



# Smiles from Sarah

Healing Children With Play

## 2025 IMPACT REPORT

Smiles from Sarah is a 501(c)(3) organization



# A Year of Growth, Community & Healing Through Play

What an extraordinary year! In 2025, Smiles from Sarah (SFS) reached new milestones, forged new partnerships, and launched exciting new initiatives including our first-ever Child Life Symposium. By strengthening the support system for Child Life Specialists we brought thousands of moments of joy and healing to children in the hospital. This year's impact is a testament to what is possible when compassion turns into action, and when we carry Sarah's spirit of joy and kindness into every hospital room we touch.

## Our Mission



We are committed to enhancing Child Life programs through therapeutic play, which helps children confront and cope with medical challenges. By fostering quality Child Life connections, we help to transform hospital experiences into moments of joy and healing.

## 2025 PROGRESS BY THE NUMBERS

**24** Therapeutic Play Kit Building Events

Total: 65 Events

**4K+** Therapeutic Play Kits Created

Total: 9.4K+ Kits



**2** New Hospital Partners

Total: 7 Partners

**1st** Child Life Symposium



**\$70K** Direct Funding to Child Life Programming

Total: \$180K Contributed

**5K+**

### Hours of Therapeutic Play With Child Life Specialists

In addition to brightening the day of patients and families, therapeutic play enables Child Life Specialists to forge meaningful connections with children, build trust and elevate quality of care.



[SmilesFromSarah.org](https://SmilesFromSarah.org)

 [@SmilesFromSarahF](https://www.instagram.com/SmilesFromSarahF)

  [@SmilesFromSarah](https://www.linkedin.com/company/SmilesFromSarah)

# Expanding Our Child Life Hospital Partnerships

SFS strengthened and expanded our network of hospital partners, ensuring that more Child Life teams, patients and families benefit from our support.

## Welcoming New Hospital Partners

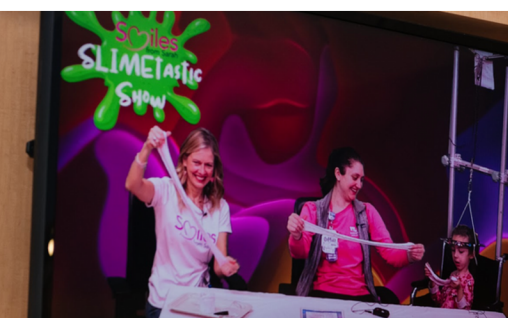
This year, **Cook Children's Medical Center** and **ChristianaCare** joined our SFS family! Both institutions share our deep commitment to patient-centered, play-based support for children navigating medical experiences. By adding these partners, we broadened our reach, our impact, and our ability to meet Child Life needs across diverse communities.

## Connecting Directly with Child Life Teams

A 2025 highlight was our on-site visit to **Boston Children's Hospital**, where we spent valuable time with their Child Life team. Seeing firsthand how our funds, therapeutic play kits, and specialty resources are being used was both affirming and inspiring. These direct connections help us understand evolving needs, identify new tools and programs that make a difference, and shape future support and innovation.

## SFS Day at Children's National

In March, we celebrated our first-ever **SFS Day** at Children's National during Child Life Month. We kicked the event off by broadcasting a live slime-making activity from the hospital's Seacrest Studio, ensuring all patients could participate. The celebration continued in the atrium, where our volunteers and the incredible Child Life team hosted hands-on kit-making stations that encouraged meaningful interaction and therapeutic play. Witnessing the smiles, laughter, and moments of comfort shared between patients, families, Child Life Specialists, and our volunteers was a powerful reminder of why this work matters so deeply.





# Connecting & Inspiring Our Hospital Partners

In November, SFS held our inaugural Child Life Symposium bringing together 29 Child Life Specialists from six partner hospitals for a powerful day and a half of connection, collaboration, and inspiration. Excitement could be felt throughout Children’s National Research & Innovation Campus in Washington, D.C., a perfect setting for learning and community-building.

