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**The Pathway to Becoming a Child Life Specialist**

**Gabriella Bradley**

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**Human Development and Family Science**

### **Introduction**

It was not until my senior year of college that I discovered the career of a child life specialist. Since deciding to pursue this career path, most college students I have spoken to about it have not heard of it. This leads me to think that many college students are unaware of the career path to becoming a child life specialist. The role of a Certified Child Life Specialist (CCLS) is to help patients and families receive satisfactory care by providing emotional and developmental support (*The child life profession*, 2021). CCLSs do this by supporting and educating the child and their family members, engaging in play therapy, and creating ways for children to manage fear and anxiety. This care often takes place in a hospital setting but can also involve home visits. Given the diversity of work activities of a child life specialist, it is likely that many college students from majors in helping professions would be interested in this career path. In the future, it is likely that there will be an increase in the need for child life specialists; at least a 7% increase was hypothesized for between 2016-2026 (Green, 2018). Due to the fact that the process of becoming certified as a child life specialist is complex and competitive, it may be useful for students to be aware of this option before their junior year of college. To increase awareness of the career path of child life specialists, I created a one-session curriculum on the pathway towards becoming a CCLS for students from California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB) in Seaside, California in order to raise student awareness of this promising career choice.

### **Need Statement**

Many college students are unaware of the child life field and the possibility to pursue a career as a CCLS. This is problematic for three reasons: College students from the age of 18-25

are in a critical time of identity formation (Arnett, 2000), there is an increasing need for CCLS (Romito, 2021), and there are many steps in the certification process that can be accomplished as an undergraduate student. Educating college students on this profession and the pathway towards it can help students who do not yet know what career they want to pursue as well as increase the number of workers in the field of child life services.

According to the CSUMB's Institutional Research and Assessment (2020), in 2019 and 2020, 71 percent of CSUMB's students were between the ages of 18-24. This is important because these are students that fall into Arnett's (2000) emerging adulthood stage of development. Emerging adulthood is seen as the time between adolescence and young adulthood. Having left dependency on one's parents while simultaneously delaying adult responsibility, one finds the opportunity to explore the possibilities of their future. Arnett (2000) enlightens readers with information about how societal changes influenced the developmental process. In the past, humans were entering more stable life roles in marriage, parenthood, and careers by their late teens or early twenties. Those transitions are now happening later in life, thus elongating the phase of identity exploration and development. Young people are now taking the opportunity to discover their likes and dislikes and how that translates into their future careers. Furthermore, the number of adults under the age of 25 pursuing higher education in the form of a bachelor's or master's degree has been increasing. People under 25 holding a master's degree more than doubled from 2000 to 2018, going from 10.4 million to 21 million (United States Census Bureau, 2020). With students wanting to explore their passions as well as pursue higher education, they could benefit from education about the career of a CCLS as it could help them discover a career path that they had not previously considered or known about.

There is not only a need to educate students on this career option for their own gain but also for the needs of the profession. Since 2001 the amount of children with special health care needs has increased by 6%, resulting in 18.8% of children falling into this category (Romito, 2021). According to Romito (2021), children are also living longer with chronic illnesses than they used to. This is a good sign of medical advances; however, it also requires new services for those children such as outpatient care and transitioning to adult health care. Kirchenbauer (2013) reported that not all hospitals have enough CCLSs to provide adequate care for adolescents and, therefore, they have to learn how to cope on their own. Thus, it is crucial for the field of child life services to continue to grow in order to meet the growing health care needs of children.

In order for one to understand exactly how crucial this growth is, one must know what the role of a CCLS is, as well as the impact they have on children and their families. The role of a CCLS is to help children, as well as their families, prepare for and cope with stresses, fears, and anxieties that come with illness and injury (Association of Child Life Professionals, 2021). CCLSs work within a team of other health care workers, such as doctors and nurses, by focusing on meeting the emotional and developmental needs of children while they receive medical care. A CCLS may give families a tour of the facility where care will be taking place, explain procedures in a way the child can understand, allow children to test out procedures and equipment through the use of dolls or stuffed animals, engage in play therapy with the child and/or their siblings, or support families after the death of a child who was receiving medical care.

Children and their families benefit from the services CCLS offer. According to Brewer et al. (2006), when children were prepared by a CCLS before operation, they benefited post-operation. It was found that children had lower levels of anxiety and better coping skills.

