



Keeping It Real



Capacity Building
CENTER FOR STATES

How Simulation Training Can Support the Child Welfare Workforce

Simulation training recreates real-life conditions to provide a realistic experience for students, trainees, or workers that helps prepare them for real-world interactions (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2015b). Child welfare agencies across the country are increasingly turning to simulation training to expand skill sets, build worker confidence, and strengthen capacity to serve children, youth, and families.

Are You Thinking About Using Simulation Training at Your Agency?

As your agency considers using simulation training as part of your curriculum, think about how it can help your workforce, the different ways it has been applied elsewhere, and the type (onsite or virtual) that might be best for your agency.

Read This If:

You are deciding whether to add simulation training to your curriculum to strengthen workforce development.

Learn More About:

- ◆ How Simulation Training Can Support Your Workforce
- ◆ How Simulation Training Can Be Used in Child Welfare
- ◆ Types of Simulation Training
- ◆ Costs and Other Considerations

Early evaluation data from Illinois suggest that simulation training may improve child welfare worker retention.

Illinois Department of Children & Family Services (DCFS) child protective investigators who did not receive simulation training were almost twice as likely to leave their jobs at 18 months compared to investigators who had received simulation training from the University of Illinois Springfield Child Protection Training Academy (Chiu & Cross, 2019). Program evaluation findings suggest that investigators participating in simulation training felt more prepared, which may have reduced the stress of the job and increased their self-efficacy in their work (Chiu & Cross, 2019).

How Simulation Training Can Support Your Workforce

Just as simulation can help pilots build skills before they fly a plane, it can help child welfare workers safely strengthen their competencies. Simulation training can be a powerful training method for child welfare workers because it (Bogo & Kourgiantakis, 2019; Goulet et al., 2020; Logie et al., 2013):






- ◆ **Allows workers to practice their skills** in an environment similar to the complex situations they will encounter in their practice
- ◆ **Increases worker confidence** when in the field
- ◆ **Offers avenues for receiving feedback**
- ◆ **Encourages trainers to break down skills into manageable subsets**, allowing skills to be built in a thoughtful way that increases the chance of success for participants
- ◆ **Supports workers in transferring newly acquired skills** to real-life situations

In addition, simulation training can be used to help current or future child welfare workers develop a better understanding of what child welfare work entails daily (Jansen, 2018). It also can be used to help families and resource families learn new skills. Watch "Simulation Training: The Benefits" on the [Keeping It Real website](#) to hear about one state's experience.

How Simulation Training Can Be Used in Child Welfare

Child welfare agencies are using simulation training to support a wide range of child welfare practices, shown in exhibit 1.


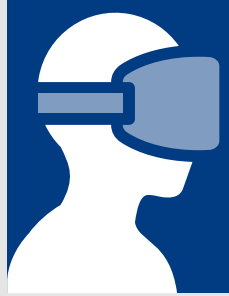
Exhibit 1: Sample Applications of Simulation Training in Child Welfare

 <p>Improve techniques that can help facilitate family engagement</p> <p>(Bogo et al., 2014)</p>	 <p>Enhance workers' skills in conducting investigations and safety assessments</p> <p>(Chiu & Cross, 2019; Reeves et al., 2015; University of Utah College of Social Work, 2019)</p>	 <p>Prepare workers to participate in court proceedings</p> <p>(Reeves et al., 2018)</p>	 <p>Improve child welfare worker safety</p> <p>(Service Access & Management, Inc., & The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center, University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work, 2016)</p>	 <p>Train workers to be more culturally responsive</p> <p>(Leake et al., 2010)</p>
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Types of Simulation Training: Onsite and Virtual

Two types of simulation training are described in exhibit 2 below. Agencies may decide that onsite simulation training, virtual reality training, or a combination best meets their needs.

