SIMULATION
in Child Welfare Training: Moving Beyond Role Play

Capacity Building
CENTER FOR STATES

The innovation of **simulation training** for child welfare workers can assist in developing vital skills and approaches that lead to better outcomes for children and families. A **training simulation** activity aims to mimic the conditions and content of a task that a worker will encounter while on the job.

Health professions education extensively uses simulation training, and simulation training will likely prove useful for situations confronted by child welfare workers for many of the same reasons. Both health professionals and child welfare workers need to develop competence in interviewing and "to deal with the tension of balancing workers' authority and offers of support, providing empathy while responding to resistance and anger, and setting limits in the face of provocation" (Bogo, Shlonsky, Lee, & Serbinski, 2014, p. 89).

Simulation activities can occur as full-scale simulations—almost indistinguishable from real-life experiences—or they can unfold as partial simulations that focus on learning a particular set of skills in a modified environment. Recent studies in the use of simulation-based training in social work have demonstrated its usefulness (Logie, Bogo, Regehr, & Regehr, 2013).

According to recent research, workers may benefit from simulation training because it:

▶ Allows people to practice their skills and receive feedback from trainers and peers without real-world consequences

▶ Encourages trainers to break down a set of skills into manageable subsets

▶ Increases the likelihood that newly acquired skills will transfer to real-life situations because the simulation looks and feels like an actual job experience (Logie et al., 2013)

Simulation Training Program Costs and Benefits

Training the child welfare workforce involves developing participant knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes. Simulation training works best for skill development, as participants have the opportunity to practice skills in the training environment. Thinking about a training's core objectives helps to identify where best to use simulations. The table below outlines some of the costs and benefits of using simulation training to train child welfare workers.

Costs	Benefits
The expense of creating the training environment can be considerable.	Simulation training allows the participant to practice skills in a realistic environment.
A well-executed training simulation takes a substantial amount of training time.	Simulations increase the chance that the skills learned can transfer to the actual job setting because simulations approximate real situations.
Simulations work best when actors play the role of "clients," which may necessitate an additional expense.	Simulations give supervisors, trainers, and others a chance to evaluate the training participant's performance.

Trainer Considerations

Trainers must prepare to facilitate a simulation, as it differs from other types of child welfare worker training. They must have the ability to demonstrate the skills being taught and provide feedback to participants to help develop their competence.

Trainers also should have a contingency plan for dealing with a situation that heads down an unsuccessful path, including the opportunity to pause and coach through the simulation for better outcomes. When designing the training environment, organizers should think carefully about training objectives, as well as budgetary and space constraints.

Organizer Considerations

Simulation training organizers need to ask themselves (and, perhaps, others) a series of questions to determine the type of simulation and training environment they need to achieve their goals. These may include:

▶ How versatile does the space need to be? For example, will participants simulate a meeting in a living room one day and conduct a mock court hearing the next day?

▶ How will participants receive feedback? Will someone record the simulation activity? Will observers attend the simulation? Will observers look through a window or stay in the room?

▶ What are the learning objectives? Clearly defined learning objectives serve as the key to a successful learning experience and often influence the choice of training environment.

▶ Will participants need to be able to identify physical hazards in the environment?

▶ Will participants need to practice addressing environmental issues, such as a television that is too loud to talk over, people coming in and out of the room, or other environmental hazards?

▶ Will participants be expected to interview individuals or families?

▶ Will participants be expected to conduct team meetings?

▶ Will participants be expected to demonstrate one or two skills or a suite of skills?

Training Simulation Components

Learning Objectives

Clear learning objectives help the trainer and participants understand the expectations and increase the likelihood of success. They also will give participants a clear understanding of the simulation itself, for example, whether the simulation will include a demonstration of individual skills or ask the participants to synthesize a variety of skills.

Scenario/Environment

Curriculum writers should write to common field experiences and move on to more complex experiences. Writers should use learning objectives to guide scenario development.

▶ Scenarios should start with clients who are easier to engage and move on to clients who exhibit more complex challenges, such as anger or resistance.

▶ Scenarios should focus on the activity of the learner and the decisions the learner will make throughout the activity.

Participant and Actor Preparation

Organizers of the simulation training should clearly state the simulation's purpose and objectives so participants can effectively prepare. Organizers should give participants at least as much time to prepare for the simulation activity as the length of the activity itself.

▶ Trainers should demonstrate the skills participants will need, including giving and receiving feedback, to reduce participant anxiety.

▶ Simulation actors who will portray the "clients" should receive clear directions regarding simulation objectives.

▶ Training staff should clarify how much character flexibility and creativity are allowed. Simulations work best if actors have authority to take the simulation to its natural conclusions based on interviewer questions and responses.

▶ Actors should receive training to give feedback to participants on the skills that participants demonstrated during the simulation rather than on the outcome of the case scenario.

During the Simulation

Training staff should provide clear instructions to participants regarding the length of the simulation activity, simulation goals, and observer roles. Organizers should set simulation parameters in the preparation phase.

▶ If the goal is training to skill development, encourage participants to stop when they feel stuck and ask for assistance. This leads to enhanced skill development and a more comprehensive understanding of the simulation event.

▶ If the goal is evaluation, clarify that participants must finish the simulation before receiving feedback.

Debriefing

Training staff should encourage participants to reflect on the activity and identify their strengths as well as areas for growth. Observers of the activity (if any) also should provide feedback to participants. This process will allow all of the trainees to practice giving and receiving feedback and begins to teach the practice of peer-to-peer support and coaching.

▶ The debriefing should include concrete feedback to participants on what they did well, as well as areas for future growth and learning.

▶ Observers should tailor feedback to the specific learning objectives described to the participants at the beginning of the process.

Simulation Training Program Examples

To take advantage of the benefits of simulation training, several jurisdictions have begun partnering with local universities to create simulation training programs for child welfare workers. The Capacity Building Center for States included the examples below for informational purposes only; this does not indicate Center endorsement of the programs described.

Illinois

In 2015, the University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS) created the Child Advocacy Studies program, which includes three core courses related to child maltreatment and child advocacy, as well as a Residential Simulation Lab where current professionals and students can gain experience and practice in the skills needed for effective intervention in child abuse and neglect. The simulation training exercises are based on real child abuse cases and enacted in a mock home setting (the Simulation Lab) that allows trainees to practice their knowledge and skills in a supportive environment. Cameras placed throughout the training environment allow for real-time observation and later debriefing.

Illinois partly drove creation of the new program with Illinois Senate bill 653, 2015 legislation that restructured training for child protection investigators and supervisors to include an experiential training component. That year, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) partnered with the UIS to establish a Child Protection Training Academy, which provides professional development for hundreds of child protection investigators and their supervisors from across the State (University of Illinois at Springfield, 2015).

Los Angeles County

In 2015, Los Angeles County DCFS, in partnership with seven area universities, opened DCFS University, a 28,000 square foot facility with classrooms, computer labs, and simulation labs, where child welfare workers can safely learn new hands-on skills for situations they may encounter in the field. The simulation labs contain a number of challenging environments that replicate those workers may see during their home visits, for example, a home where wine bottles, beer cans, trash, and clothing are strewn about the living room. After each simulation training exercise, colleagues and trainers offer valuable feedback that can help child welfare workers hone their skills. DCFS also partners with law enforcement, public health staff, probation officers, and county counsel in the simulation labs to help new social workers learn about different aspects of child welfare (Favot, 2015).

References

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