



CONTACT: Danny Hajjar, dhajjar@mrss.com

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New Paper Emphasizes Need to Prioritize Children’s Emotional Safety Alongside Physical Safety in Medical Settings

Released by the Association of Child Life Professionals, New Paper Outlines Key Practices for Medical Professionals To Mitigate Medical Trauma and Create Emotionally Safe Healthcare Environments for Children and Families

Washington, D.C—Today, the [Association of Child Life Professionals](#) (ACLP) — a nonprofit organization focused on advancing the field of child life by establishing and maintaining professional standards of child life practices — released a new paper, “[Emotional Safety in Pediatrics](#),” detailing the top pillars to mitigate and prevent pediatric medical traumatic stress in healthcare settings through emotional safety. The paper is released as part of ACLP’s new “[Emotional Safety Initiative](#),” a movement to prioritize emotional safety at the same level as physical safety in all pediatric medical experiences.

Emotional safety, as defined by ACLP, is an intentional, interdisciplinary practice to promote resiliency, healing, and trust for pediatric patients and their families during medical experiences, such as experiencing a sudden or life-threatening illness or injury, undergoing a painful or frightening treatment procedure, or simply just being in a hospital or emergency room.

The paper synthesizes numerous medical resources, studies, and practices which contribute to child life, all supporting the need for medical systems to equally prioritize children’s emotional safety alongside physical safety in healthcare planning. When forming treatment plans for pediatric patients, medical professionals tend to overlook the potential emotional effects of their work, which could result in additional injury. The paper makes clear that it is important that for every physical action taken, healthcare systems must also address and mitigate the emotional impact.

“Medical professionals, like child life specialists, aim to continuously adapt and develop their approach in caring for patients to ensure emotional safety is a priority. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for emotional safety has been further amplified as the number of pediatric patients admitted with mental health related issues has dramatically increased , said Kim Stephens, President of the Association of Child Life Professionals. “With the release of this paper, we hope to promote and encourage healthcare workers to establish both emotionally and

physically safe environments and provide equitable care to our nation’s children and their families during this time and onward.”

According to the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#), 80% of children and their families experience some traumatic stress following medical treatment for life-threatening illnesses or injuries. Traumatic damage can also be brought upon by actions or comments by healthcare professionals that don’t consider the unique developmental and coping needs of children, resulting in long-lasting impacts on a patient’s physical and mental wellbeing.

While emotional safety is the responsibility of everyone in a hospital—from the front desk staff to janitorial teams to doctors and nurses—this work is headquartered in child life services. By utilizing evidence-based methods, open and age-appropriate communication with patients and families, comforting environments, and individualized intervention plans into all areas of pediatric care, healthcare professionals—including but not limited to child life specialists—can minimize stress and foster a healthier lifelong relationship to the medical setting. In addition, emotional safety can be implemented in other ways beyond patient care, such as the design of hospitals and other medical settings.

“We must continue advocating for emotional safety to coincide with physical safety. By adopting the four pillars of emotional safety, as detailed in the paper, the healthcare community will help mitigate patient trauma and reduce distrust in pediatric patients and their families, allowing for positive healthcare experiences in the future and improving their health-related quality of life,” shared Jenaya Gordon, MA, CCLS, NCC and primary author of “Emotional Safety in Pediatrics.”

The evidence-based methods used by child life specialists are woven into the four pillars of emotional safety, which are explored throughout the paper. These include:

1. **Screening and Assessment** — Identifies the patient and family perceptions, experiences, needs, and strengths, in order to explore and implement emotionally safe strategies.
2. **Intervention** — Focuses on the commitment to a child’s comfort and understanding regarding medical encounters.
3. **Environment** — Uses evidence-based practice to promote safe and reliable environments that minimize stress and promote emotional safety for patients, families, and healthcare professionals.
4. **Education, Training, and Communication** — Facilitates collaborative relationships to develop helpful communication strategies among the interdisciplinary team, the patient, and their support systems.

The full emotional safety paper can be found [here](#).

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About the Association of Child Life Professionals

ACLP advances psychosocial care and the emotional safety of children, youth, and families impacted by healthcare and significant life experiences. The Association represents trained professionals with expertise in helping infants, children, youth, and families cope with the stress and uncertainty of illness, injury, and treatment. ACLP is comprised of more than 5,500 individuals representing at least 600 organizations worldwide. Our members include Certified Child Life Specialists, child life assistants, university educators and students, hospital administrators and staff, school teachers, therapeutic recreation specialists, and professionals in related fields. For more information about ACLP's Emotional Safety Initiative, visit emotional-safety.org.