Exhibit 2: Types of Simulation Training

	<h4>Onsite Simulation Training</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Experiential learning takes place in a realistic physical environment specifically designed to recreate situations that child welfare workers might encounter while in the field.◆ The environment may vary, ranging from one room to an entire mock house.◆ For an example of an onsite simulation training program, take a look at the videos featuring the program in Illinois <add placeholder link>.
	<h4>Virtual Simulation Training</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Experiential learning occurs in a digital simulated environment designed to allow child welfare workers to practice skills they will need while in the field.◆ Each session is delivered electronically, either via computer or other digital device, or through a virtual reality headset.◆ For an example of virtual simulation training, see the "Virtual Home Simulation Video" from the University of Utah School of Social Work.

Onsite Simulation Training

An onsite simulation training program provides a physical environment that simulates real life as much as possible where participants can demonstrate their understanding of key concepts, practice critical thinking skills, and build self-awareness (Kourgiantakis et al., 2019). This may mimic the “first knock on the door” or presenting evidence to a judge.

Onsite simulation training enables participants to (Kourgiantakis et al., 2019):

- ◆ Practice competencies and receive feedback in real time from instructors, coaches, and other participants, which can be used to deepen understanding and improve skills
- ◆ Observe their peers in simulation training, evaluate a colleague’s performance, reflect on what they did well, and identify what could be improved

Virtual Simulation Training

Virtual simulation training takes place in a digital environment. The digital environment can be fully immersive by using a virtual reality headset or partially immersive by working through a video game-like, first-person-perspective program on a computer. In several virtual simulations, a participant “walks through” a home visit and makes decisions or participates in a virtual court simulation. Like onsite training, virtual simulations are fully customizable to meet an agency’s training needs, though development time may be longer than for an onsite simulation.

Virtual simulation training has several benefits for child welfare agencies. It is usually conducted at the participant’s home agency, often using technology that is already in place, so there is no need to travel to a training site. Because it takes place in a digital environment and doesn’t involve risk for any participants, virtual simulation training prioritizes the needs of the learner (Reeves et al., 2015). Added advantages of using virtual simulation training include the consistency of the training received by all workers in a child welfare system who go through it (Davies, 2014) and the potential to complete the training multiple times if needed.

Are You Looking to Move Forward With Simulation Training?

The following discussion of costs and considerations can help start a conversation about what is needed to implement a simulation training program.

Thinking About the Costs of Developing a Simulation Training Program for Child Welfare Agencies

When thinking about developing and sustaining a simulation training program, agency leaders, training directors, and other decision-makers must consider whether the value of the simulation training program to the agency is worth its price tag (Maloney & Haines, 2016). This question is difficult to determine without understanding the needs of a particular agency, but it is worth noting that simulation training options vary from low to high cost and from low to high tech. Neither onsite nor virtual reality simulation training is inherently less expensive; either one can be a cost-effective option. Costs will also be affected by the choice an agency makes to use or adapt an existing simulation program or build one from scratch.

Simulation Training Is Not Role Play

Simulation and role play are both types of experiential learning in which participants build knowledge and practice skills by acting out mock-ups of real-world activities. However, there are significant differences between them.

Role play often occurs as part of classroom training without any special preparation such as sets, props, costumes, or prepared scripts. Participants usually role play together, acting out the parts of family members and child welfare workers and switching as needed. On the other hand, simulations aim to recreate real-world conditions and details as closely as possible, using environments and scenarios that reflect actual cases. In simulation training, participants interact with prepped actors or staff who play the parts of families, judicial or legal staff, or doctors (Hitchcock, 2017).

Because of this difference, simulation training is an immersive experience and more closely replicates the real-world conditions that child welfare workers encounter on the job (Tufford et al., 2018). Both role play and simulation training are beneficial to participants by providing a space for them to practice skills learned in the classroom and make mistakes safely. However, simulation training allows them to do so in a more authentic and realistic fashion (Tufford et al., 2018).

