



Child Life Specialists

Child Life Specialists play a critical role in rehabilitation and recovery for thousands of pediatric patients who sustain spinal cord injuries each year.



Q: What is a Child Life Specialist?

Child Life Specialists are healthcare professionals who help pediatric patients and families cope with hospital stays and complex medical conditions. They can be found in many hospitals across the country and are often part of the clinical team overseeing acute and rehabilitative care for children who have sustained spinal cord injuries.

Q: What are the goals of a Child Life Specialist?

Child Life Specialists are focused on the psychosocial wellbeing of young patients. Using play and age-appropriate educational activities, they work to make children more comfortable during their time in the hospital and help them understand and adapt to their diagnosis.

Q: How might a Child Life Specialist specifically help a child living with a spinal cord injury?

Spinal cord injuries, whether the result of a car accident or sports-related injury or a neurologic condition such as acute flaccid myelitis, affect many aspects of life. A child may need a wheelchair to move around. Hand use may be limited. Bowel and bladder function may be lost. Injuries involving neck and throat muscles might restrict the ability to chew, swallow or even breathe, while disrupted communication between the brain and spine may trigger spasticity.

Child Life Specialists will help patients understand and cope with the often-overwhelming secondary conditions that occur after injury. For example, a Child Life Specialist might use a combination of medical and therapeutic play activities to help a child who has lost bowel and bladder function. Playing with a doll equipped with a catheter can help the child become familiar with the equipment they'll need themselves and give them a better sense of control over the process. In addition, they might make “glittery urine” to squirt through catheter bags and “poop slime” for silly play, activities that can help a child feel comfortable talking about the changes to their body and normalize this new aspect of life.

Child Life Specialists will teach children about paralysis and the secondary conditions they are experiencing using art, games or other hands-on activities. They might talk about how the impact of an injury depends on its location while having the child hold a colorful 3D model of a spinal cord or make one of their own using egg cartons and pipe cleaners.

Child Life Specialists will also prepare young patients for medical procedures such as bloodwork and tracheostomy tube changes by letting them handle the medical equipment ahead of time and brainstorming coping strategies. They might go with them to the procedure to hold a hand and provide support or distraction.

Q: How are Child Life Specialists trained?

Child Life Specialists typically earn bachelor's or master's degrees in child life studies (or a related field such as child development, psychology or early childhood education.) To be certified by the Association of Child Life Professionals, they must also complete a clinical internship and pass a comprehensive exam.

Q: Do Child Life Specialists collaborate with doctors?

Yes. Child Life Specialists work closely with the healthcare team overseeing patient care. Rehabilitative care for spinal cord injury involves many healthcare professionals, from doctors and nurses to nutritionists and physical therapists. Child Life Specialists will consult one-on-one with team members and join clinical meetings to monitor the child's challenges and develop creative strategies to support their developmental and emotional needs.

Q: Do Child Life Specialists work with the families of patients?

Yes. Child Life Specialists work closely with families to not only provide support for the young patient, but for the family itself. Child Life Specialists may spend time playing with siblings to help ease their fears and provide distraction, while also taking time to walk parents through educational materials and personalize medical checklists, adding a Steelers theme for a Pittsburgh fan or a spray of flowers for a dedicated gardener. The wellbeing of the patient is connected to their family, so Child Life Specialists pay close attention to how all its members are coping with the diagnosis and time at the hospital.

Q: How can a Child Life Specialist help my child with the psychological aspects of recovery after a spinal cord injury?

Child life specialists use age-appropriate play to not only help the child understand and process the changes to their bodies and lives but develop coping strategies for the challenges that accompany spinal cord injuries.

Building trust is a key part of their work; at first, they will spend time with your child – playing cards, watching cartoons or taking trips to the vending machine – to get to know them. Once the patients are more comfortable, child life specialists will begin to identify what aspects of the hospital stay and injury are causing distress. For children who are nervous about the many healthcare professionals in and out of their rooms, a child life specialist might design a scavenger hunt that zigzags around the hospital to meet each staffer. For children who are feeling frustrated that they're not able to run around, splatter paint art sessions may provide a stress release.

Above all – and no matter the medical condition that has brought them to the hospital – pediatric patients are children. Child life specialists not only play an important role in a young patient's care and recovery but provide the play opportunities that are critical for every child's developmental needs.

Q: My child is 19 years old; is that too old to work with a Child Life

Specialist?

No. Some pediatric programs, including at Kennedy Krieger Institute, admit patients into their early 20s. Young adults at this age can also benefit from spending time with a Child Life Specialist in order to become more comfortable during their hospital stay and better understand and cope with the challenges of living with a new spinal cord injury.

Sources: Kennedy Krieger Institute, Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, Boston Children's Hospital, Association of Child Life Professionals.

Need to talk to someone?

Our Information Specialists are available to answer your questions.

Call toll-free 1-800-539-7309 Mon-Fri, 7 am-8 pm EST.

Or schedule a call or ask a question online at

<https://www.ChristopherReeve.org/Ask>.

Additional Resources for Child Life Specialists:

Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago: Strategies for families from a Child Life Specialist

<https://www.luriechildrens.org/en/blog/tools-for-emotional-safety-from-a-certified-child-life-specialist/>

Association of Child Life Professionals (ACLP)

www.childlife.org

University of Maryland Children's Hospital: Resources for Parents

<https://www.umms.org/childrens/health-services/child-life/parent-resources>

Hospitals with Child Life Specialist Programs:

Boston Children's Hospital

<https://www.childrenshospital.org/programs/child-life-services/our-specialists>

Children's National Hospital

<https://www.childrensnational.org/plan-your-visit/inpatient-and-hospital-stays/patient-services-and-hospital-amenities/family-support-services/child-life>

Kennedy Krieger Institute

<https://www.kennedykrieger.org/patient-care/centers-and-programs/child-life-and-recreation-therapies-department>

PARALYSIS RESOURCE CENTER FACT SHEET – CHILD LIFE SPECIALISTS

NYU Langone Health

<https://nyulangone.org/locations/pediatric-rehabilitation-services>

RWJ Barnabas Health

<https://www.rwjbh.org/treatment-care/child-life-specialists/>

Shirley Ryan AbilityLab

<https://www.sralab.org/articles/blog/child-life-activities-add-comfort-magic-hospital-stays>

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Shriners Children's

<https://www.shrinerschildrens.org/en/pediatric-care/child-life-services>

University of Maryland Children's Hospital

<https://www.umms.org/childrens/health-services/child-life>