

MUSC Child Life Atrium: Encouraging Emotional Well-Being of Hospitalized Children

By: Charlie Coste

Background

The MUSC Child Life Program and Atrium are a part of the MUSC Children's Hospital. The Child Life Atrium is staffed with Child Life Specialists and is designed to meet the play and activity needs of children, teens (ages 0-18) and their families during hospitalization. The Atrium has toys, games and play areas and is a "safe place" where medical treatment and procedures do not take place. The purpose of the Child Life Program is to encourage emotional well-being and normal development in health care settings through the use of play, education and support. Volunteers work one on one with children in the atrium or at bedside providing companionship and play opportunities.

Description of Service

I started volunteering there this past summer once a week. Then last semester and continuing this semester I volunteer every Thursday from 5-7:30pm. When I walk in, the Child Life Specialist gives me a child to go visit. If the patient is on any medical precautions, I have to put on a gown, gloves and mask before entering and then we can hang-out and play in their room. If they are not on any medical precautions, I can again hang-out with them in the room or I can bring them to play in the Atrium. In the Atrium, they get to choose from a lot of activities such as toys, arts and crafts, air hockey, billiards, and books. For teens there is a separate area with video games, more arts and crafts, a karaoke machine and a selfie booth. At the end of the shift, I help sanitize tables and put away toys for the night.

My Impact

In total, I have spent over 100 hours in the Atrium. I am able to meet, get to know and spend time with at least 1 to 2 children per week. This means I've been given the opportunity to have an effect on the lives of about 80 children since I began volunteering. These children are able to just take a break from all the treatments and doctors, be themselves and simply have fun.

My Most Memorable Experience

One day, I was assigned to an 8-year-old Hispanic boy who is frequently in the hospital and whom I had spent time with before. He always has a lot of energy and I've never seen him without a smile on his face. With the illness he has, he can't leave his room so he will often stand at the edge of his room with the door open and wave and talk to everyone passing by. That day, he wanted to play with some toys cars and then we did arts and crafts. We started out painting and using glitter glue on paper but that quickly turned into him wanting to paint and use glitter on my gloves. He was getting the best laugh painting my gloves and then watching me mush them together. The most memorable part for me however, was that since he was Hispanic and English wasn't his first language, I began trying to communicate with him in Spanish. I was began trying to communicate with him to best of my ability in Spanish. The first time I spoke in Spanish, I asked "What's your favorite color?" and I just saw his eyes light up and he smile and answered back in Spanish "blue." The best part was that talking with an 8-year old in Spanish was pretty fun because his vocab level was about the same as mine.



The Impact of Volunteering on Me

Each day that I volunteer is a unique opportunity to learn. The resiliency of these children is amazing and listening and getting to know their stories can really change one's outlook on their life. While the ultimate goal for them is to relax and have fun, I often have just as much, if not more fun spending time with them. I have learned and continue to learn how to embrace my "inner-child" as well as develop my communication skills with kids. Also, the understanding of what children experience during hospitalization as well as development of communication skills are extremely valuable for aspiring to become a pediatric physician.

Leadership

The most obvious principled leader characteristic you have to embody with this volunteering is the service of others before yourself. While you're with the patient it is all about them and what they want to do. It's whatever makes them happy and more comfortable. One of the most important leadership characteristics when dealing with kids is embracing a true, authentic self. I observed how the best nurses with the patients were the ones that basically embraced their "inner-child." Kids have a way of sensing if you're just pretending to be someone you're not so I found that the best interactions I had were when I just tried to be myself. The second most important characteristic when working with children is respect by building trust. When walking into a patient's room, it's important to try to "break the ice" and establish some sort of a bond so they feel comfortable. This is especially important and becomes more difficult when the child is shy and not very talkative.

Want to Get Involved?

If you are interested in becoming a volunteer at MUSC, here are a few things you should know:

- You apply online during the specific dates listed on the MUSC Volunteer Services page
- If accepted, you will be given an interview to determine your placement
- You have to be up to date on all shots and vaccinations
- You will have to receive the flu shot and TB test every year
- You must attend an orientation before beginning your regular volunteer shifts