This special event was brought to life through the vision and leadership of Tawni Rochester, Child Life Manager at Children’s National. Tawni partnered with us to shape the Symposium’s content and purpose, creating a rare opportunity for specialists to step away from daily demands and spend intentional time with peers who truly understand their work.

The enthusiasm from attendees was overwhelming. One specialist shared that the symposium offered “the most meaningful motivation that Child Life Specialists can receive.” Another reflected that bringing teams together experience was. Many left with new ideas for enhancing

in this way felt “both energizing and deeply grounding,” underscoring just how needed and valued this patient support, using Smiles from Sarah resources in more impactful ways, and strengthening collaboration within their hospitals.

Above all, participants expressed gratitude for the sense of community and shared purpose - something they rarely get to experience as a group.

The Symposium reinforced the heart of SFS’ mission: supporting Child Life teams in ways that strengthen their impact. We are grateful to Children’s National, to Tawni for her exceptional leadership, and to every specialist who joined us. This gathering marked an important step in building a more connected Child Life community, and it’s only the beginning!



[SmilesFromSarah.org](https://SmilesFromSarah.org)

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# Direct Funding to Child Life Programming

In 2025, SFS provided an additional **\$70,000 in direct funding** to our hospital partners, enabling flexible support that allows Child Life teams to respond quickly and creatively to the unique needs of their patients. This funding is one of the most valued forms of assistance we offer, giving specialists the power to personalize therapeutic activities, comfort items, and programming in ways that make meaningful moments possible.

This year, teams used SFS funding across a wide range of therapeutic and coping activities, including:

- **Medical Play & Procedural Support** - Tools that build understanding and reduce anxiety, such as medical play dolls, procedure preparation materials, and pill-swallowing teaching kits.

- **Emotional Expression & Mindfulness** - Books, mindfulness tools, and hands-on items that help children process emotions, develop coping skills, and find calm during difficult moments.
- **Sensory Play & Regulation** - Fidgets, sensory toys, and regulating materials that support focus, comfort, and emotional control across all ages.
- **Celebration, Milestones & Normalcy** - Supplies for birthdays, treatment completion, and special moments that help children and families feel seen, supported, and celebrated.

These categories reflect just a portion of the creative ways our partners leverage SFS funds. Thanks to our generous donors, Child Life Specialists are able to deliver responsive, personalized care when it matters most.



# Sarah's Smile Squad

In 2025, Sarah's Smile Squad distributed **more than 4,000 therapeutic play kits** to children across our partner hospitals, each one carefully designed to comfort, engage, and empower patients during some of their most challenging moments. These kits give Child Life Specialists everything they need for meaningful, high-quality play without having to gather supplies, making them an invaluable tool during busy clinical days.

This year, we expanded our offerings with two exciting additions listed below. Together with favorites like bedside volcanos, calming sensory jars, and safe space pillowcases, our kits create moments of joy, distraction, and emotional support for children of all ages.

## Bravery Beads

A hands-on, expressive activity that helps children process feelings, celebrate progress, and create something meaningful during their hospital stay.



## Magic Slime Kits

A sensory-rich, creativity-sparking project that invites children to explore science, express emotions, and enjoy a moment of pure fun.