Sanchez et al. (2018) found that when children received services from a CCLS they displayed fewer negative emotional behaviors during procedures such as IV placement. Furthermore, patients reported reduced pain and parents perceived their children to be in less pain and more cooperative than parents of children not receiving care from a CCLS (Sanchez et al., 2018).

In addition to supporting young patients through and after treatments and operations, the impacts that CCLSs have on families include increased sibling wellbeing (Lookabaugh, 2018) and reduced parental stress (Bell, 2015). According to Bell (2015), parents of children in the hospital reported many stressors such as financial and marital stress, unknowns about their child's illness, and having to relocate for medical care. While a CCLS may not be able to solve financial troubles, having the support and services of a CCLS may be helpful. Gill (2020) discusses the specific needs of siblings of children in the hospital such as the need for information about their sibling's procedure as well as coping support, peer support, and play therapy opportunities. Gursky (2007) found that when siblings received education intervention informing them about their sibling's procedure or condition from a CCLS they had lower levels of anxiety. Both the parent and sibling stressors can be eased by services from CCLS staff.

Given the positive impacts CCLS staff can have on children and their families, the CCLS career path may be a desirable career path for students in majors that focus on helping professions that support children and families. When students are unaware of this promising career path, educating college students on the pathway towards becoming a CCLS is important because there are many steps that can be taken towards certification while pursuing an undergraduate degree. The requirements for certification fall into four sections, a bachelor's degree, specific courses, clinical experience, and the certification exam (Association of Child Life Professionals, 2019). CSUMB offers 4 of the required courses needed to fulfill the specific

course requirements. Additionally, CSUMB requires students to take two semesters of service learning which could aid in the process of fulfilling the clinical experience. Certification requires a 600-hour internship in a children's hospital and most hospitals want you to have previous volunteer experience working with children in a health care setting. Knowing this information before one's junior year would allow one to choose a pediatric health care site for their service learning hours. This can help streamline the process for internship applications after graduation as well as make them more desirable as an internship applicant.

Given these needs for both students and the profession, I created a single-session curriculum to be offered to CSUMB students pursuing majors in helping professions to teach them about child life services and the pathway to becoming a CCLS. The curriculum will include information about the role of a CCLS, the impact they have on children and families, and the process to become certified. Additionally, detailed information will be provided about what courses and opportunities CSUMB offers that fulfill certification requirements.

### **Theory**

One theory that provides a conceptual framework for understanding young adults' academic and professional development is Lent et al.'s (2000) social cognitive career theory (SCCT), which suggests that the process of career development is centered on learning processes based primarily on Bandura's social cognitive theory. Bandura's theory emphasizes the external and internal influences on learning (LaMorte, 2019). The aspects this theory takes into consideration are development of interests, how education/career decisions are made, and the process towards educational/career success. Career development is influenced by one's self-efficacy beliefs, the outcomes they expect, and learning experiences (Lent et al., 2000).

According to Lent et al. (2000), the process of career development is also impacted by environmental factors that are objective or perceived. While this theory can be very complex and has been studied through many different angles, the main goal is to show that elements of one's life such as the opportunities one has and how one thinks about oneself, as well as social constraints that may exist based on one's gender or ethnicity, affect how one chooses their career path. For example, if a young woman enters college having come from a family where the women have all been nurses, she may automatically gravitate towards pursuing a career in nursing based on her experience. Furthermore, someone who has a hard time with high school may choose not to pursue a college degree based on their perception of themselves and their ability to be successful in an academic setting. However, when someone has an experience that changes any one of these elements, their future education and career decisions can change as well.

The Social Cognitive Career Theory suggests that new experiences can alter one's education and career decisions. Therefore, it is important that college campuses offer students opportunities to learn about career options that are aligned with their major programs. For instance, educating college students in majors such as human development and family science, collaborative health and human services, or psychology about the career of a CCLS adds to their learning experiences for career exploration. Additionally, explaining the pathway to this career and what is required to become certified can increase their self-efficacy in the choices they make for programs and courses offered at their university. Based on this theory, the career information offered needs to be tailored to enhance students' experiences, self-perceptions, and support career development.



