

Empowering Students and Supervisors: A Collaborative, Multi-Site Internship Model

*Dagney Willey Adamson, MHI, CCLS and Marne Perrin, MS, CCLS
Co-founders and Co-Owners of Coping Copilots, LLP*

About Coping Copilots, LLP

Coping Copilots, LLP is a Minnesota-based private child life practice born from our collaboration (Marne and Dagney) which began in 2020, when we met working in a traditional healthcare setting. Though we quickly realized we were complete opposites in strengths and styles, our shared passion for child life and our ability to creatively build off each other made us “Better Together.” That synergy sparked a vision: to expand the role of child life into the community through private practice.

The barriers students face in securing traditional child life internships also informed our work. Recent research highlights that only about half of applicants successfully obtain an internship, with factors such as graduate-level education, prior healthcare-based practicums, and faculty support significantly influence success rates (Boles et al., 2025). This reality means that many capable and passionate students are overlooked, despite being well aligned with the heart of child life practice.

We officially registered Coping Copilots in December 2023 and launched in April 2024, grounded in a strong mission, vision, and set of values. The idea for a shared internship model was inspired by, Alexia, the daughter of a mutual friend. Alexia is a bright and passionate student whose independent studies degree from NYU focused on creativity in communication and child development. Despite her clear alignment with the heart of child life work, her non-traditional academic path did not meet internship program criteria, leaving her overlooked. After creating a custom practicum experience for her and witnessing her continued challenges securing a placement, we felt compelled to create a sustainable and scalable internship model to support students like her.

We realized we didn’t want to just think outside the box, but instead, we wanted to blow the box up. That might sound bold, but as organizational psychologist Adam Grant says, great minds do not think alike, but they challenge each other to think differently. As the CLCC and Federal Registrar requirements emerged, our commitment to mentorship and community-based child life practice only deepened, guiding the work we do today. This article serves to outline the process of creating a sustainable and scalable child life internship model drawing on the power of collaboration.

COPING COPILOTS AT A GLANCE

MISSION:

To promote resilience in children, teens, and their families by providing support during unique and challenging circumstances through the lens of development and play.

VISION:

To integrate proactive developmental, trauma-informed, and preventative coping support into communities throughout the state of MN and beyond, while investing where our contracted professionals are located.

VALUES

- Strengths-Based Approaches
- Play (Adults Too!)
- Do the Right Thing (Even if it’s hard)
- Respectful Collaboration

A Networked Approach to Innovation

As we began shaping this experience, we realized our business structure naturally removed many common barriers. As a partnership, we didn't need to navigate committees, leadership approvals, or organizational red tape. Decisions could be made quickly—sometimes with a single text. We already had a business attorney who could review affiliation agreements within 24 hours, and our existing professional liability insurance included student coverage. This meant organizations could approve student involvement almost immediately. These built-in advantages made the process smoother and more accessible than we had imagined.

A unique strength for the child life community of Minnesota is the close proximity of many child life departments and the strong professional connections built over the years of shared programming. One great example is a multi-organization diabetes support group that brings together CCLSs from several departments as facilitators. In fact, it was through this program that Dagney formed key relationships—connections we later relied on to begin weaving a network of opportunities for our future interns.

Expanding Access to Supervision and Mentorship

As we began to think about how to create this experience, we reflected on the amount of untapped potential in CCLSs who had not been able to support students or interns due to their practice setting—particularly those working in the community-based roles or as part of one-person or small child life programs. We wanted to leverage the strength and experience of Minnesota's child life professionals to offer unique learning opportunities while reducing the burden on staff already involved in student internship programs at traditional sites.

We carefully reviewed CLCC policies and documentation to ensure we understood our model would align with internship verification requirements. Through this review, we confirmed that Coping Copilots, LLP could serve in the internship coordinator role. This structure would allow each rotation to designate a qualified rotation supervisor responsible for 80% of daily contact with the intern, focusing on developing competency-based foundational clinical skills. How we chose to reinforce those competencies and skills outside of rotation hours was left to our discretion.

To thank the professionals who joined us in this adventure, we hosted our inaugural "PJ's and PDU's" morning event in partnership with the University of Minnesota and Minnesota Child Life Coalition. The event offered three free PDUs to any Minnesota-based CCLS who attended in person, with a small fee for virtual attendees and recordings. We were transparent about the virtual fees for this event and our future PJ's and PDU's events will fund future stipends for internship coordinators who offer supervision outside of their

Building the Experience

As we developed the internship model, we used the ACLP modules to guide the design of supplemental content and assignments that would deepen student learning. While doing so, we were intentional about innovating rather than replicating a traditional model. Our first priority for each student was to provide one rotation in a traditional healthcare setting, helping them stay prepared for and marketable to traditional child life roles. Beyond that, we created opportunities to learn from CCLSs in non-traditional roles and unique settings, supporting children of adult patients, working in community-based programs, and even authorship experiences.

