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Ashley King

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Decreasing the Price of Fame:

Research on the Use of Child Life Specialists in the Entertainment Industry

By

Ashley King

Child Life Studies

Mentor:

Genevieve Lowry

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Abstract

Children who grow up working and performing in the entertainment industry encounter experiences during childhood unique to their circumstances. Research conducted through interviews with individuals who have worked in the entertainment industry detail experiences such as over-working children on set, lack of emotional outlets to address the stressors experienced, and the impact of the high-stress, fast-paced nature of the industry on the child's ability to cope. Interviews, as well as articles and documentaries available publicly with anecdotes from former child stars, demonstrate the lack of safety and stability, increased stress, and additional burdens children working in entertainment experience; qualifying growing up as a youth in professional entertainment as an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE).

Equipped with knowledge of child development, Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLS) support children's psychosocial development and promote comfort with their environments. Through interventions and interactions guided by the pillars of preparation, coping, play, the use of the expressive arts, and developmentally-appropriate explanations, child life specialists are able to support children's coping who are experiencing stressful circumstances and ACEs. This paper explores how the use of a CCLS in the field of entertainment would positively impact the experiences of child stars while working on set.

15 individuals were contacted online to participate in a semi-structured interview. 5 interviews were conducted, ranging from a length of 1 hour to 2.75 hours. All participants were over the age of 18-years-old, and thematic analysis was conducted to assess common themes between interviews. Themes discovered directly relate to anecdotes in publicly available articles and documentaries involving former child stars.

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Many thanks to my sister, Lindsay Stafford, who encouraged me to explore being a child life specialist many years ago, and who helped me in first writing on this topic for the *ACLP Bulletin*. Your encouragement on this paper will continue to lead me to exciting undertakings. I'm glad I finally listened to you!

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Thank you all! You've pushed me, challenged me, and inspired me to seek an innovative way to help children experiencing stress that has been overlooked for so long. May this journey continue, and benefit many children and teens as they are pursuing their passion in performing.

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Decreasing the Price of Fame:

Research on the Use of Child Life Specialists in the Entertainment Industry

Introduction

I moved to New York City in 2011 to pursue a lifelong dream of dancing and performing professionally. I had wonderful opportunities to perform for stage, tv, and film, and after my first year in the big city accepted a job teaching dance to young kids. I quickly fell in love with helping students both express themselves and connect with others through movement, and it didn't take long for my career focus to shift from pursuing performing to teaching. I have since provided instruction to children, teens, and adults from all over the world in recreational and professional dance at one of the top training studios in New York City. After eleven years dancing in Manhattan, I decided to explore a new career path through Bank Street's Child Life Master's program. As a Certified Child Life Specialist (CCLS), I hope to infuse my passions of working with individuals in the arts and my desire to help children and teens cope with stressful circumstances. While learning about child development and trauma-informed care during my first semester at Bank Street, I recognized an overlap between what child life specialists offer and what some child stars need while working in the arts and entertainment industry. Guided by research and interviews of those who were child actors, as well as individuals who have worked professionally in entertainment as mentors and instructors, this Integrative Master's Project explores the stressors experienced by children and teens in entertainment and advocates for the inclusion of a Certified Child Life Specialist as an integral member of the team of production.

What is Child Life

Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLS) work with children, teens, and families in stressful situations through approaches grounded in child development, play, trauma-informed interactions, and the use of coping skills. Through interventions, CCLS' are able to reduce the immediate and long-term impact of stress and trauma (Association of Child Life Professionals, 2023). Child life specialists provide developmentally appropriate communication and play; fostering children and families resilience while navigating stressful environments and situations.

The Pillars of Child Life

Certified Child Life Specialists ground interventions in the five pillars of child life; preparation, coping, play, expressive arts, and the use of developmentally appropriate explanations (Lowry et al., 2022). Interventions guided by these aspects of care can be implemented in any setting in which children and teens experience stress, trauma, or disruption of their normal routine or home environment. Understanding the pillars of child life and how they are implemented is beneficial to understanding how they can be applied to the entertainment industry, an environment that has yet to collaborate with child life.

Preparation

Preparing a child for a stressful situation or environment has proven effective in aiding in the child's coping, reducing fear and anxiety, and in building resilience (Boles et al., 2018; Romito et al., 2021). Typically found in hospital settings, CCLS use a five sense approach to preparing children for medical environments, diagnosis, treatments and procedures. During the preparation, child life specialists encourage questions and emotional expression from the patient, and include the caregivers in supporting their child (Boles et al., 2018; Romito et al., 2021).

Preparation for a patient is implemented with consideration of the individual's cognitive development, psychosocial development, history, and cultural background.

Coping

Child life specialists use knowledge of coping styles and strategies to aid children and teens navigating stressful circumstances. CCLSs are able to support the individual using coping techniques that address their specific needs and promote their well-being. A CCLS is able to determine appropriate coping methods by assessing the individual's environment, identifying potential stressors for the child or teen, observing their behavior and engaging in discussions about their experience. Decreasing the stress that a child experiences has been demonstrated to better long-term coping and adjustment with stressful circumstances such as medical visits (Romito et al., 2021). Child life specialists offer interventions such as deep breathing, visualization techniques, play, and distraction techniques to promote a child's coping.