## What We're Hearing...

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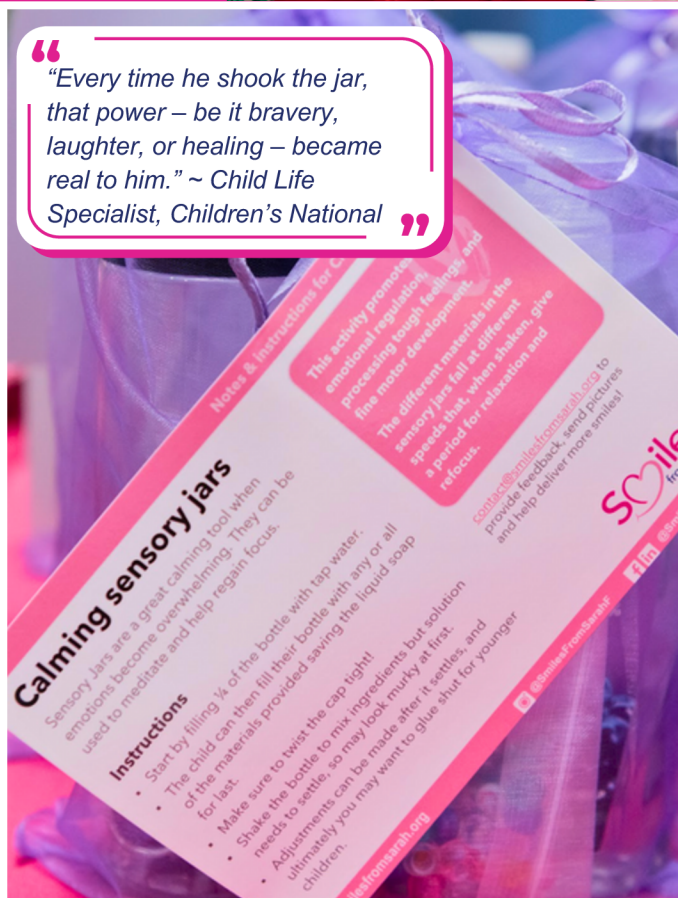
*"The Smiles From Sarah slime kits brought the first smile I've seen in days to my daughter's face. There was even a glimmer of her spicy self that I was fearing was gone after her diagnosis." ~ Parent, Children's Hospital of Richmond*

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*"Every time he shook the jar, that power – be it bravery, laughter, or healing – became real to him." ~ Child Life Specialist, Children's National*

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**Calming sensory jars**  
Sensory jars are a great calming tool when emotions become overwhelming. They can be used to meditate and help regain focus.

### Instructions

- Start by filling 1/4 of the bottle with tap water.
- The child can then fill their bottle with any or all of the materials provided saving the liquid soap for last.
- Make sure to twist the cap tightly.
- Shake the bottle to mix ingredients but solution needs to settle, so may look murky at first.
- Adjustments can be made after it settles, and ultimately you may want to glue shut for younger children.

**Notes & Instructions for Calming Sensory Jars**  
This activity promotes emotional regulation, processing tough feelings, and fine motor development. The different materials in the sensory jars fall at different speeds that, when shaken, give a period for relaxation and refocus.

[www.smilesfromsarah.org](https://www.smilesfromsarah.org) to provide feedback, send pictures and help deliver more smiles!

# Annual Fundraiser Success!

Our annual Sip & Smile Fundraiser brought together 200+ supporters at a beautiful venue overlooking the Washington, D.C. skyline. Guests enjoyed an evening of connection and purpose, participating in our silent auction, raffle, wine pull, and more - all honoring Sarah's legacy. Thanks to the generosity of our community, we **raised \$65,000+** to advance therapeutic play, support and meaningful moments of comfort for children and families facing medical challenges. The event also elevated awareness of the extraordinary work Child Life Specialists do every day.

Our featured speaker, **Sophia DeBacco**, Child Life Specialist at Children's National, shared powerful stories that highlighted the essential role Child Life plays in reducing fear, building trust, and supporting families during their most difficult moments.

*"What Smiles from Sarah does is look through the lens of Sarah, the lens of a family who endured so much time in the hospital, the lens of someone who saw how much of an impact the intentionality of a child life specialist has. They are creating the most intentional therapeutic activity kits I have ever seen...and going upstream, asking child life specialists what we need to make an impact, and they are making it happen."*

Sip & Smile continues to be more than a fundraiser - it is a celebration of hope, healing, and community. Together, we are ensuring Child Life teams have the tools, resources, and support they need to help every child feel safe, understood, and cared for.

