



# Child Life Therapists in Australia:

*empowering children in healthcare through play*



Hospital can be a confronting and stressful place for children, young people and their families. Children and young people may experience fear, confusion, anger, isolation and sadness as they are hospitalised; this may compromise their ongoing development and wellbeing both during their stay, and as they transition home.<sup>1</sup>

Child Life Therapists (previously called hospital play therapists in Australia) are trained health care professionals, specialising in child development. Child Life Therapists utilise their knowledge and skills to work with children 0-18 years in the hospital setting, using evidence-based practice.

## What does a Child Life Therapist do?

After assessing the needs of a child or young person and their family, and in consultation with medical, nursing, and other allied health professionals, a child life therapist can provide services that:

- Provide opportunities for play and leisure, supporting continued development and wellbeing within hospital and other healthcare environments
- Familiarise children and their families with the hospital environment through play experiences or structured orientation programs
- Reduce anxiety around procedures and hospital admissions, by facilitating medical play and teaching children new coping strategies
- Support children and their families during medical procedures, using techniques such as diversion and guided relaxation
- Facilitate training and support to other healthcare professionals around child development, and best practice in supporting children's wellbeing while in healthcare.

***Our interactions with patients and their families are individualised, strengths-based, and support family-centred care.***



<sup>1</sup> Rennick, J. E. Et. al. (2002). Children's psychological responses after critical illness and exposure to invasive technology. J Dev Behav Paediatr., Vol 23(3), pp.133-44.

## Why Play in Hospital?

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Charter of Children and Young People's Rights in Healthcare Services in Australia (AWCH, 2010)<sup>2</sup>, both emphasise the rights of children in accessing play and leisure – including when hospitalised.



There is a large body of research supporting the work of child life therapists. We know that:

- Appropriate preparation before a procedure or commencement of treatment can reduce anxiety and distress for children and families; this also has a positive impact on future procedures<sup>3</sup>
- Distraction and procedural support is effective in reducing child and parent anxiety<sup>4</sup>
- Children can learn effectively about their health through play, and can use play to ask questions and explore misconceptions about their treatment/procedures<sup>5</sup>
- Play is important for children's ongoing cognitive, physical, social and emotional wellbeing<sup>6</sup>

## Quality Child Life Therapy Services

The Association of Child Life Therapists Australia (ACLTA) encourages child life therapists throughout Australia to become professional members (with compulsory Professional Development standards).

Experienced child life therapists can complete a rigorous prescribed portfolio of work to the ACLTA Accreditation Committee, which awards the title of **Accredited Australian Child Life Therapist (AACLT)** to successful applicants. This award requires renewal every three years. This is the first Australia-wide quality benchmark for the profession, and will be implemented from 2014 onwards.

### Want to know more?

Speak to your local healthcare facility to see if Child Life Therapy services are available in your closest Children's Hospital or Paediatric Unit.

For more information on the Child Life Therapy profession in Australia, see the ACLTA website: [childlife.org.au](http://childlife.org.au)



<sup>2</sup> Available online from <http://www.awch.org.au/pdfs/Charter-Children-Young%20People-Healthcare-Au-version-FINAL-210911b-web.pdf>

Some introductory readings:

<sup>3</sup> Hatava, P., Olsson, G.L., & Lagerkranser, M. (2000). Preoperative psychological preparation for children undergoing ENT operations: a comparison of two methods. *Paediatric Anesthesia*, 10, 477-486; and Zahr, L.K. (1998). Therapeutic play for hospitalized preschoolers in Lebanon. *Pediatric Nursing*, 23, 449-454.

<sup>4</sup> Burke, S.O., Handley-Dery, M.H., Costello, E.A., Kaufmann, E. & Dillon, M.C. (1997). Stress-point intervention for parents of repeatedly hospitalized children with chronic conditions. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 20, 475-485.

<sup>5</sup> Makuch, A. & Reschke, K. (2001). Playing games in promoting childhood dental health. *Patient Education and Counseling*, 43, 105-110 and McGrath, P. & Huff, N. (2001). "What is it?" Findings on preschoolers' responses to play with medical equipment. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 27, 451-462.

<sup>6</sup> Ginsburg, K.R. (2007). The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds. *Vol 119(1)*, pp.182-91.