### **Consideration of Diversity**

This project will be conducted with students from CSUMB in Seaside, CA. According to the CSUMB Institutional Research and Assessment (2021), in Spring 2021 54% of students identified themselves as being first-generation college students. Tate et al. (2015) discussed the challenges that first-generation students face when pursuing higher education and career goals. He states that first-generation college students have lower academic success and graduation rates than non-first-generation students. By providing career education support, it can help first-generation students overcome some of the barriers they face in career development. To help first-generation students feel more confident about pursuing a career as a CCLS, students will be given time to break out into small groups to discuss their understanding of the content and seek clarification on aspects that did not make sense. Additionally, information will be given about what challenges students might face along the way and tips to overcome them. Finally, I will give my contact information to each student so they can reach out for help and support during their certification process.

In addition to the population of first-generation students at CSUMB, 71% of students are ethnicities other than Caucasian and 36% are male. According to Lookabaugh (2018), the current child life field is **mainly** comprised of Caucasian females. Therefore educating this student body is valuable because it could help bring more diversity to the field of child life. Students of all genders and ethnicities will be invited to participate.

### **Learning Outcomes**

I intend to provide a one hour Zoom session to freshmen and sophomore level students at California State University, Monterey Bay. By the end of the project, participants will be able to:

1. Describe two roles of a child life specialist.
2. Indicate three impacts CCLSs have on children and families.
3. Describe the four major components of getting certified as a child life specialist.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

I will conduct this project via Zoom with students from CSUMB. I expect about 20 students will attend this Zoom meeting. The target age group will be 18-25 years old. The target education level will be freshman and sophomores. I expect the group to consist of both male and female students of varying ethnicities. Students from any major would be welcome to attend however, it would be advertised specifically to human development, collaborative health, and psychology majors.

### **Procedures and Materials**

To start the session I will introduce myself and share why I chose this project. Depending on the number of students, I will also have them share their names and why they are attending this session. Then I will share my screen to present a GoogleSlides presentation (See Appendix A). The first section of the presentation will go over the role of a Certified Child Life specialist. I will start by playing a 4-minute video that gives a brief introduction to the role of a CCLS (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aoVIXSvQMB8>). When the video is over I will review the main points regarding the purpose of a CCLS and share a variety of tasks a CCLS may complete during a workday. Finally, I will discuss the need for CCLS within the larger medical team and the growing need for more CCLS workers. Before moving onto the next section, I will pause and ask for any questions or comments. See workshop Google Slides in Appendix A for more details.

In the second part of the information session, I will describe the impact that CCLS staff have on the child themselves as well as the family as a whole. I will talk about the positive outcomes that children have during procedure preparations as well as post-operation. I will also discuss the positive impacts CCLS can have for siblings of the patient and for the parents. I will share personal stories from families who have received care from a CCLS and results from studies that have been done on the impact of CCLS staff. Before moving onto the next section, I will pause and ask for any questions or comments. See [the workshop Google Slides](#) in Appendix A for more details.

In the final part, I will explain the process of becoming certified by the Association of Child Life Professionals. The four components of becoming certified include a bachelor's degree, specific course work, clinical work, and the certification exam. I will explain what college courses need to be completed as well as the professional experiences needed. I will also include information about some challenges they may face in the process. Before moving onto the next section, I will pause and ask for any questions or comments. During the next part of the session, I will have the students go into break-out rooms to talk about what stood out to them or what questions they might have. When the break-out rooms are over, we will come back together and discuss what was talked about in the break-out rooms. I will answer any remaining questions and give out my contact information to anyone who is interested in pursuing this career path. To conclude the session I will send a link in the Zoom chat to a google form for the students to fill out for assessment (See Appendix B). I intend for the session to last one hour from start to finish.

## **Results**

Due to COVID-19, I was unable to execute my project, therefore I do not have results.

### **Discussion**

Due to COVID-19, I was unable to execute my project, therefore I do not have a discussion.