Onsite Simulation Training Costs

Onsite simulation training requires three main sets of resources:

- ◆ **Facilities.** The simulation environment—often called a **simulation lab**—ranges from simple (e.g., a classroom at the agency, a hotel room, or training facility converted into a mock courtroom or living room) to more complex (e.g., an entire apartment or house). In addition, the facility space often needs furniture and props to recreate a real-life environment. For example, to support a caseworker’s risk assessment, the rooms may include potential risks to young children (e.g., broken furniture, pill bottles, or knives in easy reach) and other items to represent family life and protective factors (e.g., kids’ drawings, food in the refrigerator, and children’s books).
- ◆ **Staff.** Most onsite simulations require individuals with whom the trainees interact to practice their skills. Child welfare agencies have hired professional actors, worked with local medical students or standardized patients from medical schools (who are already trained to facilitate simulation training and debriefing), and recruited family and youth volunteers, child welfare workers, or retired court professionals with child welfare experience.
- ◆ **Program and scenario development.** Developing a simulation training to meet an agency’s needs takes time and, often, collaboration among several groups. The process involves identifying and mapping the skills participants develop in the training, creating the scenarios to meet those needs, and exploring where they fit into the agency’s existing training curriculum. For more information, see "[Keeping It Real: Developing Simulation Training for Child Welfare Workers](#)".

The startup costs of an onsite simulation training program vary substantially based on the availability of existing resources. For example, the availability of unused buildings owned by the state that the agency can repurpose for the program or available classrooms in an existing training facility can reduce startup costs, whereas the need to purchase or rent such spaces may increase them. Purchasing audio and video recording equipment for the simulation space so that participants and coaches can review training and offer feedback is another common startup expense. Partnering with community organizations and local universities with social work training programs can provide access to valuable resources for staffing, developing training scenarios, and conducting evaluations, as well as building buy-in for the initiative in the community (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2017).

To see the benefits of simulation training, agencies can start small, perhaps with one scenario that focuses on one or two competencies and one space that can be a single classroom repurposed for the training. Once it is clear that the program is achieving the desired results, it can be expanded to encompass additional training topics or scaled up to serve additional participants.



Example From the Field: Sustaining a Simulation Training Program

Once an agency has implemented simulation training as part of its workforce development curriculum, it is important to consider how the program might be sustained over time. The Nebraska Division of Child and Family Services has sustained and evolved its simulation program for more than 20 years through several agency leadership changes. One of the reasons the agency was able to sustain the program is continuity of champions in the training department. Another is the enthusiastic buy-in of caseworkers, trainers, and coaches, all of whom were quick to see the added value of training that replicates real-life experiences. Finally, the program maintains a working partnership of stakeholders that includes the child welfare agency, the local university, a child advocacy center, and a local theater company that agreed to train actors for the simulations. Leadership investment, staff buy-in, and community partnerships enables Nebraska’s simulation training program to thrive.

Virtual Reality Simulation Training Costs

The startup costs for a virtual reality simulation training program vary and largely depend on the type of technology the program requires to run effectively. For example, if selecting a fully immersive program, it might be necessary to purchase enough virtual reality headsets to conduct the training in a timely manner. On the other hand, if the program selected can be run on a computer, it might not be necessary to purchase additional equipment.

Additional costs might involve purchasing the virtual reality software and/or working with software developers (at universities or private companies) to create the required scenarios if existing ones do not meet agency needs. While some software may be able to be used “off the shelf,” most will need to be adapted to reflect as closely as possible the cultural characteristics of the communities within which the agency operates, as well as the training needs of the agency’s workforce. Partnering with community organizations and local universities to offset startup costs can help agencies set up a virtual reality training program and provide access to valuable resources to support development, technical assistance, evaluation, and other needs.

Exhibit 3 provides an overview of potential startup and ongoing costs of onsite and virtual simulation training programs.

