New Child Life course champions hospitalized children

Mixing white glue, food coloring, borax powder and tap water to make “goop” (think slimy Silly Putty) may look like child’s play, and it is. But in this case, the concoction was “cooked up” by Sacramento State students enrolled in Child Life and Family-Centered Care, a brand-new course offered this summer.

The day’s lesson theme was therapeutic play.

The 22 students preparing to become certified child life specialists study topics related to child development, pain management and coping strategies, and helping children and their families understand illness, hospitalization and medical procedures. They learn such practical skills as infant massage, music therapy, palliative care, pet therapy, spiritual issues and emergency room issues.

The experimental course, launched in early June and ending Thursday, July 11, is a unique campus-community partnership developed by Sacramento State and three local hospitals: Shriners Hospital for Children, Sutter Children’s Center and UC Davis Children’s Hospital.

A number of working certified child life specialists affiliated with those pediatric hospitals give students hands-on training. Making “goop” is a play activity to help children cope with being hospitalized.

The three-unit, six-week course is taught by Professor Ann Moylan of Sac State’s Family and Consumer Sciences Department.

“It’s been amazing for the students to see the collaboration between the campus and the three hospitals,” says Moylan, who also is a certified child life specialist. “They get so much out of seeing people in their profession come into the classroom and talk in specific terms about their own journey to that profession.”

Starting this year, the Maryland-based Child Life Council requires prospective child life specialists to complete a course such as this, in addition to other classroom studies, a 480-hour child life internship and 100 hours of volunteer work in a hospital’s child life department before they can take the certification exam.
“The child life profession focuses on the social and emotional well-being of hospitalized children who are ill, injured or in need of medical procedures, and on their families,” Moylan says. “Child life specialists try to keep the child’s life as normal as possible – to make it less traumatic – as they help to prepare children for procedures.

“The specialists give children a feeling that they have some choice and control: ‘Which arm would you like the IV in?’ And a child who may not be afraid of getting an X-ray but is frightened by the noise the machine makes may feel better if he’s warned with a ‘3-2-1’ countdown that it’s coming,” Moylan says.

The child life idea was born in the 1920s, when American health care workers realized play and preparation activities were important to the emotional stability of ailing children and their families. Hospitalized children often become distressed, lonely and bored. Making “mountains” from shaving cream or engaging them in play with simple pieces of medical equipment, for instance, are clever ways to redirect a child’s attention and help in the understanding of medical procedures.

These days, most pediatric hospitals employ at least one child life specialist. Specialists also can be found in hospice programs, camps, early intervention programs, courtrooms, dental practices, support and bereavement groups, community programs, and private practice.

Sacramento State’s Child Life and Family-Centered Care course was approved by the University for two years and eventually may be approved as a permanent course.

For information about a career as a child life specialist, go to www.childlife.org. For media assistance, contact Sacramento State’s Office of Public Affairs at (916) 278-6156.

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