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## Parental Perceptions of Child Life Specialists

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Parental Perceptions of Child Life Specialists

Anna Muccio

University of Arkansas

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### **Abstract**

Most children spend time in the hospital at some point during their childhood whether it is for a short visit or a long-term stay. Hospitalization can be a very stressful experience for children and their families. Child life specialists work in hospitals to help families navigate hospitalizations and cope with stress. This study aimed to investigate parental perceptions of child life specialists, including parents' familiarity with their role, recognition of its importance, appreciation for help provided, and the formation of meaningful relationships with child life specialists. A survey was conducted among child life specialists who had worked with children and families in hospital settings, and ninety-one responses were collected. The findings indicate that parents were generally unfamiliar with the role of a child life specialist before entering the hospital. However, after interacting with a child life specialist, parents came to recognize the importance and value of the child life specialists' role and appreciated the help that they provided for their child and family. Child life specialists also feel that they can form meaningful relationships with the parents they work with. Overall, the study emphasizes the crucial role that child life specialists play in supporting children and families throughout hospitalization.

**Keywords:** Child life specialists, parental perceptions, hospital setting

## Introduction

### Background and Need

Many children have to visit or even stay long-term at the hospital for a variety of reasons. Hospital stays can be stressful for both children and their families. The goal of a child life specialist is to help children and families navigate their hospitalization and alleviate some of the stress that a hospital stay can cause. LeBlanc et al. (2014) noted that some of the ways child life specialists commonly assist children and families in the hospital include, “preparation for medical procedures, health care play, procedural support, family facilitation, developmental support, play programming, and therapeutic play and dialogue” (p. 254).

Although child life specialists should play a crucial role in the hospital stay experience for children and their families, some question if they are even necessary. Ballard and Lookabaugh (2018) recognized that even though child life specialists focus mostly on the children staying at the hospital, it is necessary to involve and support the family as well. Claridge et al. (2020) reported that the stress faced by parents likely influences the child’s ability to cope while in the hospital.

In a hospital setting, parental care and satisfaction is critical as their child receives medical attention. There are factors that influence a parent’s view on the value of a child life specialist. Some of these factors include the length and type of hospital stay, the location and environment of the hospital, the techniques and practices of the specific child life specialist, and the family situation of the child who is staying at the hospital. By exploring these questions, new information can be gathered about how child life specialists can be more helpful and effective in their practice, along with ways that the job of a child life specialist could be altered to better help and serve the children and families during hospital stays.

## **Problem and Purpose Statement**

Spending time in a hospital is a stressful experience for children and their families. However, working with a child life specialist has been found to positively contribute to the resiliency of the family (Bell, 2015). This is because Certified Child Life Specialists work with the whole family, not just the hospitalized child. Thus, it is crucial to assess the perceptions of parents regarding child life specialists, enabling the child life specialists to offer essential support during their child's hospitalization.

## **Research Objectives**

1. Do child life specialists feel parents are familiar with the role of a child life specialist before entering the hospital.
2. Do child life specialists feel parents they work with recognize the importance and-value of their role?
3. Do child life specialists feel parents they work with seem to appreciate the help that they provide for their children?
4. Do child life specialists feel they are able to form meaningful relationships with the parents that they work with?

## **Literature Review**

This research project sought to evaluate parental perceptions of child life specialists following a child's hospitalization. Past research focused on child life specialists, particularly what a child life specialist is, the perceptions of other healthcare professionals regarding child life specialists, the practices and techniques used by child life specialists, how child life specialists are helpful, and the effects of the hospital environment on the impact made by child

life specialists. The following review of literature highlights these research studies to underpin this research project.

### **What is a Child Life Specialist?**

Although their job is critical to children and families who are staying long-term at the hospital, many people do not know what a child life specialist is or what role they play in children's hospitalizations. Simply put, "Certified child life specialists are child development experts who specialize in helping children and their families cope with the stress and uncertainty of medical treatments, illness, injury, disability, and hospitalization" (Weinberger et al., 2017, p. 71). Child life specialists at hospitals support patients developmentally and emotionally as they stay at the hospital for periods of time (Diener et al., 2019). In one study focusing on the impact of care from child life specialists in imaging departments, it was found that "parent satisfaction, staff satisfaction, child pain and child distress are shown to be positively impacted by the services of a CCLS" (Tyson et al., 2014, p. 1426). It is important to understand the impact child life specialists have on the well-being of hospital patients. As much as children and families need physical care while at the hospital, families need psychosocial support to help cope with their hospitalization (Dickenson and Morris, 2021).

