When the John R. Oishei Children's Hospital opens later this year, there will be more space in the emergency department, a new helipad and a neonatal intensive care unit with individual patient rooms.

There will also be new spaces for play and relaxation.

The new hospital will have a pavilion in the lobby where musicians and other groups can entertain families. There will also be an indoor garden on the fifth floor to provide a tranquil space for families and patients.

They are among the areas the hospital's team of child life specialists will be able to use as they provide support for children and their families.

The specialists provide a backbone of support focused on helping pediatric patients cope. They also sprinkle in some fun, too, under what often can be anxiety-filled moments.

Tara Young, a certified child life specialist, has been helping patients in that role at the hospital for 15 years. She spoke recently with The Buffalo News about her work and what the new hospital will bring as part of an ongoing series of interviews ahead of the November move of Women & Children's Hospital.

Q: What role do child life specialists play in a patient’s stay?

A: The role is to provide support, facilitate coping and minimize emotional trauma. We encourage normal growth and development for infants, children and adolescents. We promote effective coping through play, education and self-expressive activities. We use medical play, using a doll and the patient uses play opportunities to learn about the hospital experience. They may give their dolly a checkup. They have hands-on play experiences because they learn from their environment through play and it allows them to better understand what is happening in the hospital. We talk to them in a developmentally appropriate way.

Besides medical play, we also do pre-operative play for same-day surgery so they'll understand what the operating room looks like and what they'll see and smell. We never, ever lie at any point.

We give them a choice over the kind of flavor of Chapstick and they can rub a flavor right in their own anesthesia mask. It gives the kids back some control. We give them choices where they have choices. We advocate for the kids. We give them a voice.

Q: What areas do you focus on the most?

A: We wear a lot of hats in the hospital. We make the hospital experience as fun as possible. We allow kids to be kids. We have play rooms on all the pediatric floors. Things come out through play – fears and misconceptions about surgery.
Q: How big of a department is this?

A: There are seven of us. It's recently gone up, and we hope to grow further, so we're excited about the future.

Q: What do you have planned for the day of the big move?

A: We're still planning out the specifics. There's a lot of possibilities. We're going to make the day super fun. When each patient and their family comes in, we'll welcome them and we'll have a lot of fun stuff planned.

Q: What's going to be improved at the new hospital that will enhance your role in child life?

A: There will be a New Era pavilion that is an entertainment space in the lobby. This will provide an opportunity for musicians and any entertainment group to be in that area. It's another space where we can provide fun. Right now, we use our playrooms and we use the cafeteria. This will be an extra space for families, so we're very excited. We'll also have an indoor garden on the fifth floor, where our offices are based. It's more of a tranquil space that families can come for some peace and relaxation. There will be trees, greenery, two-story windows for a lot of natural light. People can connect to nature and the outdoor world.

Q: What might the public not know about child life specialists' work?

A: We also help with the end of life. We help with support for a family and siblings in the event of death. We provide handprints and legacy building with the family. I facilitate a bereavement for kids ages 5 to 18 that had a death of a parent or sibling. This is the way the kids can connect with other kids and see they're not alone. It's a way they can connect with their loved one.

Q: What is the hardest part of your job?

A: Kids are amazing and how they cope and get through the hard stuff, but it's hard to see families going through hard times. And it can be tough when you have to find a way for yourself to cope with everything you see.