

# Creating a Safe Space for Children to have a Voice

## Child Life in a Child Advocacy Centre

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### The Sheldon Kennedy Child Advocacy Centre

The Sheldon Kennedy Child Advocacy Centre (CAC) is currently the most comprehensive Child Advocacy Centre in Canada, with a mission to provide hope, help and healing to children, youth and families impacted by child abuse.

Opening its doors on February 25, 2013, the not-for-profit Centre houses over 100 professionals under one roof to provide a one-stop facility with compassionate services that 'wrap around' the children and their families. To ensure child abuse cases are managed in the best interest of the child within an environment of expertise, the CAC works in collaborative partnership with:

- Calgary Police Service (CPS)
- Calgary Region, Child and Family Services (CFS)
- Alberta Health Services (AHS)
- Alberta Ministry of Justice Calgary Crown Prosecutors' Office
- RCMP
- Alberta Ministry of Education



The Centre is an innovative practice model that is transforming how the current system responds to children who have experienced abuse and their families in Calgary and the surrounding communities.

## The Sheldon Kennedy Child Advocacy Centre

One example of the forward-thinking practice provided at the Centre is the establishment of the Child Life Specialist position in April of 2013, which is currently the only position of its kind practicing at a Child Advocacy Centre in Canada. The Child Life Specialist has a neutral role at the Centre supporting many of the services provided, which include:

- Investigations and forensic interviews
- Victim advocacy, support and follow-up
- Specialized medical evaluation and treatment
- Trauma-focused mental health services
- Case review and monitoring
- The development of outcome measurement and research
- Community education and prevention.

With increasing visibility, the Centre is working towards breaking the stigma and silence that surrounds child abuse, with the ultimate goal of protecting children and creating safer and healthier communities.

## The Need for Psychosocial Support for Children and Families Impacted by Abuse

Receiving an average of 122 new child abuse cases per month, the CAC responds to the most severe and complex cases of child sexual and physical abuse, representing only 10-15% of the child abuse cases in Calgary and surrounding areas.

It has been estimated that over \$20 billion dollars are spent each year addressing the impacts of child abuse (Bowlus, A., et al. 2003 in Cooper & Wells, 2014). The impact of child abuse is well documented and has been linked to addiction, re-victimization, conflict with the law and mental health issues in adolescence and adulthood (IOM and NRC, 2013).

While the experience of abuse is traumatizing enough to the child and family, it is common for children to experience re-traumatization or systemic trauma during the process of being interviewed after disclosing abuse. High levels of anxiety can result in an increased number of interviews required to obtain the necessary information to lay charges on the person who has offended, longer interviews, or information that is not substantial enough to proceed with the case.

While receiving medical and therapeutic treatment for the abuse is a critical part of the healing process, it does not come easy for children and families either. Clearly, efforts to minimize the stress accompanying the processes following the disclosure of abuse are necessary to effectively support children and families.

## The Child Life Program

The primary role of the Child Life Specialist is to meet the psychosocial needs of the children and families visiting the Centre, and to minimize additional stress and trauma while maximizing coping during the investigative and treatment process.

This work begins by creating a child-friendly space for children to feel safe, and ensuring all professionals use a trauma-focused and developmentally appropriate approach.

The Child Life Specialist is responsible for the Child Space, an environment where children can feel free to explore and engage in play activities. Play is essential to children's ability to cope with stress, as play is familiar to them and allows them the opportunity to communicate, express emotions, and achieve a sense of control.

As the Child Space is a safe space for children, professionals can quickly establish a therapeutic relationship with children by participating in non-threatening play-based interactions. A non-intimidating and child-friendly environment is critically important in increasing the child's comfort level and reducing trauma (Newman, Dannenfelser, & Pendleton, 2005). The value of making such efforts to put children at ease has been established in the investigation process, as children who are more relaxed in police interviews are able to provide relevant information more easily, resulting in a more reliable investigation (Collins, Doherty-Sneddon & Doherty, 2013).



## The Child Life Program

The presence of a Child Life Specialist has been shown to greatly benefit children and youth during medical examinations for sexual assault (Johnson, 2004).