We condensed key elements of the traditional internship, such as case discussions, group programming, teddy bear clinics, and final presentation into an “intensive week”, allowing students to fully immerse themselves in clinical work during their rotations. One especially meaningful experience included a discussion with Helen, a retired child life professional who shared insights from nearly 50 years in the field.

Each student was paired with an internship coordinator who met with them outside of clinical hours to process experiences, review assignments, and extend their learning. In many ways, our interns had the benefit of learning from what felt like a large department: 32 child life professionals, multiple music therapists, a children’s museum, and a non-profit organization. However, this “department” consisted of CCLSs in Arizona, Illinois, Iowa, all over Minnesota, and even Saudi Arabia.

Logistical Lessons Learned

As we worked to establish this internship model, we quickly learned about the many logistics involved, such as: affiliation agreements, contracts, and background checks among them. We also encountered challenges with organizations that required to direct agreements with the university, rather than with us as the internship provider, which necessitated additional legal support. Healthcare organization’s IT firewalls created complications with direct communication between rotation supervisors and coordinators, as well as with sharing documents. Additionally, not all students had access to resources, such as transportation, which posed a challenge with this model.

We also needed creative solutions for not having a physical office space. When meeting in person with students for orientation and intensive week, we utilized local coffee shops and public libraries to complete tasks and experiences at minimal cost. Another unique consideration, especially when working in community settings like schools, was building in buffer hours for school closures, such as cold weather days or snow days. Fortunately, we had already built in extra hours for sick days and other contingencies, but it’s a factor that you wouldn’t have to think about in a traditional healthcare setting.

Our Pioneering Interns and the Sparkle They Bring

We have been so humbled by how wholeheartedly our pioneering interns embraced this new model—leaning in with curiosity, creativity, and a willingness to help us iterate in real time. Alexia, Kelsey, and Kylie each came to child life through a non-traditional path, making it especially rewarding to be able to build their rotations and select their coordinators in combination with their unique backgrounds in mind. In a sense, we fit the internship experience to the individual, rather than trying to fit the individual into the internship. When it came time to celebrate their completion, we chose one word for each that captured their growth and spirit: Insightful. Confident. Imaginative.

The best part of this model has been all the unexpected “sparkle” it has brought, not only to us, but to our students and the child life professionals who joined in. Several professionals told us they hadn’t realized how much they needed an outlet like this, and how it left them feeling refreshed, energized, excited, and hopeful for the future of the profession. And of course, there was the joy of seeing Alexia, Kylie, and Kelsey’s faces, completely glowing, when they officially finished their internship experience.

Looking ahead to Fall 2025, our next group of three interns, all three affiliated with universities, are strong, passionate students who, for various reasons, have also fallen through the cracks of the traditional internship process. They will each be paired with a different internship coordinator. The bright looks on their faces when discussing this opportunity, especially after feeling so discouraged from not securing a traditional internship, fuels our commitment to championing students who might otherwise be overlooked. We believe their passion will be an incredible gift to our field.

Looking Ahead

Leading into Spring 2026, we hope to expand our pool of partners, not only within our state’s established or emerging child life programs, but also among CCLSs stepping into non-traditional or community roles. We also are seeking opportunities across the Midwest, connecting with smaller programs or community-based CCLS who may be interested in offering a 4-week full rotation or a 1-2 week mini rotation for hands-on clinical experience.

In turn, we hope to provide more internship opportunities now that we have a system in place to support multiple students. We’ve spoken with many students who have gone through multiple internship cycles without success, despite doing all the right things, and we wish we could do more, faster. Our goal is to be a resource, an example that non-traditional, competency-based internship models can be a rich and meaningful experience, and to collaborate and share resources with other CCLSs who may want to build something similar in their own communities.

Final Thoughts

It has been deeply rewarding to create a unique learning model that not only champions future professionals, but also uplifts and reconnects many skilled specialists in Minnesota through their involvement in the internship. This work has opened up doors to collaborate with like-minded CCLSs across the country who share our commitment to growing the field. We have been humbled and encouraged by the support of cheerleaders who see our vision and resonate with our values. This aligns with recent calls in the child life literature to expand educational opportunities and create innovative training models that address inequities in internship access and support professional sustainability (Boles et al., 2025; Gourley et al., 2023). The excitement is contagious as we work together, think creatively, and carve out a new path forward into the profession.

References

- Boles, J., Keller, B., Maher, G., Jones, K., & Murphy, L. (2025). An examination of factors associated with child life internship acquisition. *The Journal of Child Life: Psychosocial Theory and Practice*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.55591/001c.142176>
- Gourley, V., Ginter, A. C., & Valencia, M. R. (2023). "We're going through tough times right now": How students of color navigate the field of child life. *The Journal of Child Life: Psychosocial Theory and Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.55591/001c.72088>