

Introduction/Background

Child Life Specialists support the emotional and psychosocial needs of children and families, focusing on reducing stress and enhancing coping through therapeutic play and education. Since its inception in the 1950s, the field has expanded beyond hospitals to outpatient and dental settings, where managing anxiety is crucial for improving patient and caregiver experiences. In pediatric dentistry, parental anxiety can significantly affect a child's behavior, especially during treatments requiring general anesthesia (GA). This study aims to assess the impact of Child Life counseling on reducing anxiety among parents of pediatric dental patients undergoing GA at NYC Health + Hospitals/Bellevue and to identify parents' primary concerns about GA.

Methods

This pre-/post study evaluated the impact of Child Life Specialists on parental anxiety during their children's pre-hospital visit prior to receiving comprehensive dental care under GA at Bellevue. Forty-seven parents or legal guardians were recruited over four months (Dec 31, 2024–Mar 27, 2025). They completed the pre- and post surveys at the beginning and end of the pre-hospital appointment, respectively. The surveys, administered via tablet on REDCap, included the six-item short form of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) and study-specific questions. Data was analyzed using T-tests and Chi-square. No patient records were accessed, and all identifying information remains confidential.

STAI Six-Item Short Form Example

Read each statement and select the appropriate response to indicate how you feel right now, that is, at this very moment. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any one statement but give the answer which seems to describe your present feelings best. 1 - Not at all, 2 - A little, 3 - Somewhat, 4 - Very much so

	1	2	3	4
I feel calm.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel tense.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel upset.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am relaxed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel content.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am worried.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 1: Example of STAI questionnaire asked to parents on REDCap before and after Child Life intervention.

Results

Of the 47 surveys collected, 30 were included in a contingency table analysis examining how perceptions of Child Life educational support related to changes in anxiety. Participants tended to report positively to Child Life related items post-intervention. For example, 94.4% who agreed that “the images helped me understand” and “I had a better understanding of what to expect” showed a decrease in anxiety levels post pre-hospital appointment ($p = 0.590$). Similarly, 88.9% who felt “less anxious about anesthesia” had decreased or unchanged anxiety levels ($p = 0.297$). Additional trends were seen among parents who had increased levels of anxiety and who preferred asking questions to a Child Life Specialist (77.8%, $p = 0.423$) and wanted a specialist present before surgery (72.2%, $p = 0.726$).

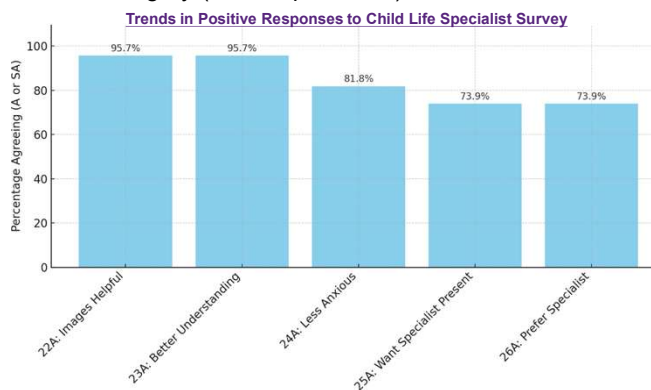


Figure 2: The bar graph displays the results of the post-survey STAI questionnaire. Parents receiving Child Life intervention demonstrated mostly positive response (e.g. “I feel relaxed”) to related questions. While not statistically significant, these trends illustrate that parents generally find comfort and lowered anxiety in having a Child Life Specialist available prior to their child's dental surgery.

Demographic Characteristics	n	%
Primary Language of Parent		
English	8	27%
Spanish	22	73%
Age of Child Scheduled for GA		
1-4 years old	13	43%
5+ years old	16	53%
Gender of Child Scheduled for GA		
Male	18	60%
Female	12	40%
Number of Children in Household		
1-2 children	13	43%
3+	13	43%

Comparing parental anxiety levels by language, Spanish-speaking parents reported more positive results across all STAI items in the post-intervention. For instance, 90.9% reported low tension (vs. 75.0%) and 50.0% felt relaxed (vs. 12.5%). Although not statistically significant (all $p > .05$), “I feel relaxed” approached significance ($p = .064$). Additionally, 85.7% of Spanish-speaking parents showed decreased anxiety scores post-intervention compared to 14.3% of English-speaking parents ($p = .398$).

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between Child Life Specialists and anxiety levels in parents, revealing some notable trends.

- Child Life interventions may help reduce parental anxiety.
- Positive perceptions of Child Life support (e.g., understanding procedures, GA, comfort asking questions) are linked to lower or stable anxiety levels.
- Spanish-speaking parents reported more positive emotional outcomes, possibly because Child Life Specialists at Bellevue were also able to communicate with them in Spanish.
- Differences were not statistically significant but indicate promising trends.
- Further research with larger sample sizes is needed to validate these findings.

References

Available upon request

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