Sophia DeBacco  
Certified Child Life Specialist  
Children's National



# Stories That Make Us Smile...

*Our team has truly never worked with a more supportive, thoughtful and intentional foundation! We are so thankful for the carefully created therapeutic kits that supplement our interventions and the monetary donation that allows us to have flexibility to purchase specialized materials and care for individualized needs. Staff is also so looking forward to the upcoming symposium to share and learn from other CLS teams--these opportunities are so valued and rare. The deep understanding of the work of child life can be felt in all that Smiles from Sarah offers and this further encourages us to provide the best possible care and comfort to our children, teens and families.*

**~ Boston Children’s Child Life Specialist**



*A five-year-old boy spent 10 long months in the hospital, making him extremely weak, deconditioned, and facing a poor prognosis. In an effort to bring a bit of joy and normalcy to his hospital experience, I introduced the Smiles from Sarah Calming Jars. He eagerly selected the order of colors, smelled the soap, and decided what special “power” his potion would hold. Every time he shook the jar, that power – be it bravery, laughter, or healing – became real to him.*

*What began as a simple activity quickly turned into a cherished ritual. Each one carried a unique power: bravery, dancing, silliness, sunlight, flying, and healing. One day, during a particularly painful and difficult dressing change, he requested “his “bravery”” potion. Afterward, with a proud smile and a clap of his hands, he exclaimed, “There really is magic in there. I was so brave!” In that moment, the activity became more than play – it became empowerment.*

**~ Children’s National Hospital Child Life Specialist**



*My patient was going through a hard day and had been stuck a few times trying to get an IV. We took a break and went to the playroom to get the patient to calm down and reset. She chose to do the slime kit and we were able to simultaneously make something fun while talking about something hard. During her IV the next time, she squeezed her slime with all of her might to help her be brave. Every part of the intervention was smooth and seamless thanks to Smiles from Sarah. I didn’t have to hurry to put together an activity. I had one right at my fingertips, and it served many purposes for this patient in their time of need.*

**~ Children’s National Child Life Specialist**



# Thank you

To our incredible Smile Squad volunteers, donors, play kit hosts, hospital partners, child life specialists, and beyond - thank you! Your generosity, creativity, and commitment make it possible for Smiles from Sarah to deliver healing, hope, and joy through play. Together, we are building a brighter, more playful future for hospitalized children.

## Thank You To Our Major Supporters!

**Deloitte.**



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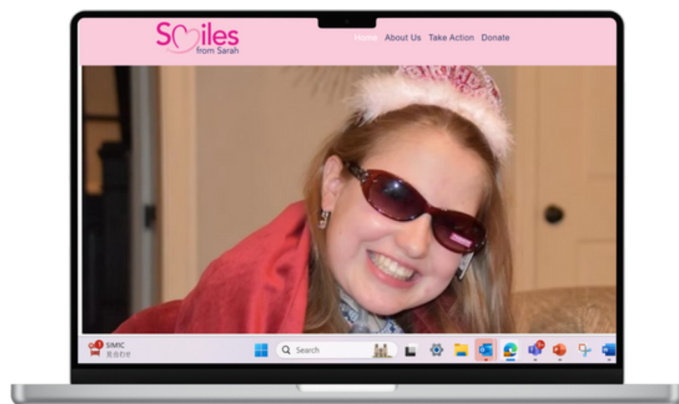
Gayle Severance

Samira Thabet

Jon Wright

## Looking Ahead

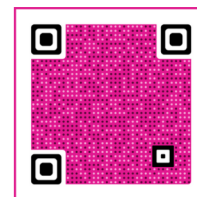
We are excited to continue expanding our reach into the new year through thoughtful growth of our hospital partners, funding Child Life development and facilitating knowledge - sharing opportunities for our Child Life teams. Your support makes our mission possible. We invite you to be a part of our journey and help us bring more smiles to children's faces. Visit [Smiles from Sarah](https://SmilesFromSarah.org) to get involved or donate today!



**We Are Now  
a Non-Profit  
501(c)(3)  
Organization!**

SFS has proudly graduated from being fiscally sponsored by the CORE Foundation to an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit. This milestone reflects our growth and the strong community of supporters who believe in our mission. We are deeply grateful to the CORE Foundation for guiding us through our early years. Their commitment to empowering organizations like ours made this next chapter possible!

**Learn More  
& Donate  
Today!**



Visit us at [SmilesFromSarah.org](https://SmilesFromSarah.org) or scan the QR code to learn more, get involved, host your own therapeutic play kit event or donate today!