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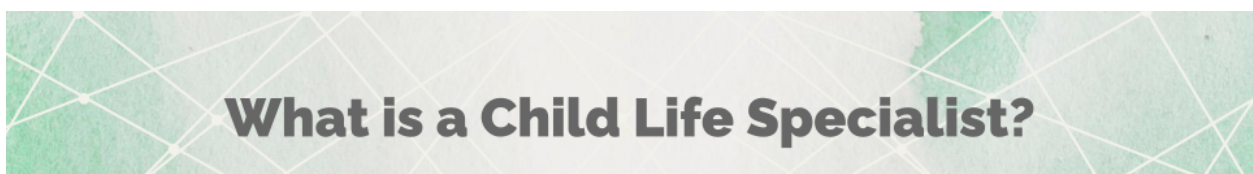
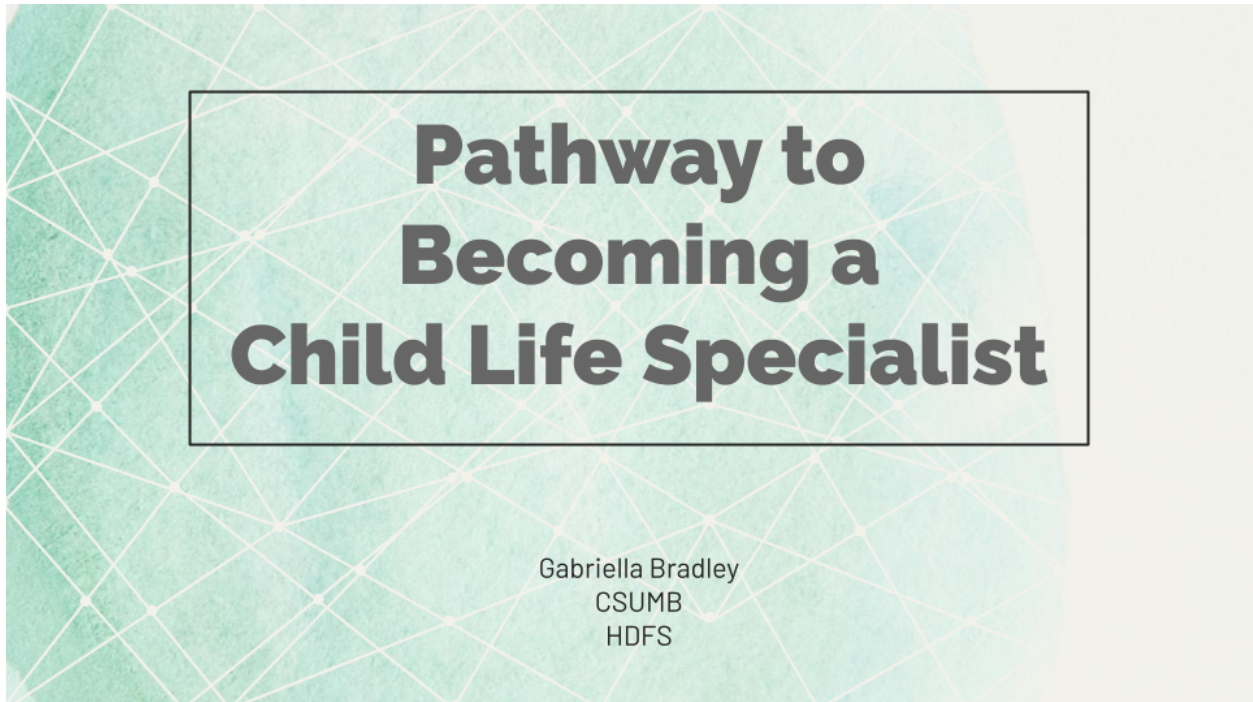
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## Appendices

### *Appendix A*

*Google Slides for the pathway to becoming a child life specialist*



“Certified Child Life Specialists are educated and clinically trained in the developmental impact of illness and injury.

Their role helps improve patient and family care, satisfaction, and overall experience.”

-ACLP



## What is a Child Life Specialist?



## What impact do they have on children?

- Meeting emotional and developmental needs
- Reducing stress and anxiety
- Teaching coping skills
- Reduced pain

## What impact do they have on families?

- Increased sibling wellbeing
- Reduced stress for siblings and parents
- Coping support

## How can you become one?

- Bachelor's Degree
- Required Courses
  - Child Life Course Taught by a CCLS
  - 2 Child Development Courses
  - Family Systems Course
  - Play Course
  - Loss/Bereavement or Death/Dying Course
  - Research Course
  - Three Additional Courses

## How can you become one?

- Volunteer Experiences
- Clinical Experiences
  - 100 hr practicum
  - 600 hr internship
- Certification Exam

