



Empowering children and their families to cope through difficult times

Carroll, a native Californian who spent 13 years working as a child life specialist and supervisor at the Children's Medical Center in Dallas, joined UCLA in November 2012.

What does a child life specialist do?

We focus on the psychosocial care of children and families in the hospital. I like to say that whereas a social worker starts with the family and works down, we start with the child and work up. We are here to help kids understand why they're in the hospital, help them understand their diagnosis, prepare them for procedures, and support them through the experience. We try to help children develop coping strategies that they can take with them when they leave the hospital and ultimately empower them and their families.

What kind of coping strategies do you teach children?

If a child is having a chest tube pulled, we teach the child how to take deep breaths and blow out. Sometimes we use bubbles or a pinwheel or a feather in the air to help the child learn how to do that. Our hope is that three years later, when that child is sitting in a classroom taking a test, he or she has learned that taking a deep breath and letting that breath go is calming. If a child learns something in the hospital that can be translated into a regular, normally developing kid's life, that's a fantastic impact.

What are some of the tools used by a child life specialist?

The tools we use look a lot like everyday toys you would pick up in Toys R Us or Target. Toys are normal and familiar to kids. The hospital environment is everything but. We have blank cloth dolls that children can take home with

"We try to help children develop coping strategies that they can take with them when they leave the hospital and ultimately empower them and their families."

them. They can draw on a face with whatever emotion they want. They can even give the doll an IV or an incision — with play or real medical equipment.

How does it help a hospitalized child to use real medical equipment on a doll?

We're taught in this culture that hospitals have a mystical quality and you don't question doctors or nurses. To allow a child to listen to his own heart beat with a stethoscope or to start an IV on a doll is a very powerful experience. It returns control to the child and demystifies the medical equipment.

Why is it important for children to be prepared for medical procedures?

You would never want to wake up with something under your skin and not know how it got there. A child feels the same way. Research shows that children cooperate better and recuperate quicker if they are appropriately prepared. Some people like in-depth preparation and some people like just enough information. Child life specialists are

trained to understand the child and to know how much information to give. Obviously a teenager can take more information generally than a preschooler. We know how to tailor our preparations for the developmental level.

What can you do to prepare a baby for a procedure?

With an infant, we prepare the parents. If the parent is calm, or at least as calm as anyone can feel when his or her infant is going in for a procedure, the infant will cope better. Infants pick up on the parent's heartbeat or the stiffness of mom or dad's arms. So if mom and dad or the caregiver is relaxed, the baby will be, too.

What do you like most about your job?

I'm one of those strange people who always felt at home in a hospital. I love the fact that it is an ever-changing environment and you're constantly learning new things. I also like working with students. I enjoy their enthusiasm and excitement. On a clinical level, I love having the opportunity to work with families and to empower them to cope better.