### **Perceptions of Child Life Specialists by Other Health Care Professionals**

Child life specialists work in hospitals with nurses and doctors, many of whom have undergone much more schooling and preparation in order to work in the hospital environment. Cole et al. (2001) found that child life specialists were perceived as having very little power on the health care team. However, some disagree, finding that child life specialists are key members of the team (Metzger et al., 2013). Drayton et al. (2019) found that, "nurses expressed feelings of ease when the child life specialist was present," and that they felt the child life specialist had

more time to dedicate to spending with the child and their family (p. 5). The previous literature suggested that child life specialists are able to help in ways that doctors and nurses cannot.

### **Practices and Techniques of Child Life Specialists**

Child life specialists use a variety of practices and techniques in order to be successful. Child life specialists use various techniques so that they can care for children both developmentally and emotionally. Some of the most common practices of child life specialists include providing play experiences along with presenting developmentally appropriate information about upcoming procedures and creating therapeutic relationships with the patient and other family members (Kaddoura et al., 2013). One of the most popular techniques used by child life specialists is play (Weinberger et al., 2017). Play is an important technique used by child life specialists because it allows children to explore and be creative as they undergo stressful situations.

### **How are Child Life Specialists Helpful?**

There are identified benefits to the help of a child life specialist, and many ways that they are helpful around the hospital that may not always be noticed by those around them. In one study, it was found that, “the proven benefits of CLS may be more cognitive and psychological in nature, producing magnitudes of impact on the child's ability to cope with pain and improve overall parent satisfaction in the context of various procedures” (Murag et al., 2017, p. 238). Child life specialists are not only helpful to older children, but also in other areas of the hospital such as the NICU. For families with a baby in the NICU, respondents reported that helping support siblings was a role of a child life specialist in the NICU (Smith et al., 2014). Sometimes, like with families who have a child in the NICU, child life specialists help by entertaining older siblings in order to support the parents.



## **Effects of the Hospital Environment on the Impact of a Child Life Specialist**

Each hospital has a different overall environment and offers different benefits to those who stay there. Most hospitals have a playroom or area where children can play, and some even offer outdoor features. Studies show that certain environments, like patient rooms and waiting areas, can have a positive impact on the experiences of hospitalized children and their families (Weinberger et al., 2017). The environment of the hospital plays a significant role in the success of their hospital stay. Weinberger et al. (2017) noted that “the hospital playroom is an environment that should be optimized to support the goals and values of child life professionals” (pg. 72).

Overall, there has been significant research conducted on child life specialists and their role during children’s hospitalizations. Some key findings from these previous studies focused on how child life specialists are perceived by medical professionals in the hospital, how child life specialists use certain practices or techniques in order to have an impact in the children they work with, and different ways that child life specialists are helpful around the hospital and in the lives of families. These studies also show how the environment of the hospital affects the child emotionally and developmentally, especially through playroom activities. This research project shifted the focus to how child life specialists are perceived by the parents of hospitalized children.

### **Methodology**

This section highlights the methodologies that were used to gather information for this research. Included are the research design, rigor, population and sampling, and instrumentation, along with data collection and analysis for the project.

## **Research Design**

This research study used a non-experimental quantitative design, with a survey for data collection. Non-experimental quantitative designs are, “research designs that examine social phenomena without direct manipulation of the conditions that the subjects experience. There is also no random assignment of subjects to different groups. As such, evidence that supports the cause-and-effect relationships is largely limited” (Leung and Shek, 2018, p. 1). In this study, child life specialists who have worked with parents were asked to complete a survey. Survey research collects information from individuals through their answers to certain questions. It has been found that survey research, “is often used to describe and explore human behavior, surveys are therefore frequently used in social and psychological research” (Singleton and Straits, 2009, p. 1).