Play

Play is an essential activity in childhood, and the use of play is core to the approach of child life (Jessee et al., 2018). Through play, a child is able to develop, cope with life's demands, learn about their environment, express their emotions, and connect with others (Bolig et al., 2018). Child life specialists implement interventions using different forms of play depending on the needs and circumstance of the child or teen, creating a child-centered approach to play interventions. Therapeutic play supports the individual's psychosocial well-being, normative play supports the child's development and exploration of their environment, and medical play is used as preparation for stressful circumstances such as a medical procedure. CCLS' use knowledge of development, as well as the child's strengths as determined through assessment and observation, to guide play activities that will benefit the child's psychosocial growth.

Expressive Arts

Child life specialists use the arts as a tool for coping and for self-expression (Rollins et al., 2018). Expressive arts offer children, teens, and their families the opportunity to identify and express the many emotions that can be associated with stressful circumstances. Artistic expression can be accomplished through various art forms, such as music, the visual arts, movement, storytelling, and writing (Rollins et al., 2018). The expressive arts and artistic expression, as well as play, can be used to help children process challenging and stressful events.

Developmentally Appropriate Explanations

Child life specialists use knowledge of child development and cognitive development to communicate with children and teens in a way that they will accurately understand the information provided. Communication will match the child's developmental level, experiences, and cultural background, and will aid the child in both understanding and coping with their stressful circumstance.

The field of child life began in the hospital setting, and has since expanded to different environments in which children and families experience stress and anxiety (Association of Child Life Professionals, 2018). Currently, child life specialists are found in a variety of settings in which children experience stress, from outpatient clinics to hospitals, funeral homes, schools, and courtrooms (Beickert & Mora, 2017). Children working in the entertainment industry experience stressors, anxiety, and environments unique to their development. The inclusion of a CCLS on set using interventions through the five pillars of child life would positively impact both their experience on set and their development into adulthood.

Children in Entertainment

It is easily surmised that the lifestyle and experiences of a child star are unique, but the extent to which these experiences differ from typical childhoods deserves further investigation. Interviews approved by Bank Street's Institution Research Review Board were conducted with individuals to understand both the environment of the industry and the stressors children in entertainment experience while working professionally. It is worthwhile to discuss the unique lifestyle children in entertainment experience when considering the benefits a Certified Child Life Specialist can offer to mitigate the potential negative effects from involvement in the entertainment industry.

Child stars devote themselves to training, auditioning, and working, often spending many crucial years of development focused on their craft and immersed in an adult-centered world. As one interview participant stated, it 'skews what childhood should feel like when (working) in entertainment (A. King, personal communication, February 19, 2024).' While the experiences depicted are not the experiences of every young professional, and not all aspects of the entertainment industry are negative, common themes arose in the interviews. Revealed were themes in young professionals' lives concerning their lifestyle, common stressors, self-image, and family dynamics.

Lifestyle

While this publication addresses the experiences of young professionals while working on set, it is important to have a general understanding of the lifestyle of the child actor to better understand their lifestyle during production. Interviews conducted revealed the unique experiences of the child actor during their everyday life when involved in the entertainment industry. As one interview participant stated, 'working kids aren't kids (A. King, personal

communication, February 19, 2024).’ Due to the demands of auditions, training, and working, it is difficult for the child star to be involved with normative experiences of childhood such as playing and spending time with friends in a non-professional environment.

Child stars maintain busy schedules with school, auditioning, working, and training. To accommodate for this busyness, some child actors are homeschooled to allow for flexibility in their schedule. Regardless of which avenue of schooling a child actor’s family chooses, children in entertainment experience pressure to keep up with their commitments. For consideration, ‘regular children (are) feeling overwhelmed- now add a workload outside of school (A. King, personal communication, April 14, 2024).’ Due to their busy schedule, child actors have limited interaction with their peers outside of entertainment. They stay in contact with friends through technology and social media, but the peers that young professionals most often associate with are their castmates and competition. This makes for a complicated dynamic in their relationships as ‘peers are competition and also friends (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024).’ Some child actors take limited breaks from working and/or auditioning due to the worry of missing opportunities for employment if they take a break from their craft.

While missing out on what are seen as typical activities during development, such as seeing movies with friends, child stars also gain experiences that can positively impact their childhood experience. Children in entertainment get to travel for work and meet individuals in rehearsals and on set that they might not have met otherwise. Understanding of the lifestyle and upbringing of the child star, and that not every experience carries negative implications, is helpful when considering the stressors and environment of involvement in production.

Lifestyle on Set

Compounded to the lifestyle and experiences of the child star is the unique and potentially challenging environment in which they work while on set. The structure of the work day while in entertainment varies between sets, and often operates with a ‘hurry up and wait’ mentality (A. King, personal communication, March 1, 2024). The working expectations of the day also vary depending on the type and size of role in which the young performer is cast. Articles and documentaries with anecdotes from former child stars, as well as interviews conducted for this research project, reveal commonalities between the environment of production in the individuals who are with the young professionals throughout the work day, the way school on set is conducted, and how fun and play are approached during work hours.

There are many people that surround the child throughout the workday in the entertainment industry. While child performers through age 15 should be accompanied by a guardian while on set, former child stars have reported violations to this statute in the SAG-AFTRA contracts (Robertson & Schwartz, 2024c; SAG-AFTRA, 2024b; SAG-AFTRA, 2024c). The guardian while on set could be either a parent or someone delegated by the child’s parent (SAG-AFTRA, 2024b). Once a child actor is 16 or 17, it is not mandated that they have a guardian with them, but can choose to still have one (SAG-AFTRA, 2024c). An interview with an individual who currently works in production revealed that when parents are present on set, they are often absentminded while the child is working. In the recent HBO Max documentary *Quiet on Set: The Dark Side of Kids TV*, former child stars revealed they were often taken out of sight and sound of the parent, leaving the guardians uninvolved and unaware of what the child was doing (Robertson & Schwartz, 2024b).

