

Alexis Castro, MS, CCLS, CPT

BACHELOR OF ARTS IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES; MASTER OF SCIENCE IN CHILD LIFE

4 YEARS EXPERIENCE

“There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.”– Mr. Rogers

Can you tell me a little bit about your hospital and the units you cover?

I work in a two-person program at a community hospital. We are a 685-bed facility, which includes the only level 1 trauma center and comprehensive burn center within 15,000 square miles. I cover the burn center, which is comprised of a 10-bed inpatient unit, operating room, two hyperbaric oxygen chambers, and an outpatient clinic that runs 5 days a week. Our burn center is a dual pediatric and adult facility.

What's your typical unit census and about how many patients do you see per day?

My daily census varies greatly, depending on the number of clinic appointments and pediatric patients admitted. I can have as little as a few children coming to clinic, to upwards of 5 children admitted and a full clinic schedule. I also support siblings and children of our adult patients, which can add to my census if needs arise such as preparation before a visit or facilitating engaging family time in the playroom. Lastly, I have a list of children who I monitor to make sure they are connected to burn survivor services, integrated positively back into school, and receiving the support they need.

What does your average day look like?

I work Monday through Friday, 8am to 4:30pm, however that can fluctuate depending on early morning procedures or special events occurring in the later afternoon/evening. The first thing I do when I arrive at work is print copies of the inpatient census and outpatient clinic schedule. The surgery schedules are emailed the day before and I will know if there are pediatric patients scheduled for the next day. Getting an idea of the number of patients and types of procedures that day helps me plan and prioritize. In the morning I prioritize dressing changes happening on the inpatient unit or children going to surgery. Children coming to clinic are then prioritized into the list of procedures for the day.

With that tentative roadmap, I hit the road! Anything and everything can change, so being flexible and adaptive is key. Times for OR can change, walk-in clinic patients can arrive, new patients are admitted, and visiting children on the unit, just to name a few. On the days I have a lighter census, I am using that time to work on other items: QI projects, monthly teen support group, special events, child life initiatives.

What is your favorite distraction item and how do you use it?

For toddlers and preschoolers, I find light up sensory toys effective. Oriental Trading carries fiber optic wands that many children get excited to use. For school-age children I like to use I Spy books to promote mastery in situations that often feel out of their control.

What's the best part about your job?

With part of my role in after-care support services, I love seeing our patients reintegrate back into their communities and thrive. I just returned from working at a camp for burn survivors and enjoyed witnessing the campers participate in an awesome array of activities (horseback riding, archery, ropes course, and go-karts...just to name a few!). They are able to make connections with other burn survivors, feel a part of a community, and build confidence. After supporting burn survivors through difficult medical challenges, it is refreshing and uplifting to witness this part of their success.

What's the hardest part in doing your job?

After walking alongside their recovery journey and witnessing their strength and resiliency, it is difficult to hear about the challenges burn survivors may face back in their community. Bullying is a common experience for children and teens with burn injuries and can have powerful impacts on self-image. It hurts my soul to hear what is said to or about them, as peers focus on outer appearances and miss the characteristics that make each child unique.

What's a facet of your job that people wouldn't expect?

When I share all of my job scope, people are often pleasantly surprised that I facilitate a monthly teen support group for female burn survivors, plan quarterly events, and provide school re-entry support. Our burn center has an active after-care program for children, teens, and adults to provide community and support.

What's something you wish you knew when you started on this unit?

Our role can be emotionally demanding at times and it is important to not forget the value of self-care and work-life balance. This is something that I am constantly working on and it has become even more a necessity working on a burn unit. If I am not refueling my own energy I will not have as much to give our patients and families.

Do you have anything else you'd like to share about your job, tips for students, or thoughts?

Be open to experiences and have a growth potential mindset. Even roles that are not child life specific have transferable skills and experiences that you can apply to making yourself a well-rounded child life specialist.