## **Rigor**

The research included a survey which was administered online to Certified Child Life Specialists who had worked directly with parents in the hospital setting. In research projects such as this, it is important to recognize rigor. Some potential threats to rigor could include respondents not providing true or accurate answers to the survey due to discomfort or difficulty recalling their interactions with parents during the survey and/or obtaining a large response rate. In this study, these problems with rigor were addressed by making the survey completely anonymous and voluntary so that respondents only had to provide information if they felt comfortable and could accurately describe interactions with the parents of hospitalized children.

## **Population and Sampling**

The participants in this study were 91 child life specialists who had experience working with parents whose children were hospitalized. The population for this study were child life

specialists who gained access to the survey and voluntarily answered the questions included in the survey. In order to obtain adequate information for the study, the aim was to receive around one hundred responses to the survey. The type of sample used in this study was a convenience sample, where child life specialists agreed to complete a survey about their interactions with parents of hospitalized children. The survey, which was administered electronically, was completely voluntary.

### **Instrumentation**

The survey used in this study consisted of Likert-scale questions which identified whether parents were familiar with the role of a child life specialist before entering the hospital, if parents recognized the importance of the role of a child life specialist, if parents appreciated the help that child life specialists were able to provide for their child, and if child life specialists were able to form meaningful relationships with the parents they interacted with. The survey took approximately ten to fifteen minutes for a child life specialist to complete. The answers to the questions were then reviewed in order that information regarding parental perceptions of child life specialists could be gained.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

A survey was administered online to child life specialists who have interacted with parents of hospitalized children. These child life specialists were given an electronic survey which was prepared in order to find out more information about their interactions with parents in the hospital. The survey was available on an online forum called ACLP Connect, which is available on the ACLP website for people with an ACLP account. The link to the survey was also posted on Facebook pages and forwarded directly to child life specialists.

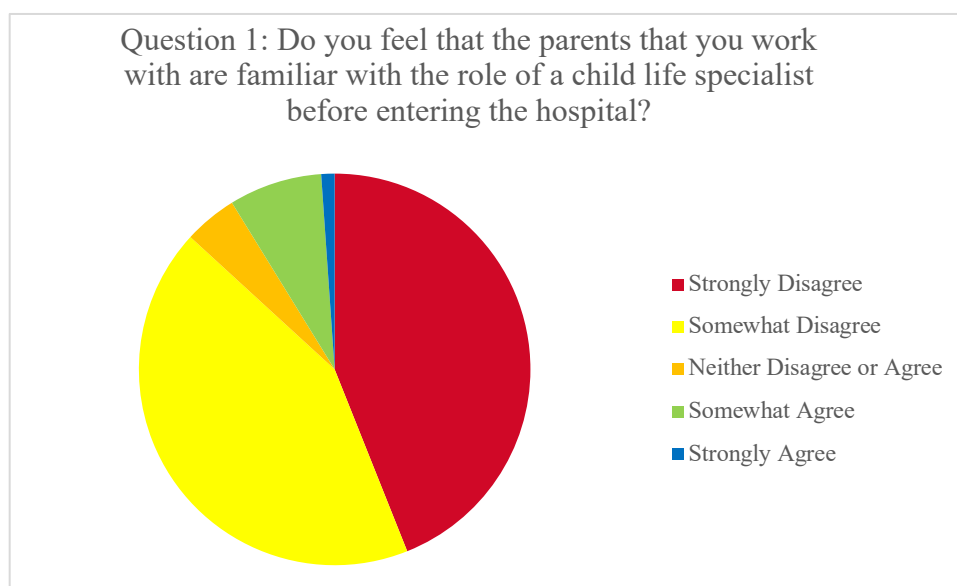
The data collected was transferred from Qualtrics to SPSS to be analyzed. All data analysis was conducted using SPSS.

This section covered the research design, rigor, population and sampling, instrumentation, and data collection and analysis of my research in order to give a clearer understanding of how and with what tools this research was conducted.

## Results

Participants in the survey were asked four questions relating to parental perceptions of child life specialists and used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” to respond.

