

INTERNSHIP-READINESS RECOMMENDATIONS

For Child Life Based on Recent Findings

Kathryn Cantrell, PhD, CCLS, Texas Women's University

Cara Sisk, PhD, CCLS, Tennessee Tech University

& Brittany Wittenberg Camp, PhD, CCLS, CFLE, Louisiana State University

There is a current staffing crisis in the child life community with a lack of Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLSs) ready to fill open positions (Heering, 2022). One potential reason for this gap could be at the internship level. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in difficulties for students seeking internships (Sisk & Wittenberg, 2021), and students have shared that they are needing to apply to multiple rounds to acquire an internship position. Boles et al. (2024)

found 32% of internship applicants in 2022 had applied to multiple rounds of internship, with 3% applying more than four times. However, the process of acquiring a child life internship has not been studied empirically so the profession is lacking data to better understand what would help students acquire internships and ultimately address the staffing shortage. In order to provide the profession with a starting point for future research, we conducted a mixed methods study in 2021, and full results are published in *The Journal of Child Life: Psychosocial Theory and Practice* (Sisk et al., 2023; Wittenberg Camp et al., 2023). Here we summarize our main findings, focusing on what the outcomes mean for future recommendations.

Our Study

We decided to start with understanding what makes an internship candidate "ready." With this question answered, we can better understand why some candidates might be struggling to acquire an internship. Among the 40 clinical child life internship coordinators and supervisors we surveyed, the most cited variables that suggest a candidate is qualified for internship were previous experience, developmental knowledge, communication skills, and a willingness to learn (Sisk et al., 2023). When looking at the factors that suggest a candidate is unqualified for





internship, the most noted variables were lack of developmental theory knowledge, lack of previous experiences with hospitalized children, weak written and verbal communication skills, and poor interpersonal skills. Each internship site used a different process for selecting interns, and each sites' rubric prioritized different experiences, knowledge, skills, and abilities.

We also asked participants to include how many internship positions were filled or unfilled by students per year. On average, hospital programs had 2.95 child life interns per year, which included the spring, summer, and fall semesters (Range = 0 to 9). On average, hospital programs had 0.59 child life internship positions go unfilled per year (Range = 0 to 5). Filling these open positions could be a step toward improving the staffing crisis.

We also surveyed 18 child life academics to answer similar questions about internship readiness (Wittenberg Camp et al., 2023). Like internship coordinators and supervisors, academics see an ability to apply developmental theory as the main indicator suggesting a student is ready for internship. In addition, strong communication skills and an ability to develop rapport with children and adults were mentioned frequently as indicators. Academics reported spending time helping students to remediate their ability to apply theory to practice as well as improve their communication skills. Participants also reported holding individual and group

advising appointments, integrating internship preparation into course requirements, and hosting a specific workshop devoted to the internship application.

On average, child life academics recalled that students applied to 1.72 application rounds before obtaining an internship offer (or leaving the field of child life). Findings also suggested a significant change in the number of students getting internship offers after one round with students in 2020 significantly less likely to receive an internship offer on their first attempt compared to students in 2015. When asked why students were applying to more than one round, the most salient theme was competitiveness, including the supply and demand, of the child life internship. When students are unable to secure an internship, there are a number of academic alternatives to ensure students still graduate, including encouraging students to switch majors or degree programs, accepting alternative field experiences for graduation, or delaying graduation until an internship is secured.

Next Steps for Child Life

It is encouraging that both child life internship coordinators/supervisors and child life academics look for the same readiness indicators as it suggests both clinical and academic child life professionals prioritize similar knowledge, skills, and abilities. The quality most often mentioned

by both samples, theory application, is included in ACLP's (2021) Internship Readiness Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities document that has been distributed to the community.

