwhelming. Child Life Specialists strive to normalize the medical setting for pediatric patients. Using play and therapeutic interventions, CCLS effectively reduce anxiety and fear associated with healthcare settings, creating a comfortable space to receive treatment (Goldberg, 2019).

## II. Tailoring Child Life Interventions to Psychosocial and Developmental Needs:

CCLS focus on the developmental and emotional needs of pediatric patients through various techniques such as therapeutic play and developmental support (Schubert, 2019). The benefits of therapeutic play, a core component of child life services, meet the psychosocial development needs of pediatric patients by helping children to explore, learn, and understand difficult or challenging topics in a non-threatening way. (Grant, 2020). CCLS consistently integrate play into their mental health services to meet the developmental and psychosocial needs of children, providing mental health care that supports the entire child, physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally.

### A. Developmental & Age-Appropriate

**Communication:** Effective communication is an essential component of pediatric mental health treatment, playing a vital role in building trust and rapport quickly. CCLS are skilled in adapting communication strategies tailored to the age and developmental level of each child, checking for comprehension, correcting misperceptions, and providing information about treatment. CCLS are trained to convey age-appropriate information in a way that ensures children and teens comprehend and participate in their own mental health interventions, fostering engagement and collaboration with their providers and family (Carter & Lee, 2017). Beyond hospital walls, CCLS integrate these skills to serve a wide range of psychosocial needs for children in the community setting.

**B. Therapeutic Play and Creative Modalities:** Play is fundamental to healthy childhood development. CCLS facilitate play-based interventions to address mental health challenges. Research highlights the therapeutic benefits of play, including improved emotional expression, increased coping skills, and enhanced social interaction among children participating in mental health programs (Reynolds, 2020). Utilizing creative modalities for emotional expression and self-regulation, CCLS incorporate play, art, music, and other creative activities as therapeutic tools. Engaging children in a manner that facilitates emotional expression, coping, and communication, CCLS serve a vital role in pediatric psychiatric support (Jones & Davis, 2018).

## III. Integrating Child Life Services as a Mental Health Resource:

Child Life services can be adapted to serve and support a wide range of pediatric mental health needs. Family involvement is crucial in pediatric mental health. Child Life Specialists advocate for family-centered care. Fostering a collaborative approach, CCLS provide family-centered support,

engaging families in their child's therapeutic process (Smith, 2021). CCLS engage families in the therapeutic process, providing support and resources, aligning with the family-centered philosophy endorsed by pediatricians (Thompson & Christofferson, 2018).

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**A. Family-Centered Support in Mental Health Services:** The role of a CCLS includes the entire family unit. By addressing the psychosocial needs of the entire family, CCLS positively impact overall mental health outcomes for children (Harper, 2018). Easily adept and skilled at including parents and siblings in the therapeutic process, CCLS engage families in the therapeutic process. Recognizing the interconnectedness of a child's well-being with family dynamics in mental health contexts, CCLS provide family support that is critical to the success of interventions (Smith, 2021).

**B. Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** When pediatric clinicians and CCLS work collaboratively, they facilitate an enhancement of interdisciplinary services offered to patients (Carter & Lee, 2017). CCLS use a comprehensive strategy and skillset to effectively collaborate with care teams of various kinds in medical and non-medical settings. CCLS are trained and prepared to provide trauma-informed care in crisis interventions. Effectively responding to children experiencing crises or trauma, CCLS foster an environment of safety and security (Schubert, 2019). Understanding that compassion and collaborative practice increase the quality of healthcare, CCLS expands value-based care into the community setting, including school systems, hospice, court systems, outpatient and rehabilitation facilities, summer camps, and non-profits. When incorporated into a compassionate and collaborative framework, CCLS strengthen the overall care provided beyond the healthcare setting.

## IV. Child Life Training and Collaborative Approach to Pediatric Mental Health:

CCLS are skilled at meeting the psychological and emotional needs of children and adolescents. Completing a rigorous specialized training protocol, CCLS receive training that emphasizes both academic and clinical experience. CCLS are trained in diverse healthcare settings, including hospitals, clinics, hospice, and mental health facilities. The goal of CCLS is to

understand and anticipate the unique challenges children face in different contexts, tailoring interventions to meet individual needs. This distinct training that CCLS receive makes them exceptionally qualified to work effectively with children in many settings beyond hospital walls.

**A. Academic Foundation in Child Development for Diverse Therapeutic Modalities:** CCLS receive extensive academic and clinical training in child development, psychology, and therapeutic techniques. This specialized training equips CCLS with the skills necessary to address the unique psychological and emotional needs of children in diverse healthcare settings (Schubert, 2019). CCLS hold a bachelor's or master's degree in Child Life or a Human Development field, complete a rigorous Child Life Internship, and must pass the Child Life Certification Exam to become a Certified Child Life Specialist. This academic foundation ensures that they possess a solid understanding of child development, psychological principles, and the socio-emotional aspects that influence children's well-being. CCLS are qualified to work effectively in the mental health field with children and teens facing various challenging circumstances and trauma beyond medically-related stressors.

**B. Cultivate Positive Coping and Increased Emotional Well-Being:** CCLS focus on identifying and building upon a child's resilience, cultivating a sense of normalcy and comfort during challenging circumstances. CCLS create an environment conducive to mental health healing, growth, and successful outcomes. A positive hospital experience contributes to improved mental health outcomes in pediatric patients (Goldberg, 2019). Incorporating child life as a mental health service, teams interfacing with children and teens are promoting positive outcomes, enhancing their level of care offered, and providing psychosocial care and enrichment. CCLS contribute to positive experiences and outcomes, as evidenced by children feeling emotionally safe to process and express their thoughts and feelings. Child Life Services integrate therapeutic art, music, and play-based interventions into mental health programming, enhancing the customer/patient experience and improving overall outcomes.

## Conclusion:

Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLS) bring a unique skill set and qualifications into pediatric mental health care, addressing the psychosocial needs of children facing any of life's stressors. CCLS are trained in trauma-informed care, medical literacy, proficiency in therapeutic modalities, and commitment to ongoing learning. The incorporation of child life services enhance the overall effectiveness and impact of these initiatives, position CCLS as indispensable contributors

to the overall well-being of pediatric patients. Through integration of Hearts Connected Certified Child Life Specialists, business and organizations have the opportunity to provide more comprehensive, compassionate care. Hearts Connected is dedicated to addressing the mental health crisis through lower cost, accessible services nationwide. So many families are met with long wait lists deterring them from being able to find appropriate and timely support for their children. Hearts Connected continues to remain committed to connecting children to services within 24 hours and no waitlist. Teams who integrate and embrace child life into mental health service programs will enhance the quality and impact of care provided to the children and families they serve.

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