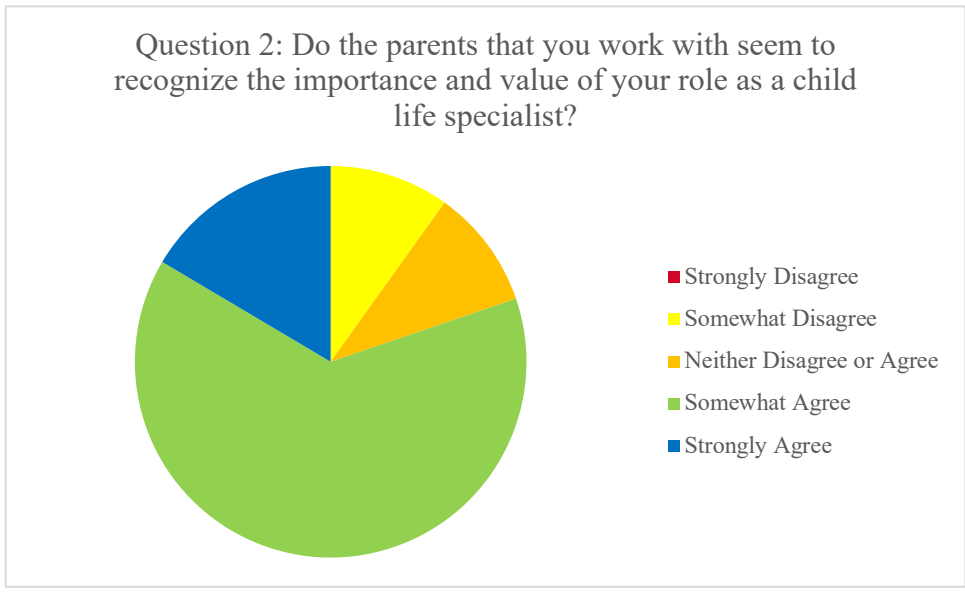
### Familiarity of Child Life Specialist Role



In response to the question regarding parental familiarity with the role of a child life specialist, a significant portion of child life specialists indicated that the parents they work with are not familiar with their role before entering the hospital with their child. Only a small minority agreed that parents seemed to be familiar with their role. These findings show the need for

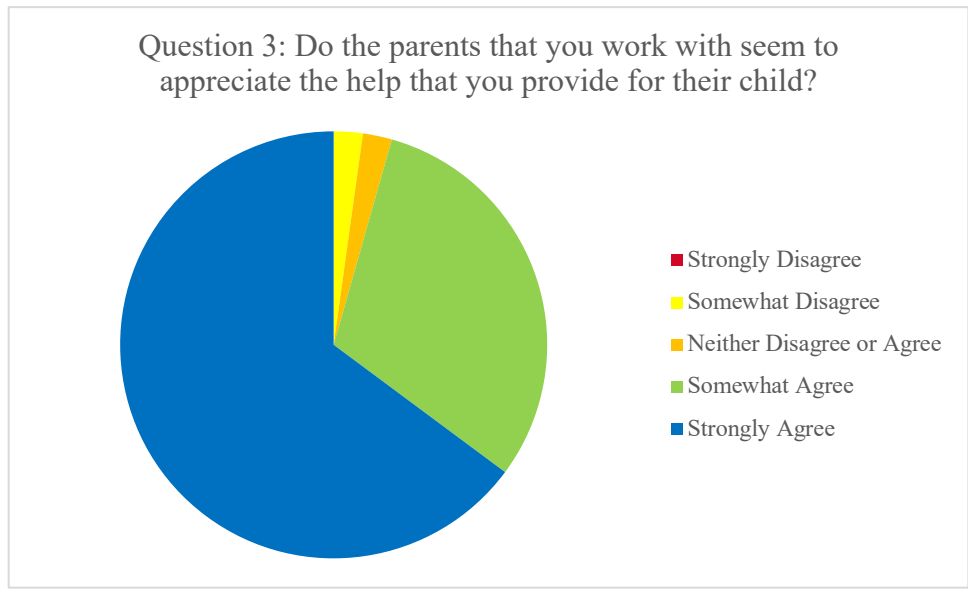
increased awareness and education regarding the role that child life specialists play in the hospitalization of a child.

