

Assessing an Innovative Method for Training Child Protection Investigators

Program evaluation of the Child Protection Training Academy's simulation program

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Since 2016, the Child Protection Training Academy (CPTA) at the University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS) has collaborated with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to implement the Child Protection Training Academy, which adds an innovative experiential component to the training of new DCFS investigators. This brief reports results of a preliminary program evaluation that the Children and Family Research Center has conducted of the program. We describe what simulation training is, why it could be valuable, what simulation training has been implemented, and what the preliminary data on its implementation and impact suggests about its value for enhancing worker preparation to serve children and families.

What is Simulation Training?

Studies of transfer of learning across different domains of employment have shown that only 10 to 15% of training content is transferred to the workplace (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005), but training can be delivered and supported in ways that enhance transfer of learning. One important factor is trainees having opportunities to practice the skills they are learning (Franke, Bagdasaryan, & Furman, 2008). Experiential learning is an educational method that incorporates skill-based practice into the educational or training experience (see, e.g., Kolb, 1984). An important component of experiential learning is the construction of realistic environments in which trainees can simulate the knowledge or skills related to their work (Gaba, 2004).

Investigating child abuse and neglect is a difficult job and investigators need all the preparation they can get. Given the demands of working with families in child protection, transferring theory to practice is particularly essential. Ideally, the initial training that new child protection investigators receive should give them opportunities to practice the skills they need, such as child safety assessment and family engagement.

To provide experiential learning, a growing national movement is employing simulations of child welfare tasks to train investigators, ranging from role plays to full-scale simulations in specially designed environments such as mock houses. Key components of mock houses include a physical environment specifically designed to simulate a practice environment, practice-oriented scenarios, actors to play the role of family members and allied professionals, well-

prepared training staff, clearly defined learning objectives, and intensive debriefing during the simulation (Capacity Building Center for States, n.d).

How Does the CPTA's Simulation Training Work?

All new DCFS child protection investigators come to the Child Protection Training Academy at UIS for a week at the end of their initial training to participate in simulations of real life situations that every DCFS investigator encounters. A house on the UIS campus was re-designed to simulate a family's home and serves as the Residential Simulation Laboratory. A meeting room on campus is outfitted as the Courtroom Simulation Laboratory, a simulation of family court. Actors from Southern Illinois University School of Medicine's Standardized Patient Program play family members, both in the mock house and the mock courtroom. In the courtroom simulation, retired and active professionals, such as judges or attorneys, play roles matching their experience.

Simulations typically consist of 7 to 8 minutes of role-playing with actors for each trainee, followed by 5 minutes of debriefing. During the debrief, the trainer checks in with the trainee to learn about their experience and assure their well-being. Then the trainer and actors provide feedback while the other trainees watch and learn from their peers. Guided by the trainer, the actors vary the scenarios throughout the day to broaden trainees' experience. For example, one iteration of a scenario might feature a telephone call to the house from a grandmother trying to distract the investigator, an action that did not occur in the same scenario earlier in the day. Each day ends with a group debrief in which the trainees discuss their overall experience of the day, consider what they have learned, and plan what they need to do the next day.

Day One of simulation training begins with an orientation to simulation and then the trainer simulates a supervision interaction. Day Two, titled Knock on the Door, focuses on engaging families. The ability to engage families is central to investigators' mission and underlies every action they take with the family. The simulation begins with the trainee knocking on the door. Their goal is to introduce themselves and gain entry as gracefully as possible. Then they discuss a temporary safety plan, which some families investigated by DCFS need, and preview the steps in the investigation. They attempt to interview persons individually.

On Day Three, trainees do a scene investigation of the house and immerse themselves further in the critical thinking they need to consider evidence. In the simulation, the parents (actors) maintain that the injury resulted from an accident with the child's rocking chair and a pole lamp. Trainees ask the parents to recreate what happened using a doll—part of the training is learning how to articulate this to parents. Trainees observe and measure objects, take photographs, and assess whether parents' accounts are plausible. Following the reenactment, the trainees walk through the house with the parents and check safety; topics of discussion include pill bottles, alcohol, dog feces, dirty diapers on floor, weights in the child's room, a pole lamp in the child's room, long cords on the blinds, and exposed wiring. After the scene investigation, each trainee explains their observations (with photographs) to their supervisor,

played by the trainer. They learn how to document their findings in preparation for court testimony.

Day Four is the courtroom simulation of a hearing regarding the family. Before the hearing, trainees simulate meetings with the parents and explain the purpose and possible outcomes of the hearing, including the chance of protective custody. Trainees then testify in the mock courtroom. Attorneys for and against DCFS question them while the judge and the family listen. The trainer, the legal professionals, and the family provide feedback to the investigators.

Do Trainees Find Simulation Training Helpful?

Post-training survey data collected and reported by the Center for Applied Information Technology (CAIT) at Western Illinois University were available for 154 trainees as of August 2017. Across the sample, for the seven evaluative questions on simulation training, there were 1,052 positive ratings (99.3%) and only 7 negative ratings (0.7%). Although ratings were consistently positive across the sample, they were somewhat less positive for later trainees than for earlier trainees. This needs to be put in perspective, however, given the substantially positive overall ratings and the possible impact of a ceiling effect, since ratings approached the maximum early in the program.

The content analysis of open-ended items on the survey found that trainees frequently volunteered positive comments on the value of simulation training. Post-training survey respondents recommended extending simulation training to a wider range of topics, professionals, and locations. A number of respondents felt like more time in simulation training was needed. In addition to post-training survey analysis, interviews with two DCFS investigators who had completed simulation training allowed the researchers to explore trainees' experience of the training in greater depth. Both interviewees felt that simulation training effectively re-creates real life experience and provides greater understanding beyond the classroom training. Both felt that, as a result of simulation training, they had become more attentive to verbal and non-verbal information from the family and more skilled with parental engagement. Both trainees suggested increasing the frequency of simulation training.

The Child Protection Training Academy is now a standard component of the training of Illinois DCFS investigators. Simulation training is a promising practice that has been enthusiastically received by trainees and deserves further development and testing. Continued research is needed, particularly if the model is extended to new problems, new client populations, different types of workers and different locations. One important question concerns the cost-effectiveness of developing simulation sites in other parts of Illinois to make simulation training more accessible to workers throughout the state. CFRC is now conducting a more rigorous program evaluation examining the impact of simulation training on investigators' experience on the job and on their likelihood of remaining at DCFS versus leaving for another job.

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Related Publications

Cross, T. P., Tittle, G., & Chiu, Y. (2018). *Program Evaluation of Child Protection Training Academy for New DCFS Investigators: Initial Report*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. <https://cfr Illinois.edu/news-release.php?id=994>

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