

The Value of Certified Child Life Specialists: Direct and Downstream Optimization of Pediatric Patient and Family Outcomes

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Today's value-based healthcare market demands that healthcare institutions and professionals provide high quality care at sustainable costs for consumers and payers alike. Top-decile performers systematically target each dimension of the Quadruple Aim, continuously improving safety, efficiency, timeliness, effectiveness, and equity in patient-and-family-centered care. These ambitious objectives require a multidisciplinary approach, particularly when serving infants, children, adolescents and emerging adults, and their families. Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLSs) have emerged as staple constituents of pediatric healthcare teams; the psychosocial care they provide draws directly from their education and training in child development, family systems, and effective communication with children and families. Using play and education to help patients and families anticipate and cope with medical care, **CCLSs significantly reduce the financial, developmental, and psychological costs associated with stress, pain, and anxiety that can persist far beyond initial healthcare encounters.**

Certified Child Life Specialists tailor a cost-effective experience of care that cultivates well-informed, actively engaged, and loyal consumers of healthcare services throughout the lifespan. In collaboration with multidisciplinary healthcare team members, child life professionals bring a multifocal lens to pediatric patients and their families – one that is rooted in developmental theory, centered upon the value of therapeutic relationships, and informed about the influence of present and prior trauma. These components are assessed and acted upon by CCLSs through play-based techniques since play is the vehicle by which coping skills are taught and refined, illness information is shared and revised, resilience is found and exercised, and emotional safety is created and maintained.

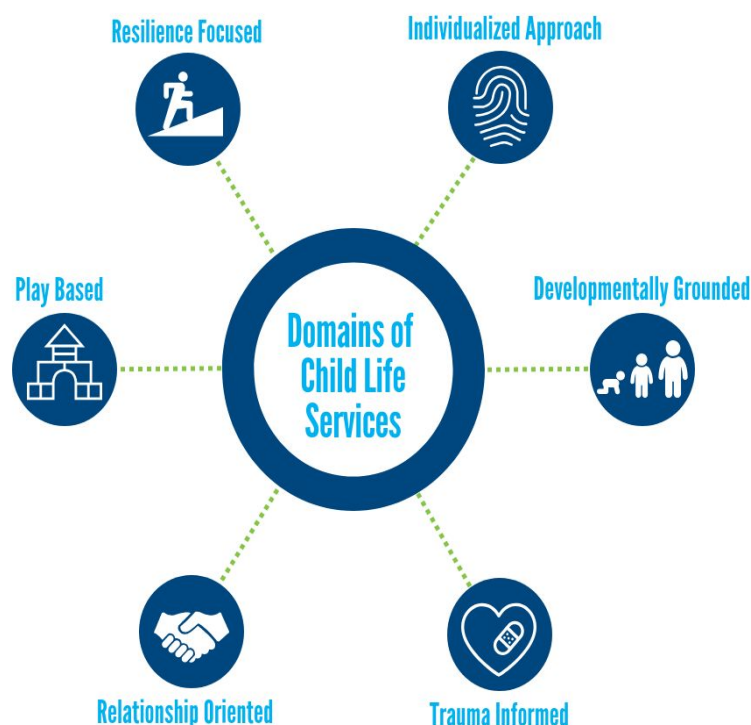


Figure 1. *The Six Domains of Child Life Services.*

As discerned by the American Academy of Pediatrics,¹ The Beryl Institute,² The Canadian Paediatric Society,³ the Society of Critical Care Medicine,⁴ the Walt Disney Company,⁵ and over forty years of clinical research, CCLSs are a low-cost yet high-yield investment in the direct and downstream success of healthcare institutions. Expansive research consistently demonstrates that CCLSs:

1. ***Drive positive and effective outcomes for healthcare organizations by optimizing the use of resources and limiting waste.*** Children who receive preparation and procedural support require less sedation and anesthesia,⁶⁻¹⁵ demonstrate less emergence delirium,¹⁶⁻¹⁸ and consume less narcotic pain medication.¹⁸ As a result, patient safety, access, and throughput are increased,^{19,20} while staffing costs^{12,14} and post-anesthesia length of stay are reduced^{17,18,21} - and significant cost savings are realized.¹²⁻¹⁵