**Importance and Value of Role**



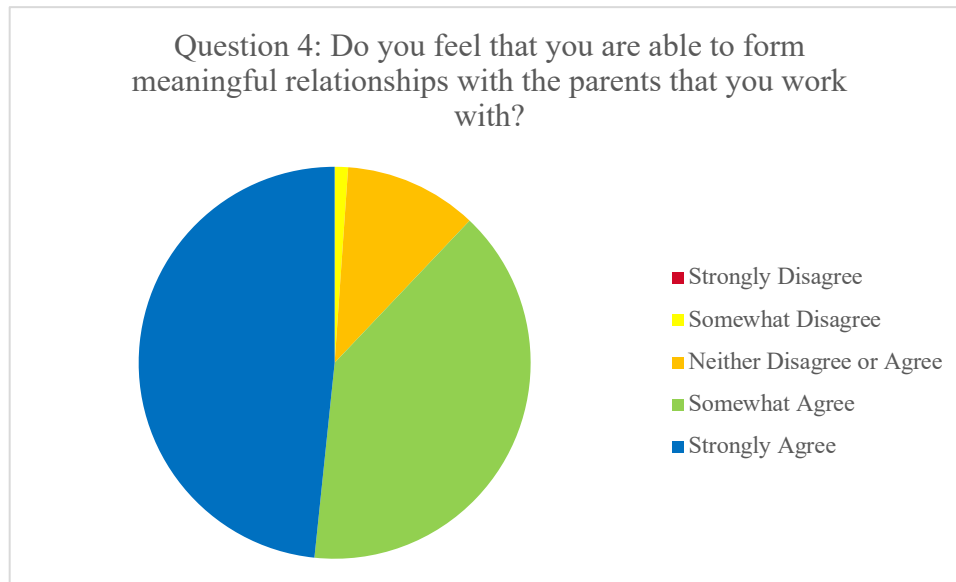
The responses to this question reveal a generally positive perception of the importance and value of the role that child life specialists play. No respondents strongly disagreed with the idea that parents recognize their importance. The majority of participants somewhat agreed and strongly agreed that parents recognize the importance and value of child life specialists. These findings suggest a positive regard for the work of child life specialists in hospital settings.

### Appreciation of Help Provided



The results regarding parental appreciation of the help provided by child life specialists indicate a high level of perceived appreciation among respondents. None of the participants strongly disagreed that parents appreciated their help, with only a small amount somewhat disagreeing or neither disagreeing nor agreeing. In contrast, a large majority either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that parents appreciated the help provided for their child. These findings suggest that the help and support offered by child life specialists are recognized and valued by parents.

## Ability to Form Meaningful Relationships



The findings regarding the ability of child life specialists to form meaningful relationships with parents suggest a high level of success in this area. None of the respondents strongly disagreed with this statement. A significant number of participants somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to form meaningful relationships with parents. These results indicate that child life specialists are generally successful in establishing meaningful connections with parents, which could contribute to improved support of both the child and their family throughout hospitalization.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study provide valuable insight into the perceptions of child life specialists regarding their role in caring for hospitalized children and their families. From the results, it can be seen that most child life specialists do not believe that parents are familiar with their role before interacting with them in the hospital. The results also show that parents seem to recognize the importance and value of working with a child life specialist. Most of the participants also said that parents seem to appreciate the help that they provide for their children.

Lastly, it can be seen that most of the participants feel that they are able to form meaningful relationships with the parents they work with. These findings emphasize the transformative impact that child life specialists have on parents' experiences during their child's hospitalization. Despite initial unfamiliarity, parents not only came to appreciate the role of child life specialists but also formed meaningful relationships with them, revealing the pivotal role that child life specialists play in the hospital environment.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

While this study provides valuable information about parental perceptions of child life specialists, a few limitations should be noted. First, the survey was completed by child life specialists who were reflecting on their experiences with parents to provide insight on parental perceptions. This method may introduce bias, as the child life specialists' perceptions may not completely reflect those of the parents. Future research could include the perspectives of parents themselves to provide a fuller understanding of their perceptions of child life specialists. This could include surveying or interviewing parents to capture their views and experiences. It would also be interesting to explore how parental education about child life specialists could impact their perceptions of child life specialists. Further research about these ideas could help increase our understanding of parental perceptions of child life specialists and how to best support children and families during hospitalization.



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