

# DECREASING THE PRICE OF FAME:

## A Proposal for the Novel Use of Child Life Specialists in the Entertainment Industry

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I moved to New York City in 2011 to pursue a lifelong dream of dancing and performing professionally. I had wonderful opportunities to perform for stage, TV, and film, and after my first year in the big city, I accepted a job teaching dance to young children. I have since instructed dance to both recreational and professional children, teens, and adults from all over the world at one of the top training studios in New York City. After eleven years of dancing in Manhattan, I decided to utilize the skill and knowledge base I acquired through teaching dance and explore a new career path through Bank Street's Child Life Master's Program. While learning about child development and trauma-informed care during my first semester at Bank Street, I realized there was an overlap between what child life specialists offer and what child stars in the arts and entertainment industry need, and I propose that the unique expertise of a child life specialist could be beneficial to children in the entertainment industry.

Children in entertainment often work professionally during important stages of childhood, risking missed opportunities for peer

socialization as well as the development of skills and personal agency. Play deprivation can have negative impacts on a child's development, and child performers miss out on age-appropriate opportunities for play while engaging in what may be viewed as the adult responsibilities of memorizing lines and maintaining a professional appearance and demeanor (Wenner, 2009).





Children in the entertainment industry are also exposed to a range of stressors that could complicate their development, such as rejection from auditions and potential jobs, responsibility for their finances, and separation from caregivers, siblings, and their home environment (Lakritz, 2022). Child life has been shown in medical settings to decrease trauma and anxiety and increase a child's understanding of and coping with their environment (Burns-Nader & Hernandez-Reif, 2016). Due to the high-stress, adult-centered nature of production, involving child life specialists in the entertainment industry could produce the same results for the child performers and help address the potential impact of both the stressors of working in the arts and the impact of play deprivation.

Child life specialists' unique knowledge base has the potential to be beneficial to children and families outside of the clinical setting in many ways. In entertainment, child life specialists could ensure the working environment for the child performer is conducive to meeting their developmental needs. While it is mandatory for children under the age of 16 years old to have a guardian on set with them, a child life specialist could add value to the guardian/child relationship by educating the caregiver on what child behavior is most developmentally typical and facilitating interventions for bonding and connection. Child

life specialists could teach child performers coping skills to use when they are experiencing anxiety, stress, or are facing rejection or jealousy from missed performance opportunities. By acknowledging that child performers are still kids, child life specialists could offer play outlets catered to their developmental needs, such as times to play outside for younger children or card games for adolescents to connect with their peers and guardians. Child life could also offer activities to encourage independence and socialization, two things that the child performers might not naturally learn while in the world of entertainment. Young performers would also benefit from outlets for self-expression not associated with their professional craft, which would aid in the development of their emotional intelligence and autonomy between rehearsing, performing, and attending school on set.

While on set, child life specialists could offer interventions both conducive to the environment and unique to the developmental needs of the child. One stressor a child star might experience is the separation from family, friends, and their home environment. To minimize the psychosocial impact of this separation, a child life specialist could encourage child performers to write 'pen pal' correspondence letters to the family and peers at home. Child life specialists could also encourage child performers to maintain a connection with their family and friends by making videos for them to share their daily lives on set. These videos could inspire conversations about the child's experiences, and with increased connection to and understanding from their home environment, aid in the child's transition to life outside of entertainment.

The presence of a child life specialist on set could provide the child performers with a sense of comfort, achievement, and control in the stressful setting of working professionally. Addressing the crucial developmental skills and needs of the child and adolescent in entertainment through both play and offering developmentally appropriate information could lead to not only lessened anxiety, better preparation, and increased understanding of expectations on set but also benefits that would affect the child's performance

and world outside of the arts. Child life specialists are skilled in being a part of collaborative, interdisciplinary teams, and could work jointly with the production team and directors to ensure child stars fulfill their roles on set without added distraction from child life interventions. With this collaboration, child life could be in the position of leading advocacy for child development and coping in professional entertainment.

The use of child life in production would also allow the child to continue in the entertainment field in a developmentally appropriate manner, potentially avoiding the experiences of certain maladaptive traits presented by former child stars (Kaddoura et al., 2013). Child life specialists could identify stressors of the environment, such as the presence of strangers and the fast-paced nature of the industry and serve as an advocate for the child's best interests. Child life could also educate the young performers on understanding personal boundaries and social rules and help them learn how to advocate for themselves and their privacy in times such as costume changes. For children involved in the entertainment industry, problematic exposures to potentially traumatic events and the stressors on a child's development may not be recognized by untrained observers

until a negative physical or mental health issue develops (Behrens- Horrell, 2011), but allowing child life specialists to use their specialized training in this environment could potentially reduce the adverse outcomes experienced by young participants in the entertainment industry.

Children will continue to be involved in the arts. They choose to participate in the arts and entertainment because of their talent and passion, without knowing the potential risks to their development from growing up in an adult-centered industry. As child life specialists, we are in a unique position to be qualified to speak on children's behalf in this challenging environment and ensure that children in the arts can pursue their passions without repercussions to their development. I never expected my artistic experiences and my passion for child life to combine. But now I recognize a need for child life in the entertainment industry and an opportunity to serve children experiencing potentially stressful circumstances in an environment that has yet to experience the benefit of child life specialists.

My future research will focus specifically on which child life modalities may be most beneficial and will include discussions with entertainment industry professionals regarding needs and how to



incorporate our knowledge, interventions, and continued research into the field. I plan to interview former child performers to discuss the impact their childhood experiences had on their development and their wishes as to what kind of advocacy and play opportunities were available. Through these methods, I will explore the role child life could have on set and demonstrate that including a Certified Child Life Specialist in the multidisciplinary team of entertainment production could effectively mitigate potential adverse experiences in these young stars and aid in their development both on and off set.

## References:

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