When asked who is with the kids throughout the work day, one participant stated ‘typically, the 1st or 2nd AD (Assistant Director) and depending on the shoot, a set teacher (A. King, personal communication, March 1, 2024).’ Aside from the guardian’s contracted responsibility for their child on set, the studio teacher has primary responsibility for the child actors during breaks (SAG-AFTRA, 2024b). In New York state, the producer is responsible for hiring the teacher on set, and working children are required to participate in three hours of school per day (New York State Department of Labor, n.d.). One interview participant stated that for one set she experienced, guardians could sign a waiver to allow the set tutor to be their guardian for the day. A different interview participant expressed concerns that some of the personnel that work when children are on set are not background checked, a concern echoed in *Quiet on Set: The Dark Side of Kids TV* (Robertson & Schwartz, 2024c).

The schedule of a day of production can be unpredictable, and with many breaks as the team of production sets up each scene. While children are required to participate in three hours of school a day, per an interview with an industry professional, the hours for schooling on set are often broken up into segments when the child is available between scenes. The amount of downtime available between scenes can be unpredictable and take ‘hours, but you never know going into it. Setting up the next shot could take 15 minutes or it could take over an hour (A. King, personal communication, March 1, 2024).’ The way in which the children occupy themselves during this time apart from schooling varies depending on the personnel with whom they are working, and the guardian with them on set. ‘The parents are expected to entertain them or they can entertain themselves (A. King, personal communication, March 1, 2024).’ If not completing their required number of hours for school, children on set spend their downtime

doing homework, playing on devices, observing the camera crew, and waiting on standby for production to set up the next scene.

While the operation of production could vary from the experiences of the participants interviewed, child actors are not given any activities to do other than schooling during downtime, as the expectation for entertainment lies on the guardian. Play ‘depends on the set... it is there, but not encouraged (A. King, personal communication, April 14, 2024).’ According to interviews with industry professionals, play doesn’t exist unless someone, often a co-star, makes a point to provide games. One individual who grew up in entertainment described how she enjoyed this downtime, as she found excitement in watching the cameras and lights, and going to craft services, which provides food and drinks for the actors. A CCLS on set in entertainment could act as an advocate for the child’s developmental and play needs, and be a child-centered presence in sight and sound of the actors at all times to ensure their safety is maintained.

Adult Content on Set

A complicated and unique aspect of growing up and working in the adult-centered world of entertainment is the exposure to adult conversations and content while on set. A growing body of memoirs and interviews from former child stars detail their concerning exposures to drugs, abuse, physical injuries, and over-sexualization on set. Such exposures often occur during crucial periods of development, and have the potential to have a profound impact on the development of the individual. As described in an interview with an adult who has observed directors work with kids on set, personnel working with kids in entertainment often forget that child stars are still actually kids. With this, young professionals are often exposed to scenes, innuendo, and conversations of adult nature that they likely would not be exposed to outside of the entertainment industry.

The world of entertainment was created by, and made primarily for, adults. Children on set experience rapid adultification, and ‘have to act and behave older than they are’ (A. King, personal communication, February, 2, 2024; Lakritz, 2024). Scenes are sometimes written and directed in a way that sexualizes children, as well as depict children in inappropriate situations for their age and developmental stage. In *Quiet on Set: The Dark Side of Kids TV*, former child stars reflect on scenes in which they were involved as youth that incorporate sexual innuendo (Robertson & Schwartz, 2024c). If on a set where the director is guided by the adage of ‘I can make you a star, I could break your career,’ guardians will be hesitant to speak out with concerns they have observed for their child (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024).

These experiences depict aspects of the entertainment industry and the organization of production that would benefit from increased awareness of child development, toxic stress, and traumatic exposures. Realizing the long-term effects of a young professional’s involvement in the arts and entertainment is crucial in working to provide mechanisms that support a child’s ability to advocate for themselves, and to reduce the likelihood of negative experiences. A CCLS in entertainment would advocate for the appropriateness of the content of which children are involved in and exposed to while on set. If the writers of a show include content that involves a minor that is too mature or involves sexual innuendo, a CCLS would work with the director and/or writer(s) to modify the content of a scene so it is developmentally appropriate for the child. Child life in entertainment would work in conjunction with the director to limit the adult content to which the minor is exposed in a scene or on set, and work to address any misunderstandings or questions the child might have.

Child Labor Law Violations

In addition to the regulations set forth by SAG-AFTRA for young professionals, each state has varying guidelines for the child actor. Child performers must obtain a permit to work from the Department of Labor, and a work permit is not allowed if the guardian cannot provide proof of a trust account for the minor (SAG-AFTRA, 2024b; SAG-AFTRA, 2024c). In New York, it is the producer's responsibility to comply with the SAG-AFTRA contract and labor laws (SAG-AFTRA, 2024b). Work and school hours are determined based on the age of the performer, and the time at which the production ended the day prior if working consecutive days. One individual interviewed who grew up working professionally as a minor obtained her GED while in high school so she was eligible to work the hours set forth for adult performers and so she appeared more eligible for roles meant for a minor. From her experience, getting the GED in high school 'puts you above the other people. And makes it cheaper for production (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024).'

