Chapter 17
Virtual Platforms

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ABSTRACT

Americans spend large portions of their day online. Data shows that there are more than 245 million internet users in the U.S. alone. This data, combined with what we observe in healthcare trends, including tele-med and other virtual options, demonstrates the need for child life services to be available online. This chapter explores the various ways child life specialists can use their skills to support children and families using digital tools. Embracing technology and exploring innovative approaches will only enhance and validate the field of child life.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a dramatic increase in the use of digital tools that can enhance, replace, or reinforce typical interactions that were once only possible when meeting in the same physical space. There are more than 4.66 billion internet users worldwide (Lambert, 2022).

The trend of people spending much of their time online demonstrates the need for Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLSs) to comply with the changing world and adapt their services to include virtual settings and online platforms. Digital habits provide an opportunity to increase awareness about the psychosocial needs of children and families and an opportunity to spread awareness about the child life profession.

As the child life profession integrates into the ever-changing and fast-paced world of digital resources, the field can look for new ways to diversify and expand the child life specialist's skill set. There has been dramatic growth in digital resources and programming. Audio stories, specifically podcasts, have grown in popularity due to their accessibility and affordability. In 2017, the number of podcast listeners in the United States was about 46 million. In 2022, the number has doubled to almost 88 million (Statista, 2022). Within the field of child life, blogs, social media posts, videos, and websites that address the needs of children and families affected by illness and healthcare have been on the rise. Examples include websites and online tools maintained and published by hospitals, child life specialists, and other child life community organizations. The child life profession originated within hospitals and has adapted to expand to community settings. The same expansion mindset can be applied to virtual platforms. Increased

awareness of the child life profession in digital media has created an opportunity to bring exposure to the field. This chapter will describe various virtual methods and online tools that Certified Child Life Specialists could use while staying within their scope of practice as defined by the Association for Child Life Professionals Standards of Clinical Practice (*Standards of clinical practice chapter 4*, n.d.). Throughout the chapter, patient is used when referring to children in hospital settings, and client is used when working with children in the community, including virtual spaces.

BACKGROUND

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, new, virtual-based opportunities arose that were modeled after existing programs like music therapy. These new opportunities opened up new possibilities for research in those fields. Nonprofit organizations successfully integrated telehealth into their programming by providing additional online services for children of adult patients in conjunction with their established in-person support. Many, like Project Sunshine, have continued with virtual programming, offering video calls facilitated by volunteers promoting play and normalization activities during hospital stays (projectsunshine.org). Another organization, JoyRx, supports children's emotional needs through the use of music, offering online jam sessions, lessons, or mini concerts with musicians (joyrx.com). Finding new opportunities for child life specialists to learn about and use the virtual tools available to expand their practice grows each day.The focus on technology and its effect on our society's ability to communicate and interact has become a crash course in finding answers to the question: How do virtual interventions work? Are they successful?

According to a study in a New York City intensive care unit among those who lost their loved ones, remote family visits to intensive care units evoked feelings of happiness, joy, gratitude, and relief (Sasangohar et al., 2021). Neurological music therapists used telehealth and found they could transfer their services effectively from in-person to telehealth for all domains (sensorimotor, cognitive, and communication), especially when caregivers were involved (Cole et al., 2021).

Providing services virtually expands child life specialists' ability to reach more than just patients and families who walk through the doors of hospitals or other community-based settings. This dramatic growth in scope can meet the needs of more diverse groups of families who benefit from child life services.

One currently underserved population of pediatric patients that could benefit from virtual child life services is those who are diagnosed with a chronic condition but seldom hospitalized for their diagnosis. In 2013, only five percent of children with asthma were hospitalized. (CDC, 2013). This statistic sheds light on the enormous opportunity for child life services to meet the psychosocial needs of children and families affected by chronic illness who are rarely hospitalized. Every child deserves emotionally safe care, and technology affords this opportunity (Every child deserves emotionally safe care, 2021).

Child life interventions directly intended for children and families, like promoting positive coping, providing medical education, and evidenced-based preparation techniques can all be provided virtually. Online interventions expand a spectrum of diverse opportunities, from customized interventions to more general education. Examples of online interventions and uses are a child life specialist using telehealth to prepare a patient for an upcoming medical procedure, facilitating a virtual visit to a classroom to talk about a classmate's diagnosis, or a parent receiving tips from a child life influencer using social media to provide education. Expanding child life services to digital platforms increases the integration of family-centered care practices in meaningful ways. The stress of diagnosis can negatively impact caregivers,

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