## CSUMB Specifics

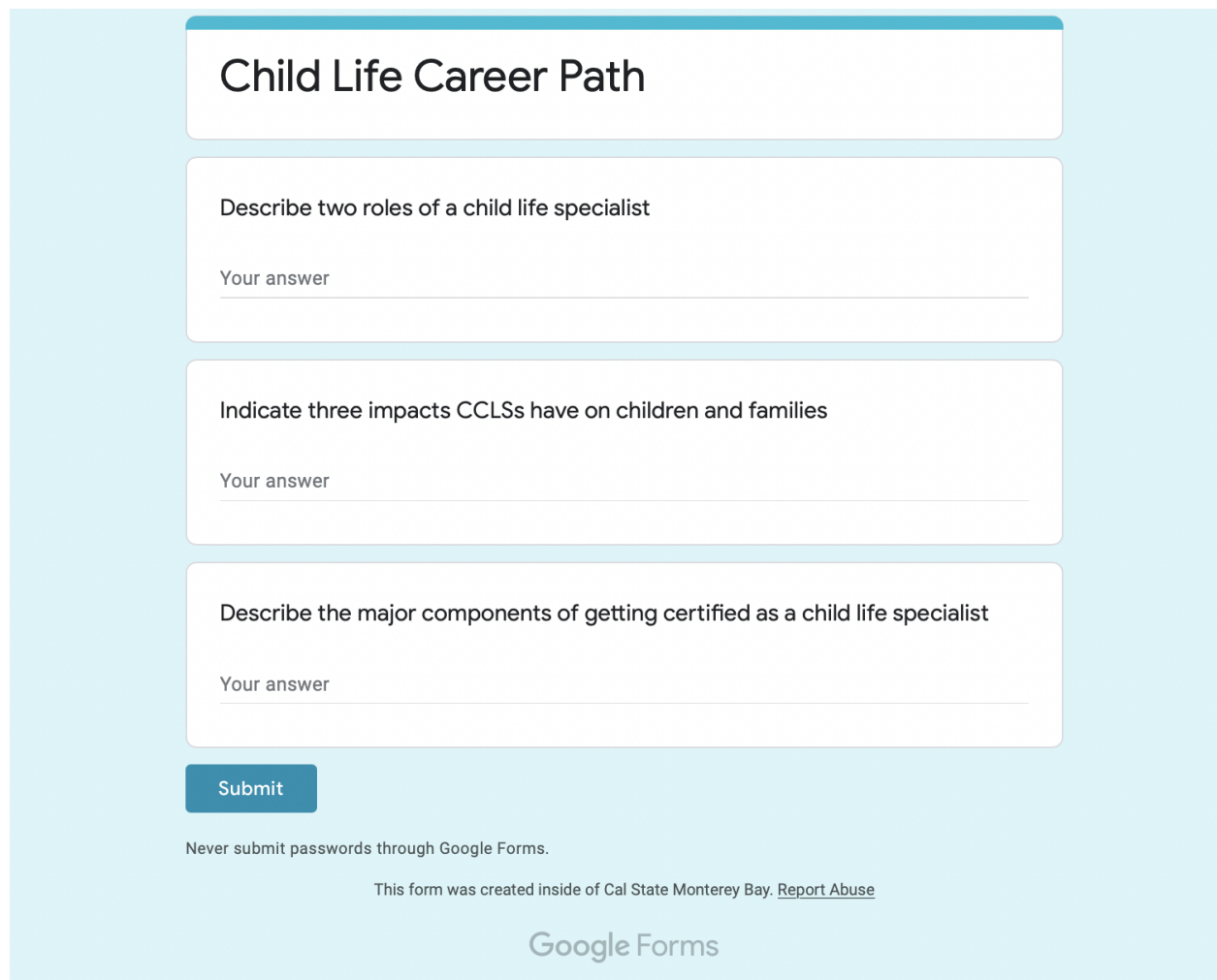
- Service Learning
- Course work
  - 2 phase specific human development classes
  - Research methods
  - Diverse Families

**Go for it!**

Questions?

## **Break Out Rooms**

- Discuss
  - what interests you about this career
  - anything that might have been confusing or that you would like more information about

*Appendix B**Google Forms assessment*

**Child Life Career Path**

Describe two roles of a child life specialist

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Indicate three impacts CCLSs have on children and families