In addition to a hectic and unpredictable lifestyle on set, and exposure to adult content, children working professionally experience child labor law violations (Robertson & Schwartz, 2024b; Stoner, 2021). Children in entertainment sometimes work overtime, with production ignoring the child labor laws for the given state (Robertson & Schwartz, 2024b). While SAG-AFTRA's (2024c) guidelines for young performers states that it is 'ultimately the parent or guardian's responsibility to ensure the young performer is being treated fairly and with respect,' parents on set are either out of sight and sound of their child, or refrain from voicing concerns over fears of repercussions (Robertson & Schwartz, 2024b). A CCLS in the entertainment industry would act as an advocate for the child in ensuring that the labor laws for the given state

and the child's age are honored, allowing the child a proper amount of time outside of production to focus on their identity and development.

Stressors

Child stars are exposed to a range of stressors during their everyday lives that could complicate their development, such as the responsibility of finances, body image concerns, competition with peers, and separation from their caregivers, siblings, and home environment (Lakritz, 2024). While this publication focuses on the experience of a child star while on set, it is important to also understand the stress and anxiety experienced during their everyday life due to the demand, expectations, and structure of the entertainment industry. These stressors experienced during their daily lives have the potential to manifest into their behaviors, actions, and fears while working in entertainment.

Young professionals are sometimes in the complicated position of financially providing for their family through their work in entertainment. Before acquiring a work permit, a family must show proof of a trust account for the child (New York State Department of Labor, n.d.). However, families are only required to withhold 15% of wages earned, a law known as 'Coogan Law' (SAG-AFTRA, 2024a). One interview participant stated that families are able to find ways around abiding by this law, which was put into effect in 1939. The stress of finances for a child poses many complications for their development, with both their relationship with their family and with their craft. One interview participant stated that 'when kids are the breadwinner, they are a business (A. King, personal communication, February 19, 2024).' Once a child becomes a business and is financially supporting the family through paychecks and residuals, no one thinks about the effect of their involvement in entertainment on the child's development. This dynamic brings the stress of 'what if the kid doesn't book jobs back to back but their family is relying on

the paycheck? (A. King, personal communication, February 19, 2024).’ This financial reliance on the child could potentially put stress on the child should they ever consider quitting the business; stress of which is not developmentally normal for a child to experience.

Lakritz (2024) and *Quiet on Set* (Robertson & Schwartz, 2024c) detail experiences of children in entertainment struggling with their body image and entering puberty while auditioning and working professionally. A child star’s concept of their body image is impacted by the characters they play on screen, the costumes that they don for work, and comments about the child’s appearance from individuals involved with production. In interviews, industry professionals detailed how some child stars are fearful of growing taller, getting bigger, and losing roles because they are no longer able to fit into costumes. Some minors in entertainment also fear aging out of roles, a fear of which is intensified both when the child’s family depends on the young professional’s paycheck and when the child’s identity is encompassed in their public image as a minor in entertainment.

In addition to experiencing financial stress and body image issues, thematic analysis of interviews conducted reveal the common theme of child actors feeling like they are replaceable. This experience could lead child stars to work and audition without taking breaks, often leading to burnout and missed opportunities for development through normative childhood experiences. The impact of this stressor would be amplified when a child experiences ‘rejection from a potential job opportunity, especially if a friend got the role (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024)’. While a competitive nature is normative for children, child stars experience competition for jobs and recognition with their peers and co-stars. Concerns of being replaceable and constantly being in competition with their peers could lead to toxic stress in the child star’s

life, as ‘it’s isolating competing with friends (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024).’

Children in entertainment often work professionally during important stages of childhood, risking missed opportunities, peer socialization, making choices, and development of skills and personal agency (King et al., 2024). The lack of play in a child star’s daily lifestyle due to their pursuit of the arts could have negative impacts on their development (Wenner, 2009). While young professionals engage in the adult responsibility of memorizing lines, auditioning, training, maintaining a professional appearance and demeanor, they miss out on age-appropriate opportunities for play (King et al., 2024). These stressors involved in pursuing the arts, as well as the pursuit of the arts in and of itself, have the potential to impact the young professional’s family dynamics.

Family Dynamics

Compounded to the child actor’s stressor of financial responsibility for their family are the stressors of their dynamic with their caregiver(s), and disruption of their family unit for work. When a child pursues working professionally in the arts, their entire family dynamic generally shifts to accommodate for traveling for auditions and jobs, and for the need of one caregiver to be available to take the young actor to auditions and jobs. Such a shift would separate the child actor from their siblings and second caregiver, with families sometimes living in different states so the child in entertainment can pursue their career.

One interview participant described how the parents are the ones to nurture and help the child pursue their artistic interests, while ‘hold(ing) so many different roles- manager, parent, therapist (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024).’ Such a dynamic places extra pressure on the caregiver to help the child manage and cope with the added stressors of their

involvement in the entertainment industry. However, if the parent is unaware of the potential impacts of the industry; the stressors of body image, self-concept, and pressures of auditioning might go unrecognized. It might cause increased pressure on the child actor when their parent, acting as a manager, pushes them to continue booking jobs and training in their artform. Some child actors choose to be emancipated from their parents so they can work longer hours on set, further disrupting their relationship with their caregiver(s) and the dynamic of their family (Harris, 2023; Robertson & Schwartz, 2024b). While these dynamics apply to the family dynamics of the child actor's everyday life, child life is equipped to aid in supporting the family through coping and separation. By acting as a role model for positive child/adult relationships, and helping the caregiver recognize the stressors and pressure the child experiences, child life can aid in mitigating the stress of their ever-shifting family dynamics.

Through an understanding of the stressors that a child star might carry in their day to day life, such as the stress of financial responsibility, body image, fears of being replaced, competition with peers, and the impact of their family dynamics, a CCLS on set could address any behaviors, concerns, or anxieties of the child while on set that manifest due to these experiences.

