

As a child life specialist at Texas Children's Hospital West Campus, Sarah Rowe helps children cope with hospital visits, offering support every step of the way

Treating with Teddy Bears

Child life specialist Sarah Rowe helps young Katy patients have a happy hospital experience

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Rowe uses a doll to show Sophia, 4, what a hospital procedure will be like

Hospital visits can be stressful situations for patients of any age, especially children. As a child life specialist at Texas Children's Hospital West Campus, Sarah Rowe works to make each hospital visit a positive one for kids. With over five years of experience, she knows it's important to be prepared for the unexpected and face each child's situation with an open, caring heart. "I get to meet families in really stressful situations," says Rowe, a graduate of Taylor High School and Baylor University. "I have a unique opportunity to offer my support, focus on the child, and help them cope." That is just one of the many things that she loves about being a child life specialist.

Spreading Smiles

Every day as a child life specialist brings a different set of opportunities to help children. Before she starts seeing patients for the day, Rowe and her fellow staff members have a team huddle to discuss each patient's specific needs. As one of a team of three child life specialists at the hospital's west campus, she helps cover the inpatient unit, emergency room, outpatient area, and surgery.

Many children that enter Texas Children's Hospital are carrying some type of anxiety regarding why they are there and what will be done. Rowe seeks to lessen that anxiety for each of her young patients by giving them choices every step of the way. She explains, "Often kids don't have choices about what happens to them in the hospital, so allowing them to pick out the toy they play with during wait times or what flavor of anesthesia they prefer gives the kids control."

She knows that just one positive experience can make all the difference in a young patient's hospital stay, especially if there is to be a return visit. Each child life specialist realizes that it is important to be an advocate for family-centered care, offer emotional support, and encourage understanding and cooperation based on the child's specific needs.

Rx for a Relaxed Experience

Support comes in a variety of forms for young patients, and child life specialists let them know how they will be taken care of and exactly who will be there every step of the way. One patient's anxiety might be decreased through age-appropriate preparation, while another patient might benefit from deep breathing exercises that encourage relaxation and reduce anxiety.

Children coming to Texas Children's Hospital West Campus for surgery might visit a pretend operating room where Rowe helps them become familiar with medical equipment and the operation room environment before surgery.

Daniel Lowrie had the opportunity to work with a child life specialist when he went to get his tonsils out at Texas Children's Hospital. His fear was visible in his eyes as he was coming out of the elevator into a new and unusual environment. Once the child life specialist took him into the mock operating room, though, his fears were slowly forgotten, he was enamored with his new-found surroundings, and he felt prepared. Rowe knows that this is what each child life specialist is trained to do. "It is very rewarding to see a child use the coping skills you have taught them and to see that those skills have helped them leave the hospital a stronger, more confident child," she shares.

A Life-Changing Career

The Child Life Council is the certifying organization for child life specialists, and requires a rigorous, exam-based program to earn credentials. Child life specialists must have a bachelor's degree in a related field and then complete at least 480 clinical hours, before taking a certification exam.

Rowe encourages anyone interested in this life-changing career to shadow a child life specialist at Texas Children's Hospital. "Start [by getting] experience [around] healthy children and [seeing] the needs they have," advises Rowe. "[That] will help each future child life specialist see how the hospital experience affects typical development."

She has had the opportunity to see some patients on return visits. Watching them use the tools she has taught them is not only an encouragement to her, but is also a testament to the Texas Children's Hospital system and the focus they have on making an impact in each child's life every step of the way. Perhaps the coolest part of this cool career is the positive difference each child life specialist gets to make in the life of a child. **KM**

HEATHER LOWRIE enjoys her cool career as a freelance writer and mom and loves encouraging others through her writing. She is married to the love of her life, and together they have three children.



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