

PROJECT FACT SHEET

Child life specialists: Helping to manage children's pain

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Child life specialists are professionals specifically trained to assist children during pediatric health-care experiences including helping families adjust to hospital, as well as assisting children in coping with various procedures.

While pain management is often described as part of the work of child life specialists, no research has described the specific pain-management strategies used by these professionals. Now a study conducted at Dalhousie University and the IWK Health Centre has explored this, and related, issues.

“We know that child life specialists play an important and positive role in children’s hospital experiences. In this research, we set out to determine whether these professionals also contribute to pediatric pain management, says Nancy Bandstra, a clinical psychology PhD student in the Department of Psychology at Dalhousie University.

“Despite significant advancements in pediatric pain management, research continues to suggest that children are largely under-treated for their pain. It is becoming more common for multiple disciplines to work side by side to help children in pain. We wanted to know how child life specialists fit into this multidisciplinary approach to pediatric pain management.”

As part of her research, Ms. Bandstra and her research team, including 5 child life specialists and her supervisor, Dr. Christine Chambers, developed an online survey. More than 600 child life specialists from hospitals and health centers across North America responded to the online survey with a response rate of 85.4%.

“The majority of respondents to our survey noted that pain management was a large component of their work,” notes Ms. Bandstra. “While child life specialists reported using a variety of strategies, some of the most commonly endorsed strategies were providing information/preparation, behavioral distraction, and therapeutic play.”

The results of this recent survey suggest that child life specialists do, in fact, play an important role in pediatric pain management and are using a wide variety of non-pharmacological techniques, many of which are supported in the research literature.

Further analyses of the results indicated that being a certified child life specialist predicted use of evidence-based strategies. “In the past twenty years, the child life profession has made significant gains in establishing and encouraging professional certification. The results of our study suggest that the development and further refinement of this process may encourage practice of evidence-based pediatric pain management strategies.”

This research project is an excellent example of different disciplines working together to answer important research questions that will improve the health of children and their families.

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