Stressors on Set

When working professionally, 'everything is a stressor... stressors are also exciting (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024).' Children on set are exposed to stressful stimuli on set, as well as other factors of set that might be scary for a child such as camera rigs, scenes involving heights or animals, or the use of atmospheric effects. When faced with situations that the child actors perceive as scary or inappropriate, young professionals feel as though they cannot push back in fear of retaliation from the director or producer (Robertson &

Schwartz, 2024c). According to interviews conducted, the family's financial reliance on the minor's income could also inhibit the parents or guardians from speaking out while on set if they experience the child in a situation that is not developmentally appropriate and/or causing the child fear. Without appropriate support or explanations, constant exposure to stimuli and situations that are scary for the actor could cause the child to experience toxic stress that could impact their development to adulthood (Center for Youth Wellness and ZERO TO THREE, 2018).

In addition to fears in their environment while on set, child actors also experience fears of failure that could negatively impact the way in which they process or approach their experiences in production. Research participants described how children in entertainment fear messing up and disappointing the adults on set, fears of which could be amplified when the nature of the set is fast-paced and the minor is concerned about being replaceable. One individual who works in entertainment described the mindset of production as 'mistakes cost money' and 'time is money;' sentiments which could increase the child's fear of failure and experience of stress while working (A. King, personal communication, March 2, 2024).

While it is likely that all children fear injury in some capacity, child stars fear injury on set for worries of not being able to continue to work if injured. A child's fears of their environment and fears of their personal safety could be displayed through uncooperative behavior. According to one research participant, it is the studio teacher and parent's responsibility to help the child when they are uncooperative with production. Research participants had varied experiences with how production approaches uncooperative children on set, but a common theme between responses was that if production could replace the child, they would; highlighting the child actor's common stressor of being replaceable.

Self-Image

A child actor's experiences on set have the potential to affect the way in which they view themselves, and impact the way in which they transition through adulthood. Per the developmental theorist Eric Erikson, the adolescent years are characterized by the struggle between discovering identity and confusion between roles (Turner & Thompson, 2018). It is normal for a teen to seek their own identity and explore the way in which they present and interact with the world. This normative exploration of identity is complicated when the teen's image is controlled by their manager, and when their image is defined by a certain role or type of role that they commonly portray. 'It's hard to have a sense of self- it depends on what role you're labeled as (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024).' This process of role categorization could complicate the minor's development when they don't identify with the characters they portray for production (Robertson & Schwartz, 2024d).

The confines of fame and notoriety can cause former child actors to struggle to adjust to and mature into adulthood (Lakritz, 2024). Adolescents potentially experience role confusion when they are held to the standard, image, or expectation of their notable childhood identity. One research participant described how some child actors unintentionally enmesh their personal identity with their professional one, and when this occurs, the individual's identity could potentially shatter when they experience rejection from an audition or critiques while on set. 'It's hard to be seen as anything but child actors. Actors go so hard in other directions of identity to not be seen as a kid anymore... They're shamed for exploring womanhood (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024).'

In Lakritz's (2024) article, Regina King stated that public school helped her stay connected to reality, likely aiding her in developing an identity outside of the arts. One individual

interviewed who grew up in entertainment detailed how her parents helped her in her understanding that her success didn't define her worth and identity. Support and invaluable lessons from parents, as well as experiences outside of entertainment, demonstrate that with conversations about identity and the examples of positive role models, child actors are able to find their identity outside of their professional career.

The stressors that children experience while working in entertainment could be identified and aided by child life in the day-to-day environment of entertainment through intervention provided through the five pillars of child life. Child life has been shown in medical settings to decrease trauma and anxiety, and increase a child's understanding of and coping with their environment (Burns-Nader & Hernandez-Reif, 2016; King et al., 2024). Due to the high-stress, adult-centered nature of production, involving child life specialists in entertainment could produce the same results for the child performers, and help address the potential impact of both the stressors of working in the arts and the impact of play deprivation.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

There is ongoing research into the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which are defined as 'potentially traumatic events that can have negative lasting effects on health and wellbeing' (Boullier & Blair, 2018). ACEs are experiences of adversity in an individual's upbringing such as physical and emotional abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, and caregiver mental illness (Harvard University, 2024). Adverse experiences in childhood include experiencing or witnessing violence, and having a family member attempt or die by suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Aspects of the environment in which a child is raised that undermine the individual's sense of stability and security are also considered ACEs. Adverse experiences in childhood have been linked to a variety of negative outcomes such as

anxiety disorders, depression, and substance abuse in adulthood, and the more ACEs a child experiences, the more likely they are to struggle with maladaptive traits (Harvard University, 2024).

The experiences and stressors depicted could significantly impact the security and stability the child actor needs. With this lens, and with knowledge of ACES, involvement in the entertainment industry as a minor could potentially qualify as an ACE. Considering the anecdotes of former child stars in the media, interviews conducted for this research project, and the research backing the impact of ACEs, it is not surprising to learn of the development of maladaptive coping skills and negative health outcomes in former child star's teenage and adult years as depicted by anecdotes in the media.

CCLSs have the knowledge and tools to mitigate negative outcomes from adverse childhood events. For children involved in the entertainment industry, problematic exposures and potentially traumatic events may not be recognized by untrained observers until a negative physical or mental health issue develops. Including child life specialists as part of production would reduce adverse outcomes described by participants in the entertainment industry (Behrens-Horrell, 2011). As a part of the team of production, CCLSs will recognize potential ACEs, and will support children using the pillars of child life to understand, cope with, and advocate for the child's psychosocial well-being in this environment. By addressing the young professional's stressors on set and by helping them navigate adult circumstances, a CCLS on set could potentially lower the likelihood of the child star later developing maladaptive traits associated with their time in entertainment.

