



Show Me the Money!

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When I was growing up and unnecessarily worrying about the future, I remember my father telling me, “Les, just do what you love and the money will come.” Now, he never mentioned how *much* money because his message was about following my heart, rather than dollar signs. He knew before I did that my heart was always my compass. I suspect if you’re reading this, then you share that trait.

There is no denying that the child life profession is entirely mission-driven and passion-based. We specialists do not enter the field because we believe that we will be buying a yacht or private plane with our earnings! Although those possessions would be nice, acquiring them is not our motivating factor. We are confident in the evidence that supports our work and we know that our compensation is measured in non-financial gains, like seeing a child successfully complete an MRI without sedation for the first time or receiving a card from parents thanking you for the compassion you showed their child throughout the

hospital experience. Some of us become interested in the field because of a personal experience with a child life specialist that had a remarkable impact on our life. Some of us pursue the career because we like the idea of helping children through challenging situations. Some of us have the experience and desire to open an independent child life business. Whatever your reason was or is to be a child life specialist, your heart is likely what guides you. Thankfully, having passion for your chosen profession is a contributing factor to fulfillment. But passion alone isn’t enough. Fulfillment also comes in feeling accomplished, successful, competent...AND

in getting recognized for your achievements. What human doesn't love a little praise every now and then?! Recognition can come in the form of financial elevation (i.e., a raise), receiving awards, career advancement, invitations to collaborate with other disciplines, getting more clients (in private practice), etc.

So how does one gain recognition? You might get various answers depending on whom you ask. My answer is rooted in one word: *marketing*. Thoughtful and authentic personal marketing will lead to recognition and ultimately professional fulfillment (passion + recognition). Over the years, in various child life roles and in other careers, I've learned some simple thought strategies in personal marketing that have proven helpful along my path. By sharing them, perhaps they can be beneficial to you.

What do you WANT to do?

Sure, you are multifaceted and multitalented. You CAN do quite a lot. But what do you WANT to do? You are a child life specialist—what is your specialty? What aspect of child life do you love the most? What responsibilities do you wish comprised most of your day? Everyone has different interests, different pace preferences, and different skills. Once you identify yours, then you can position yourself to work within the environment that fits you best. This may take years to develop and will likely change as you evolve. Think of it from a developmental perspective. Do typically developing ten-year-olds play in the same way or have the same interests as they did when they were four? Of course not. So, who says that when you become an adult you must stop growing and learning?! There are MANY directions one can go in child life and burnout can happen quickly when you are overly extended or when you do not identify the role you want to play. The more confident and happier that you are in what you are doing with your time, the more others will recognize your contributions.

Experience, experience, experience!

Pay your dues, practice patience, and get experience. It happens with some frequency that I hear about people wanting to open a private practice having minimal experience in what they plan to practice. For example, I remember a conversation with a student who after graduation wanted to open a private practice focusing

on grief and loss. Yet, her only experience working with families processing grief and loss was during her practicum. She had never held a position where she had to manage her own caseload. Thus, she was rather ill-equipped with the necessary experience to usher families through such a vulnerable process. That has detrimental potential for the family, her career, AND the child life profession at large. We must always remember that we practitioners are not only serving children and families; we are serving each other. One sour apple can spoil the bunch! We must represent responsibly, work diligently, and provide exceptionally in order to collectively advance. Eagerness and excitement are wonderful, but they can be ruined by impatience and inexperience.

Empower the medical team by training them in child life.

You will absolutely make friends and gain more referrals if you share a few of your skills, tips, and/or tricks with your frontline medical team members so that they can connect with families better. Doing this by no means will decrease your position or your value. In fact, it will increase your value. People will want you around because you have demonstrated that you are a team player. Most of your co-workers are already doing more jobs than they care to handle, so they do not want another job. They do, however, want to succeed. You have helped them achieve that goal and that is priceless.

Promote only as much as you can give.

You've committed to empowering the medical team (see above). Now commit to communicating your availability of services accurately. If you present the *Top 10 Reasons to Call Your Child Life Specialist* to your medical team and then are consistently unavailable when they call, then you can imagine the number of times they seek your services will decrease, if not cease. False advertisement is bad business.

Abandon the ego (or at least tell it to be quiet for a little while).

Be willing to occasionally be called a "Play Lady." At the end of the day, your actions will speak louder than

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your title. Additionally, accept that you might not get called to work with every family even if your services would be beneficial. We are trained to think of the whole person, the whole family, and the whole care team when we make decisions in our practice. Unfortunately, not everyone thinks holistically all the time.

Pause before posting.

We live in a world of exposure (sometimes overexposure) thanks to constant technological advances and the human desire to be seen and heard and recognized. While there is great value in connecting with people and sharing your voice, there is equal damage that can be done if you are not thoughtful about what is being shared and how often. Professionally, people are busy and have little time to review even the most necessary world news. Therefore, it is important for you to consider other people's time before you post. Pause to ask, "Is this necessary? Will this be helpful to others?" If the answer to either is "no," then refrain from posting. Hitting "post" too frequently can appear impulsive and can send the message that you are not focused on work. It also could be the reason you are not gaining the recognition you desire. Remember, less really is more.

Think outside the child life box to gain inspiration.

An all-time favorite read of mine has nothing—and everything—to do with child life. *It's Not How Good You Are, It's How Good You Want to Be: The World's Best-Selling Book*, by Paul Arden, is brilliant (the title alone is genius marketing)! Working with children and families is only part of our job; learning how to navigate systems, new job responsibilities, public relations, and general personalities comprise the rest. This quick read offers creative insight into how to think through that navigation.

Ask the horse if it is thirsty.

You know the idiom, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." The same is true with humans. The reality is that you are going to meet people who won't drink the water, so to speak. Maybe they deny your services or maybe they make zero effort to implement the numerous coping strategies you've provided. Before you spend any more time trying to help, accept that they don't want the help and move on. There are plenty of thirsty horses around the corner!

When my dad gave me the previously mentioned advice, he was the age that I am currently. Now that I've had my own life experiences, I thought it necessary to create a new saying based on what he told me: "Follow your heart; be authentic and think creatively. The recognition will come." Ironically, the more I focus on feeling satisfied each day, the less I focus on gaining recognition. Funny how life unfolds. ✨