Psychosocial Support for Children with Heart Disease and Their Families-The Function and Efficacy of Child Life Involvement

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Children with heart disease, and their families, face many psychosocial challenges as a result of various medical treatments and procedures required. Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLS) are experts in child development and the psychosocial effects associated with healthcare experiences. A CCLS is able to assess a child's developmental level, tailor information and provide coping strategies to improve understanding and management of the healthcare experience. A CCLS brings a valued psychosocial perspective and is an integral member of a child's medical team (Thompson, R. The Handbook of Child Life: A Guide for Pediatric Psychosocial Care, Charles C Thomas Pub Ltd. Springfield, IL, 2009).

Physicians, nurses and other medical staff focus on the physical treatments of heart disease. A CCLS offers developmentally appropriate explanations of the disease, treatments, tests and procedures, as well as helps to normalize the medical environment for the child and his/her family. A CCLS also helps heart transplant patients and their families manage preoperative, perioperative and long term-post operative psychosocial issues (Young, G.S., PhD; Mintzer, L.L. PhD; Seacord, D., PhD; Castan, M., eda, BA; Mesrkhani, V., MA; and Stuber, M.L., MD, Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Parents of Transplant Recipients: Incidence, Severity, and Related Factors, Pediatrics, Vol. 111 No. 6 June 1, 2003, pp. e725 -e731).

Treating children with heart disease requires a multidisciplinary team, who not only treats the child, but understands how the disease affects the entire family. A CCLS is an essential member of a high performing healthcare team that is focused on providing safe, quality, patient and family-centered care.