Child Life Competencies

The care and interventions that could be offered for children in the entertainment setting would satisfy the Child Life Competencies from the Association of Child Life Professionals (2019). While negative experiences on set during childhood are not universal for all child actors, those who might be experiencing stressful or potentially adverse circumstances would benefit from the advocacy and support of child life through care that could minimize the potential of trauma associated with involvement in the industry.

The Association of Child Life Professionals' (2019) Child Life Competencies outline the minimum level of acceptable practice by a CCLS. The importance of assessing the child or teen's needs and providing age-appropriate care specific to their circumstances, providing play opportunities, providing a safe and healing environment, supporting coping during stressful experiences, and building therapeutic relationships are key components of the Child Life Competencies (Association of Child Life Professionals, 2019). It is the expectation of a CCLS to use their knowledge of family-centered care, child development, assessment, and coping strategies to meet the psychosocial needs of the children and families with whom they work.

A CCLS in the entertainment industry would create interventions and opportunities for age-appropriate care in collaboration with the children, their guardians on set, and the team of production. Therapeutic relationships would have to be formed not only with the children, teens, and their guardians present on set, but also with the team of production, which includes individuals such as directors, movement directors, costume designers, and lighting directors. Child life's skill of assessment and providing evidence-based practice would benefit the children on set, so potential stressors could be identified and appropriate interventions could be applied. A child life specialist's skills of facilitating opportunities for play, providing enjoyment and

comfort, and promoting healing through stressful circumstances would bring opportunities to children for normative developmental experiences in an environment that is commonly adult-centered and fast-paced. Additionally, through the child life competency of sharing knowledge of child development, a CCLS on set could help the production team understand the importance of advocating for the emotional, psychosocial, and developmental needs of the child actors. Through both abiding by the Child Life Competencies and following the production's schedule for filming, a child life specialist could integrate in the entertainment community so as to benefit the development of the children of whom are following their passion of performing.

Child Life Interventions in the Entertainment Setting

Through the use of child development, coping strategies, and trauma-informed care, child life's unique knowledge base has the potential to be beneficial to child actors and their families in many ways (King et al., 2024). While there are a multitude of stressors that child actors experience that would benefit from the support of a CCLS, this paper will explore interventions that would be conducive to children in entertainment while they are working on set. This includes any time while they are on set to work, such as when they are in costuming, getting makeup done, in between scenes, and during breaks. CCLSs are equipped to identify the aspects of the industry that could potentially contribute to negative health outcomes, as well as aspects of the industry that interfere with a young performer's sense of safety and stability. In entertainment, a child life specialist would ensure the working environment for the child is conducive to meeting their developmental milestones, and would advocate for the child if faced with potentially stressful conditions or developmentally inappropriate scenes. A CCLS on set would identify both the needs of the minor and stressors of the environment, and implement interventions through use of the five pillars of child life; preparation, coping, play,

developmentally appropriate explanations, and expressive arts. Such interventions would hopefully mitigate the impact of this potentially adverse environment, and decrease the likelihood that the child's sense of safety and stability is negatively affected as they mature into adulthood.

Preparation

Preparing a child star for what they might experience on set would help the young actor cope with the demands of working in entertainment while maintaining typical developmental milestones. A CCLS' preparation for a child in entertainment would consist of developmentally appropriate explanations, catered to the cognitive development and experience of the actor. Children often perform in scenes for TV and film that incorporate atmospheric effects that depict natural disasters, effects of which could be frightening for the minor due to the sight, sound, and to their prior experiences with the effect in nature. Using a 5 sense approach a CCLS would explain the special effects, and if allowed, let the child experience the effects through watching and/or feeling them before the scene begins. Just as preparation for a stressful, unknown procedure in the hospital setting promotes mastery and comfort for the patient, so too would preparation on set. Preparation for happenings on set would also include preparing the child for the camera rigs, lights, and by identifying the individuals who are on set watching each scene.

A CCLS in entertainment would also prepare the child for experiences they would have outside of involvement in a scene, such as for the flow of the work day. According to interview participants, the timing of production is unpredictable. Speaking with the child at the beginning of the day about general expectations such as completing hair and makeup, meeting the director and team of production, and if on set for the day, introducing them to the studio teacher, would help with the child's comfort and preparedness for their work day. The young actor could also be

prepared for the constants that would be present in their day, such as the location of crafty, as well as their transition off of set at the end of the day. About the completion of filming, one participant stated ‘when you’re done, you’re done... sometimes you go right back to school the next day (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024).’ This abrupt transition at the end of the work day could be jolting for the young actor, but with preparation for the flow of the day, the minor would better be able to cope with the shift and the transition back to their home environment.

Preparation for experiences outside of the scenes in which the actors perform would also include preparing the child for times they might need to advocate for their needs, such as during costume changes. By role-playing ways in which the child could advocate for their preferences in regard to personal boundaries, the young actor would be empowered to speak up for themselves. Learning this skill of personal autonomy from a trusted individual such as a CCLS would benefit the young star’s life far beyond conversations concerning costuming, and hopefully prevent instances such as those reported by former child stars of assault and inappropriate behavior from adults on set.