Exhibit 3: Possible Startup and Ongoing Costs of Simulation Training Programs

Cost Categories	Onsite Simulation Training		Virtual Simulation Training	
Facilities	Startup:	Ongoing:	Startup/Ongoing:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Suitable facility or space for the simulation lab ◆ Equipment, furnishings, and objects necessary to recreate a real-life simulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Maintenance of the simulation lab site ◆ Maintenance and replacement of objects, as necessary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Space necessary to conduct the simulation training and/or a debriefing (e.g., enough seating to accommodate a training class or classroom space to debrief afterward) 	
Technologies	Startup:	Ongoing:	Startup:	Ongoing:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Video cameras and recording equipment to enable review and feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Maintenance and replacement of video cameras and recording equipment, as needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Headsets or computers for all participants ◆ Other technology requirements, such as more Internet bandwidth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Maintenance of hardware and software (which may include hiring outside technicians)
Staff	Startup:	Ongoing:	Startup:	Ongoing:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Personnel to write or modify the simulation scenario ◆ Actors to play the roles of family members, court personnel, or other roles in the simulation exercise and training for them ◆ Training for trainers, evaluators, coaches, and participants on how to conduct the training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Actors to play the roles in the simulation trainings ◆ Refresher training for the trainers, evaluators, coaches, and participants, as needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Internal staff and external partners (university or private vendors) to develop the program and create or modify scenarios ◆ Training for trainers, evaluators, coaches, and participants on how to conduct the training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Refresher training for the trainers, evaluators, coaches, and participants, as needed
Costs for Trainees	Startup/Ongoing:		Not Applicable	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Travel costs for participants to simulation lab site 			
Monitoring	Startup/Ongoing:		Startup/Ongoing:	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Modification of existing training curricula to incorporate the simulation training ◆ Evaluation and monitoring 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Modification of existing training curricula to incorporate the simulation training ◆ Evaluation and monitoring 	

Is Simulation Training Right for Your Agency?

The training needs of every child welfare agency are different, and the simulation training program that is right for one agency may not be right for another. Once an agency has identified the areas in which its workers could benefit from simulation training, it can begin to narrow down the characteristics of the right training for them.

Watch "Simulation Training: Starting and Scaling Up" on the [Keeping It Real website](#) to hear about one state's experience with its simulation training program.



Questions to consider to assess the feasibility of a simulation training program:

Costs and Resources

- ◆ What are the estimated startup costs of the program under consideration?
- ◆ What are the potential costs of sustaining the program under consideration?
- ◆ What resources can our agency allocate to get this project off the ground? Are they sufficient?
- ◆ What other funding streams or resource opportunities can be explored?
- ◆ Does our agency have the necessary knowledge and skills in-house to develop this program, or do we need to hire an outside vendor?

Partnerships

- ◆ What opportunities exist to partner with system partners or community organizations on this project (e.g., medical schools, courts, etc.)?

Sustainability

- ◆ What would the agency need to sustain and expand the program over the long term?
- ◆ How will the agency evaluate the program to see if it is working and identify areas for improvement?

Next Steps

Once an agency decides to pursue the development of a simulation training program, the next logical step is to create a team to explore in more depth the type of program that would best serve agency needs. Teams often include a training director and other training staff, as well as stakeholders from other parts of the agency, such as administrators, managers, supervisors and frontline workers, organizational partners, evaluators, and families and youth. Visiting another agency's existing simulation training program can help a team better understand the "feel" and impact of a simulation training experience for child welfare workers, as well as provide an opportunity to ask questions.

"Keeping It Real: Developing Simulation Training for Child Welfare Workers" is a companion publication that provides practical guidance for setting up and running a simulation training program for child welfare workers. Teams can use it to plan the development of a simulation training program from initial design through monitoring and evaluation.

Developing and sustaining a simulation training program is not a one-time event but an ongoing process. As with other types of workforce initiatives, simulation training programs will evolve over time to respond to changes in content and technology, stay responsive to the communities and agency serves, and scale up to serve additional participants or sites.

Keeping It Real Series Resources

You can find more information on the different types of simulation training programs, as well as tips and lessons learned from agencies that have implemented them, on the [Keeping It Real series website](#).

- ◆ **Keeping It Real series videos** illustrate what simulation training looks like and how it can be used to improve worker readiness for practice.
- ◆ **"Keeping It Real: How Simulation Training Can Support the Child Welfare Workforce"** provides background information on why and how simulation training is used in child welfare, then outlines five key tasks for developing and implementing simulation programs.

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