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

Describe the major components of getting certified as a child life specialist

Your answer \_\_\_\_\_

**Submit**

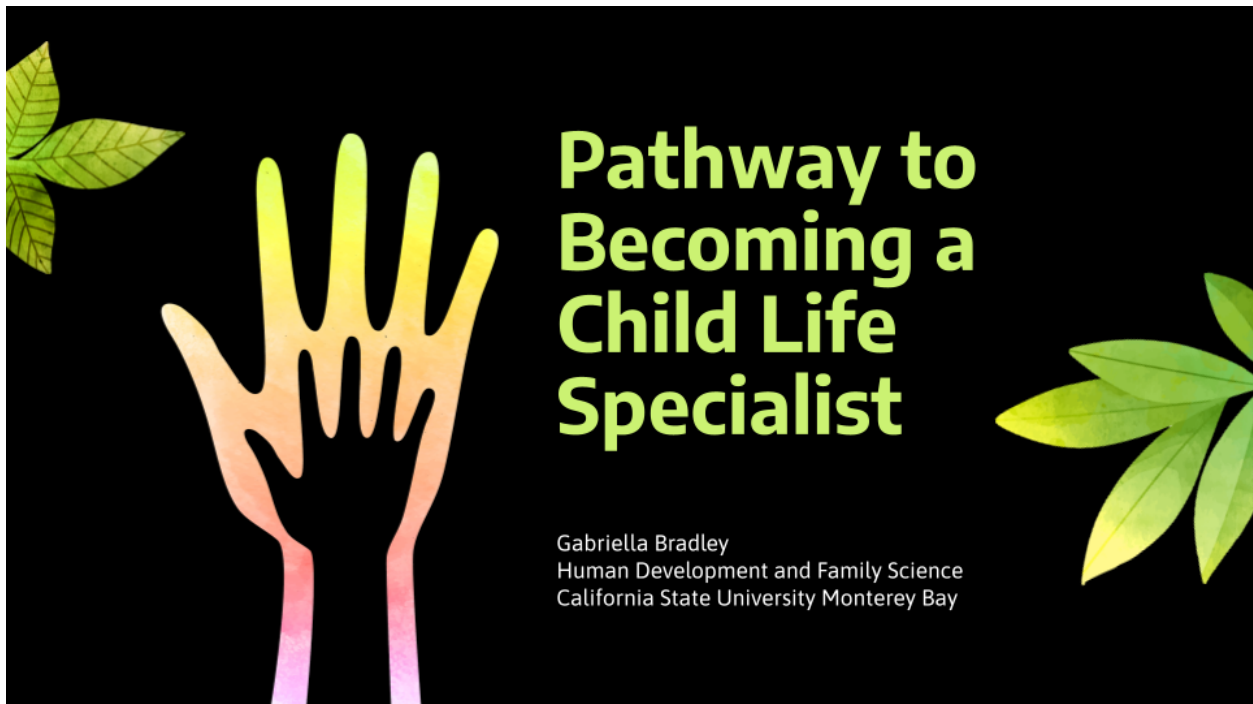
Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

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Google Forms

*Appendix C*

*Final capstone presentation*



# INTRODUCTION

Topic: Raising awareness of the Child Life Field

Project: Educating college students on the pathway to becoming a child life specialist

Why?



## Need Statement

**Problem:** Many college students are unaware of this career

**Key terms:** Certified Child Life Specialist (CCLS)

“Certified Child Life Specialists are educated and clinically trained in the developmental impact of illness and injury.

Their role helps improve patient and family care, satisfaction, and overall experience.”



## Need Statement

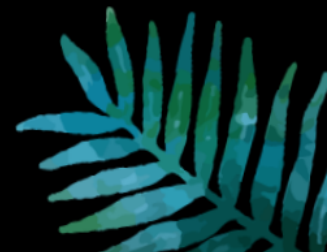
**Importance:**

Health care need for children are increasing

CCLS have a positive impact on children and families in medical situations

There are specific requirements to be met

The field needs diversity



## Theory

Social Cognitive Career Theory - Lent et al.

- Interests, decision making, and process towards success
- Self-efficacy beliefs, expected outcomes, and learning experiences
- Environmental factors (perceived or objective)



## Learning Outcomes

I designed a workshop to inform college students about the pathway to becoming a Certified Child Life Specialist with students from California State University Monterey Bay.

By the end of the project, participants will be able to:

1. Describe two roles of a child life specialist.
2. Indicate three impacts CCLSs have on children and families.
3. Describe the four major components of getting certified as a child life specialist.






## Method

### Participants


**Age:** 18-25  
**Location:** CSUMB  
**Sociodemographic Info:** Male and female students of varied ethnicities



## Method (continued)

### Procedures and Materials

Single session  
Google Slides presentation  
    What is a Child Life Specialist?  
    What impact do they have?  
    How can you become one?  
Break out rooms - Peer discussion  
Google Forms questionnaire for assessment



## Conclusion

This project is much needed and can serve as a great resource for CSUMB students.  
Therefore I hope to be able to present my project to future CSUMB students.



## Questions?