Coping

The experience of being on set could produce a variety of potential stressors for the child working in entertainment such as exposure to stressful stimuli, adult content, competition with co-stars, and fear of failure or being replaced. In addition to stressful exposures, child actors sometimes have to portray strong emotions in scenes such as anger, depression, and frustration for multiple takes in a row. A child actor might experience stress when they have to be ‘constantly on’ and engaged in portraying these emotions for an extended amount of time (A. King, personal communication, April 14, 2024). ‘Kids have to cry on set, act traumatic

experiences. There's no one to talk to about feeling sad on set (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024).' Marshall's (2021) article describes the initiative of some production companies in both Europe and the United States to employ a therapist to work with actors and editors when they are faced with distressing and emotionally taxing content. However, none of the interview participants detailed this experience. Child life could work in tandem with a therapist on set to offer the young professional coping skills to use before, in between, and after takes with strong emotional content (Marshall, 2021).

Helping a child cope with the environment of production is on a 'set by set basis, but it falls on the studio teacher and the parents (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024).' Child life specialists could identify stressors of the environment and of the scenes, and based on the developmental stage and needs of the child, provide coping techniques to process and manage the stress and anxiety experienced on set. Teaching children strategies to regulate emotions like deep breathing, journaling, or moving their body in between takes would help children cope when portraying and witnessing strong emotions.

Play

The entertainment industry is fast-paced, adult-centered, and operates on a schedule that is unpredictable with breaks that vary in length. Child life on set would accommodate this work environment, offering play opportunities for the child actors during breaks regardless of length. Children on set need 'play, to decompress and help with self-regulation' (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024). Play opportunities offered would support child actor's developmental needs for socialization, control, and sense of agency; needs of which might not be satisfied in entertainment without direct intention. Play facilitated by a CCLS offers the child actor opportunities to make decisions, navigate roles, and share their understanding of

circumstances and challenges of working on a set. Play during breaks reduces anxiety and stress and normalizes the environment of production, supporting the minor's comfort on set.

Example of Play on Set

During a break between scenes, child life could offer the children on set play materials conducive to their developmental age. A CCLS would coordinate with the director and AD on anticipated lengths of breaks, and offer the young actors materials that would promote normative play, and not interfere with costuming nor the set. Play activities could occur outside of areas where adult conversation occurs, preventing the minor from unnecessary exposure to adult content and conversation, and stressors. Developmentally appropriate play options might include dramatic play for young children, to physical play and board games for school-age children and teens. Play provides opportunities for young child actors to learn about their environment and the roles of those with whom they work. Play for teens fosters relationships with their peers while giving them an alternative to spending time on social media. A CCLS on set could positively affect the child star's cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development regardless of the length of time segments available to play.

Expressive Arts

Young children in the entertainment industry devote much of their time and energy training and perfecting their craft, but no information was available supporting their involvement in expressive activities outside of their art form. Child life specialists are trained to create and facilitate therapeutic activities that support children and teens in identifying, expressing, and managing strong emotions. Expressive art activities during a child's breaks on set would consist of activities such as painting, writing, or movement, and would offer the child an outlet in which they could express their feelings in a nonverbal manner. Such activities could help the young

actor cope with emotions correlated to their experiences, such as the stressors of the environment, stressors related to family dynamics, or feelings associated with separation from their home environment and family.

Example of Expressive Arts on Set

Offering expressive art activities on set could help mitigate the potential adverse effects of their experiences in entertainment, especially emotions related to their self-image and identity. Both interviews and public resources available detail former child star's struggles to maintain a positive self-image while being cast in roles that might contradict their self-concept, as well as struggles during transitions to adulthood when discovering their identity beyond their childhood public image. As one interview participant noted, 'kids are successful and happy with where they're at, but what happens when they grow up (A. King, personal communication, February 19, 2024)?' With time available between scenes or at the end of the workday, a CCLS on set could facilitate an expressive arts activity with the child actor where they explore their identity and who they imagine themselves to be as adults. The child or adolescent would draw a portrait of themselves how they see themselves and how others may see them. Through discussion with the CCLS, this activity can help the child star who is struggling to separate from the image of the character they portray on screen. This activity supports the actor by identifying characteristics of their TV/film character that are both similar and dissimilar to who they are and who they would like to become. Activities like these can help child actors navigate their emotions and understand reactions to challenging events. These activities can also provide outlets for expression of difficult feelings and develop tools to regulate them.

Developmentally Appropriate Explanations

Children in entertainment work in environments that are adult-centered, and child actors spend significant amounts of time conversing with adults. Currently, explanations to children about happenings on set are from ‘whichever AD has been in charge of them for the day or the director (A. King, personal communication, March 1, 2024)’. A child life specialist on set would offer developmentally appropriate communication, breaking down adult concepts by scaffolding children’s learning from what they know to what is new or unknown. Examples might include special effects, content in scenes, and unfamiliar stimuli on set. A CCLS on set would work in tandem with the director and/or AD on set; while they explain the scene and their directions to the child, child life would work to address any potential miscommunications the child might have about the scene and its content.

Children often perform in scenes for TV and film that portray distressing content such as assault, kidnapping, and violence, as well as in scenes with special effects that depict natural or man-made disasters. Child-centered, developmentally appropriate conversations would help the child better understand both the situations in which they’re involved and the fictionality of the scene. Child life would also advocate for the child to production on how much information is necessary for them to have on a given topic or the content in the scene, thereby protecting them from unnecessary exposure to distressing or inappropriate content.

One interview participant who has been involved with entertainment since childhood stated that it ‘should be on the production company, as opposed to the parent,’ to ensure that the child has a developmentally appropriate understanding of their role in a scene (A. King, personal communication, February 23, 2024). If the production company hired a CCLS for set, the specialist could help children continue their involvement in entertainment in a developmentally

appropriate manner, preventing misconceptions or misunderstandings of a scene with adult content.