2. ***Generate positive behavioral, psychological, and physiological outcomes through individualized interventions with pediatric patients.*** They implement an array of play-based, coping-focused techniques shown to ameliorate pain,²¹⁻²⁴ lower anxiety,²⁵⁻²⁹ reduce distress,^{22,23,30} and increase satisfaction with - and loyalty to - institutions of care.³¹⁻³⁷ Children demonstrate fewer behavioral disturbances during and beyond medical encounters³⁸⁻⁴⁰ when receiving comprehensive preparation, procedural support, and coping skills education, all of which are associated with accelerated healing.⁴¹

3. ***Empower children and families to become informed and active participants in their healthcare experiences.*** By providing timely, individualized diagnosis, treatment, and discharge education for children and families,⁴²⁻⁴⁸ Certified Child Life Specialists promote health literacy^{49,50} and treatment adherence^{45,51} - reducing unnecessary emergency department visits, preventable hospital readmissions, unscheduled clinic visits, and use of rescue medications⁵²⁻⁵⁵ in chronically ill populations. When education is provided in play-based, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive ways, patient-family-provider relationships and communication are strengthened,⁵⁶ familial distress is alleviated,⁵⁷⁻⁵⁹ and illness self-management is enhanced.^{45,51}

4. ***Promote and sustain developmental and psychosocial growth from infancy through emerging adulthood.*** They facilitate purposeful play experiences,⁶⁰⁻⁶³ normative interactions, and transition support for patients, parents/caregivers, and family members that shape positive coping and development. Targeted, developmentally appropriate, and family-centered play-based and educational interventions^{46-48,57,64} result in increased weight gain, abated feeding difficulties, and decreased length of stay in infancy, thus enhancing neurodevelopmental outcomes.⁶⁵ In children, adolescents, and emerging adults, these supports render improved emotion regulation, effective coping behaviors, adaptive peer interactions, and more appropriate use of healthcare resources.^{60,66-70}

5. ***Improve population health by fostering long-term patterns of healthcare consumership that reduce the risk of preventable conditions.*** By maintaining and advancing a patient-and-family-centered healthcare environment, Certified Child Life Specialists mitigate pediatric medical traumatic stress⁷¹⁻⁷³ and improve mental health outcomes for infants, children, adolescents and emerging adults, and families.⁷⁴⁻⁷⁶ They establish the foundation for positive coping and resilience

in the face of medical experiences⁷⁷⁻⁷⁹ and attenuate the negative physical and psychosocial effects of stress, loss, and grief - including stroke, heart attack and high blood pressure in adulthood^{80,81} - thereby cultivating health-promoting behaviors⁸¹ throughout the lifespan.



Figure 2. *The Five Value Drivers of Child Life Services.*

Certified Child Life Specialists drive and promote positive outcomes for institutions, patients, and families, thus approaching the Quadruple Aim and improving the healthcare industry in return. Additionally, they empower children and families of all ages and stages to become active, informed, and well-adjusted consumers in their healthcare journey, no matter where it begins or leads. Resultant reductions in anesthesia, sedation use, repeated tests/procedures due to coping difficulties, pain medications, readmission rates, and overall length of stay equate to significant savings per fiscal year scaled upon institutional programs, volumes, and performance. These impacts of child life services transcend healthcare’s volume- and value-based service descriptors by increasing throughput, minimizing waste, and improving the patient experience without sacrificing quality or substantially increasing expenditures. Certified Child Life Specialists, therefore, optimize resource use in the current moment, while also cultivating a new generation of consumers that will seek and sustain a more affordable, accessible, and effective healthcare industry for all.

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ACLP Vision

ACLP advances psychosocial care and the emotional safety of children, youth, and families impacted by healthcare and significant life experiences.

ACLP Mission

ACLP fosters child life professionals through:

- Standards and credentialing
- Connection, collaboration and community
- Evidence-based practice
- Professional development
- Championing the child life profession