



by Karen Stephens

## Child Life Specialists Help Hospitalized Kids

Childhood is full of promise for a long, healthy, and happy life. But during these early years, children are especially vulnerable. A child's immune system isn't fully developed, so he or she is easier prey for germs. Children's impulsive, exuberant behavior puts them at risk, too. They don't fully grasp cause and effect. They aren't good at anticipating, much less preventing danger.

These characteristics combine to make kids more prone to illness and injury than other age groups — and sometimes it lands them in the hospital, hopefully not for long. Unfortunately, some hospital stays are so long that kids begin to think of the hospital as a second home, and the nursing and medical staff as their second family.

Long-term health problems, coupled with hospitalization, cause stress and disrupt childhood. Typical play experiences that are critical for developing minds and bodies are interrupted. Hospitalization brings emotional upheaval as children have to confront all kinds of anxiety, such as fear of isolation and separation from parents and siblings. Imagine having to muster enough healing energy to get well in spite of all that trauma!

Since childhood hospitalization poses unique and stressful challenges, there are trained professionals, called certified Child Life Specialists (CLS,) who help support and prepare kids and families for medical treatment. They coach parents and kids as they explain procedures in child-friendly terms, and they can teach coping strategies so children can cooperate fully in their own recuperation.

The title Child Life Specialist may be new to you. These people are non-medical, college-trained professionals who know child development and how to nurture it even through a child's hospitalization. They support children — and their families — as they confront issues ranging from managing fear to living within hospital policies. During medical personnel staff meetings, the CLS comments on the child's overall development and advocates for each child and family's individual needs. They constantly seek ways to involve the whole family in the child's progress toward becoming well.

Hospitalizations don't always have happy endings, so a Child Life Specialist is also trained to support kids and families as they deal with reality and grapple with tough choices and decisions. Part of a CLS's job is to help those affected by illness to manage emotions, such as anger, disbelief, sadness, and depression.

Should your child require a hospital stay, upon pre-admission ask if the facility has a Child Life Program. If so, request the services of a Child Life Specialist. They are great at helping parents and kids maneuver the maze of hospital experiences. (Below you will see how to obtain a national directory of Child Life Programs.)

Child Life Specialists provide a wide variety of activities and experiences for children from birth to adolescence. All are geared to keep life as normal and

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routine as is humanly (and humanely) possible. They plan experiences that help children take joy in the moment; so parties and special family celebrations are not uncommon.

A Child Life Specialist is especially dedicated to helping children cope with the emotional and social stress of hospitalization. Whether in a group play room where socialization is encouraged, or in a child's own room, a CLS offers regular therapeutic activities. These creative experiences help children make sense of their world by using their most natural mode of learning: play. Activities may include play with art, music, dance and movement, storytelling, reading, and writing. Innovative play techniques include pretend medical play with puppets, dress up play as medical staff, and doll house play using an equipped play hospital instead of a doll house.

We all know children need lots of patient, thoughtful support during hospitalization, especially if we want them to learn useful things from the experience. Parents are the most important players for helping kids cope with illness or injury. But having a Child Life Specialist on a health care team goes a long way in ensuring that your child's growth and development will continue despite hospitalization.

The involvement of a CLS increases the odds that your child's positive hospital experiences will far outweigh the negative. That would be a grand lifetime lesson.

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#### Resources

- The Child Life Council, Inc. publishes a national directory of hospitals with Child Life programs. Contact them at 11820 Parklawn Drive, Suite 202, Rockville, MD 20852-2529. Phone: (301) 881-7090. Web site address: [www.childlife.org](http://www.childlife.org).
- Internet site: [KidsHealth.org](http://KidsHealth.org). Topics relate to children's health, including what kids need to know about hospitals.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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