Guidelines for the evaluation of sexual abuse of children stress that the medical exam should be explained to the child beforehand and that time must be allocated to relieving the child's anxiety (Kellogg, 2005).

At the Sheldon Kennedy Child Advocacy Centre, it has become standard practice for the children to meet with the Child Life Specialist before the medical exam. Using developmentally-appropriate language and play with anatomically correct puppets and medical equipment, the exam is explained in a step by step process that describes exactly what the child can expect from the procedure. Through this process, misconceptions and worries are identified and can be addressed.

The Child Life Specialist empowers children and their caregiver/support person to take an active role and maintain control throughout the exam by asking questions, identifying needs, and making use of coping strategies discussed in the preparation. If requested by child, or if an emotional support person is not available for the exam, the Child Life Specialist will provide support and distraction during the exam.



## The Child Life Program

The Child Life Program is enhanced by the support of the community. The Alberta Children's Hospital and the Pet Access League Society provide volunteers to spend time with and care for children in the Child Space. Being able to provide care for children during the forensic interview has been identified as an important aspect of Child Advocacy Centres, as it allows families and staff to focus on the investigation and the quality of the interview (Newman, Dannenfelser, & Pendleton, 2005).

The generous donations of time, toys, blankets, and festive decorations from Corporate Calgary, community groups and individuals provide tokens of comfort and normalcy to children on a day to day basis at the Centre. This community support also made it possible for the Child Life and Victim Support Program to provide individualized Christmas Care Packages of toys, games, activities, clothing, and gift cards to over 120 children and caregivers in need.

### Promising Initial Outcomes

1) Through continued education around the role of the Child Life Specialist and the potential benefit of Child Life services to children and families who have been impacted by abuse, the building of trusting relationships has extended beyond health care professionals to those working in child protection and the investigation and prosecution of child abuse cases

2) By supporting children through developmentally appropriate play and information, Calgary Police Service and RCMP report that children are entering interviews with lessened anxiety (in comparison to children who interviewed prior to investigations being conducted at the CAC) which has resulted in fewer and shorter interviews being required to complete a thorough and effective investigation and a decreased likelihood of re-traumatization for the child

3) Following the implementation of preparation for medical exams by the Child Life Specialist as standard practice, medical staff report that the length of exams have gone from 60 minutes to 30 minutes on average

### Future Directions

Having reached the two year mark of providing services to the children and families at the CAC, the Child Life Program continues to expand it's scope. With the success of the implementation of medical preparations by the Child Life Specialist as standard practice at the Centre, the development of an innovative tool to prepare children for the entire experience of visiting the CAC is currently underway.

With funds provided by Alberta Department of Justice, the Child Life Specialist is working with a local app development company to develop an interactive app to be used to provide an orientation for the children to each stage of their involvement with the Centre.

## The Child Life Program

Once complete, the Child Life Specialist and other professionals at the CAC will use the app as a tool to provide children with developmentally appropriate information about the Centre and any service they are scheduled to experience – forensic interviews, medical examinations, therapy, and the court process. The app will ensure professionals are able to effectively address the psychosocial needs of the child without jeopardizing the requirements of an effective investigation and prosecution.

Research on the effectiveness and outcomes of Child Advocacy Centres is limited, with little to no literature outlining the role of the Child Life Specialist. As part of the Sheldon Kennedy Child Advocacy Centre's Strategic Directions to champion best practices and establish a Centre of Excellence, an evaluation of the Child Life Program is in development to generate data that will help illustrate the impact of the services. By determining evidence-based practice for Child Life services within a Child Advocacy Centre, it may be possible to identify the provision of Child Life services as best practice for Child Advocacy Centres across the country.

To learn more about the Sheldon Kennedy Child Advocacy Centre, please visit our website at [www.sheldonkennedycac.ca](http://www.sheldonkennedycac.ca). If you wish to learn more about the Child Life Program, please contact the Child Life Specialist:



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## Media

<http://www.calgarysun.com/2013/11/19/playing-to-help-kids-at-the-sheldon-kennedy-child-advocacy-centre>

<http://www.calgarysun.com/2013/05/22/eric-francis-child-advocacy-centre-bears-fitting-namesake>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rsRfNsbVsCI>

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