Example of Developmentally Appropriate Explanations on Set

In TV and film, children are often involved in scenes that describe violence. A child life specialist would use developmentally appropriate language to describe the scene and content to the child, and work to advocate for how much information is shared with the child about the content of the show. Scenes of abuse can feel real, and a child actor may respond emotionally to their involvement. Below is an example of a developmentally appropriate explanation for a school-aged child who will be discussing domestic violence that her character witnessed between her TV/film mom and dad.

A CCLS on set would use developmentally appropriate language to explain the scene such as “in this scene your character is being asked questions by a lady whose character cares about what you saw between your pretend mom and dad.” The child life specialist may also acknowledge feelings by saying something like “it’s okay if you actually feel upset- this is a difficult thing to talk about.” They may also point out what is real and what is acting: “the lady who is acting as your mom didn’t actually get hurt, and the man who pushed her isn’t actually mad at her.” The child life specialist may end with offering continued support and opportunities to discuss by saying “I’ll be here when you finish filming this scene so you can tell me how it felt for you.”

Parental Interventions

Both interviews through this IRRB and publicly available resources depict complex family dynamics for the child working in entertainment. Families might shift their living arrangements to accommodate for the young actor’s career; often with family members living in

separate places. Parents act as not just caregivers, but also managers and on-set guardians for the child, and spend much of their time taking the child to auditions, classes, and work. Adding to the stress of the family dynamics are when the child is responsible for the family's finances. This mixing of roles adds stress on the child and family as it may be unclear to the child if the caregiver has the child's best interests in mind when making decisions.

In addition to interventions offered through the pillars of child life, CCLS on set could offer interventions and education that incorporate the caregivers. For children in entertainment, 'it's on the parents what the kid does- if they overwork, what the stressors are... Kids don't know any better if there's no one around to tell them any differently (A. King, personal communication, February 19, 2024).' A child life specialist could add value to the parent and child's relationship by acting as a role model for positive child/adult relationships, and facilitate activities that promote bonding and connection. A CCLS could help the caregiver recognize not only the stressors and pressure the child experiences, but typical developmental milestones for the young actor. Through interventions geared toward the parents of the child actor, child life would aid in mitigating the stress of these ever-shifting family dynamics.

Example of Parental Interventions on Set

One intervention that would be beneficial for parents of child actors would be information sessions on both child labor laws and the rules and regulations of set. Educating the parents and guardians would enable them with the necessary information to advocate for their child when concerned for their child's safety, labor law violations, or regarding appropriateness of the content of a scene or a costume. Information sessions would increase understanding and how to advocate for their child. Child life could help parents and caregivers practice how to advocate for their child, and inform them of whom to speak to regarding concerns while on set.

Conclusion

Children will continue to be involved in the arts. They choose to participate in acting because of their talent and passion, without knowing the potential risks to their development from their involvement in entertainment (King et al., 2024). It is the adult's responsibility to ensure that children's psychosocial and developmental needs are met on set, and to help child actors learn how to cope through the many stressors that can occur while in production. It is apparent through interviews, articles, and documentaries that more needs to be done for children in entertainment, and that individuals trained in child development need to be present on set. A CCLS on set could advocate for the needs of the child, and aid the child in pursuing their passion without repercussions to their development (King et al., 2024). By creating a safe space for children, teens, and their guardians on set, a child life specialist could satisfy this missing piece of the interdisciplinary team of entertainment, and effectively mitigate potential adverse experiences of these young professionals.

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IRRB Approval Form



**Bank Street College of Education
Institutional Research and Review Board**

January 17, 2024

Dear Ms. King,

The IRRB committee has completed the review of your proposal "*Decreasing the Price of Fame: Research on the Effects of Stress on Child Actors in the Entertainment Industry.*" The proposal met criteria for expedited review and does not require our full IRRB board review.

Upon review of the revised proposal, it has been approved and data collection on this study may commence January 17, 2024 and continue through January 16, 2025. If further data collection is required, renewal of the IRRB application will be required by December 16, 2024.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the IRRB at researchreview@bankstreet.edu. We wish you all the best in your research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jessica Charles', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jessica Charles, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Research Review Board
Associate Dean, Research and Innovation

For office use only:

Reviewed by: Jessica Blum-DeStefano

Date: January 17, 2024

Approved by: Jessica Charles

IRRB# 231206

cc:

Jessica Blum DeStefano, Ed.D Leadership Department
Lynne Einbender, EdM Teaching & Learning Department
Nicole Limperopulos, EdD Leadership Department
Mark Nagasawa, Ph.D. Straus Center for Young Children and Families
Ofelia Garcia, Ph.D. Teachers College, Columbia University

IRRB Consent Form

*Decreasing the Price of Fame:
Researching the Effects of Stress on Child Actors in the Entertainment Industry*

Interview Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of this study is to gather information about the professional entertainment industry and the resources available for children and teens on set. I am investigating the stressors involved when working in the entertainment industry, and what available resources there currently are for the young professional's developmental needs, coping, and opportunities for play while working in the entertainment industry.

If you decide to do this, you will be asked to be involved in one interview between January 1, 2024 and March 1, 2024 that will be no more than one hour's duration. This form details the purpose of this study, a description of the involvement required, and your rights as a participant.

- I _____ voluntarily agree to take part in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that the USB with the audio recording of the interview will be placed in a lock box inside a locked closet, and the USB will be cleared after the study has completed.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.