A way to further ensure that there is consistency across the profession is to consider standardizing the internship selection process. One concerning finding was that each internship site uses a different process for selecting interns, and each sites' rubric prioritizes different knowledge, skills, and abilities. For example, 43% of participants in our study shared that previous experience with children scored the most points whereas 35% shared that essay questions accounted for the most points on their intern selection rubric. The community has made strides in recent years to standardize the application process to decrease bias. Standardizing the selection process would decrease likelihood of bias and make it easier for students to prepare. Continuing on this path by standardizing the selection process and curriculum could also help. An additional recommendation would be that when a hospital has the capacity to supervise an intern, no position should go unfilled, even if a candidate does not seem to be an ideal fit for the institution.

Another concerning finding was the increase in number of students needing to apply for more than one round internship from 2015-2020. Participants in our study suggest that competitiveness might be driving this trend. Such concerns are echoed in other recent publications which suggest that acquiring an internship is increasingly difficult (Boles et al., 2024) and that competitiveness may contribute to perfectionism, imposterism, and lower well-being among child life students and professionals (Tenhulzen et al., 2023). As the authors note, "perfectionism is associated with competitiveness (e.g., Klein et al., 2020) which is an important consideration given the competitive nature of the child life field, particularly for students during their academic and clinical training" (Tenhulzen et al., 2023, p. 6). The internship application process is also reported as a significant barrier among child life students of color (Gourley et al., 2023). Ten out of twelve (83.3%) participants of color pointed to the internship application process as a significant

barrier. One participant reflected on the internship application process, its competitiveness, and the instinct to compare oneself to peers:

I went through maybe three rounds of internship interviews, and I didn't get anything until the very... final round. And so it was really difficult for me to kind of sit back and see that my counterparts... were receiving all of these internships and getting all these offers...in the back of my mind, knowing that I had way more experience than them...It was really kind of this process of me questioning whether this is a field that I would like to be entering into, and why is this happening to me?" (Gourley et al., 2023, p. 3)

As we begin to consider what our findings might mean for recommendations for the profession, it is important to acknowledge the stress and responsibility that comes with supervising a child life intern. Coordinators and supervisors are tasked with bringing the knowledge, skills, and abilities discussed in a classroom setting to life and are often the professionals making the difficult decisions about whether an intern meets the child life competencies. Holley et al. (2024) interviewed 13 first-time internship supervisors to explore the thoughts, feelings, and experiences associated with being a first-time supervisor. The participants suggested that a training program would be helpful for preparing first-time clinical rotation supervisors. In addition, standardizing the internship experience for students would also help supervisors. This endeavor has begun with the Child Life Clinical Internship Curriculum and adoption across all internship sites should be encouraged.

Considering our outcomes and the recent findings from our colleagues, we recommend a few tasks that could help the profession address the staffing crisis from the internship level. In Table 1, we break down possible steps and assign them across the four components of child life: the academic discipline, the field of inquiry, the profession, and the professional organization (Sisk & Cantrell, 2021). We would love to hear ideas from community members and encourage a dialogue about ways to improve the internship process for students.

Table 1. Recommendations for child life based on recent research

Component	Recommendation
Academic	Focus academic efforts on teaching child life application of theory to practice.
	Offer academic field experiences for students to engage with children and families in various settings, including healthcare, to rehearse applying theory to practice.
Field of Inquiry	Study student expectations regarding the KSAs needed for entering the profession.
	Study practicum readiness and identify which child life domain is responsible for preparing the KSAs needed for pre-internship experiences.
	Study internship outcomes, the KSAs learned during internship, and future employment status.
Profession	Consideration of a singular rubric or set of selection criteria to support the community's efforts to diversify the profession and decrease risk of bias.
	Inclusion of the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities outlined by the Internship Readiness initiative (ACLP, 2021) in internship selection rubrics.
	Consider alternatives to the previous hospital experience requirement should future pandemics, or other events, disrupt the student-to-professional pathway.
	Focus on filling all open internship positions.
Association	Provide affordable supervision training.
	Incentivize research into the internship process.
	Support for more open dialogue between each group contributing to the student-to-professional pathway such as a think tank including clinical and academic communities (Hammon, 2022).

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