

Training to Practice: Insights from Simulation Training Follow-Up Survey (STF) for DCFS Investigators

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December 2024

For over six years, simulation training has been delivered to the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) child protection specialists. Over a thousand newly hired professionals have participated. To evaluate the impact of this training, a Simulation Training Follow-up survey (STF) was conducted targeting several key areas: trainees' appraisals of their training experience, the skills they acquired and applied in the field, and their suggestions for future improvements. Existing research on confidence (Chiu et al., 2023) and holistic competency (Bogo et al., 2021) guided the development of skill appraisal questionnaires for child welfare workers who participated in simulation training. The STF survey also included five open-ended questions, allowing respondents to offer detailed feedback on their experiences, which was thematically analyzed to identify common themes and actionable suggestions. We recruited 1,142 DCFS child protection specialists who received the simulation training between 2018 and 2024. The final survey sample included 166 unduplicated respondents, which yielded a response rate of 16%. This research brief highlighted the key findings of the study.

Study Participants

Of the study participants, 78.5% were females, 47.3% were White, 38.4% were Black, and 60.6% were aged 31-50 years old. The majority either held a bachelor's or a master's degree. Around one-third had a degree in Social Work. Almost two-thirds of participants had three or more years of experience in child welfare, but about a quarter had less than one year. About half had worked at the Division of Child Protection (DCP) of DCFS for less than one year, and more than three-quarters had worked with DCP for less than three years. One-third of respondents carried 11–25 cases, and 28.4% carried more than 25 cases in the past 30 days. Most of the respondents (81.8%) still worked in DCP. Of those who no longer worked at DCP ($n = 30$), 76.7% left DCP within 2 years, yet 72.4% still worked in DCFS, either holding a position in a different form of child welfare practice or moving up to an administrative position.

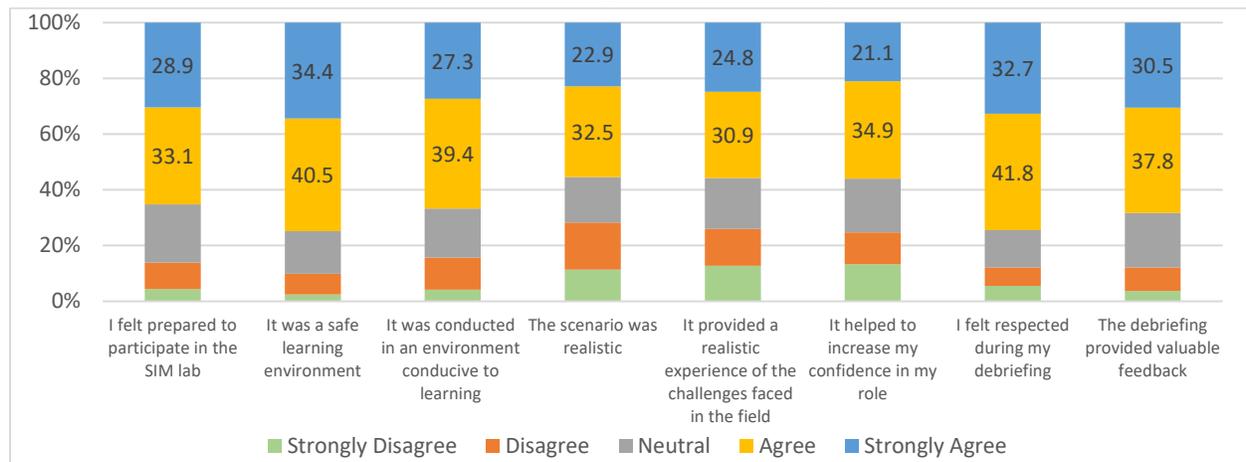
Quantitative Findings from STF

Satisfaction of Simulation Training

Overall, survey respondents expressed relatively high satisfaction with the simulation training, even after some time had passed since participation. The percentage of positive appraisals ranged from 55.4% to 74.9% (see Figure 1). About 75% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that “the training was a safe learning environment” and “they felt respected during

their debriefing,” and over 60% of respondents agreed that “the debriefing provided valuable feedback,” “the training was conducted in an environment conducive to learning,” and “I felt prepared to participate in the SIM lab.” However, only a little more than half of the study sample felt the training was realistic and increased their confidence.

Figure 1. Satisfaction with Simulation Training from STF Survey



Appraisal of Simulation Training Competencies

The survey assessed the impact of the simulation training on holistic competencies, including procedural and meta-competencies.

- Procedural Competency (Skills acquired through didactic learning):** The Procedural Competency scale includes three subscales: rapport-building (five skills), communication and information-gathering (six skills), and safety assessment (four skills). Fifty-seven percent to 70% of respondents rated the simulation training as effective to help them develop the skills mentioned above, while 30% to 43% provided neutral or poor ratings. The average score across all three subscales of procedural competency was 3.6 on a five-point Likert scale, indicating that while the training was generally viewed as useful, there is room for improvement.
- Meta-Competency (Integration of theoretical knowledge with interpersonal skills):** The Meta-Competency Scale includes four subscales: skills in action (five skills), deepening of perspectives on diversity (three skills), managing affective intensity at the moment (five skills), and openness to learning (three skills). Forty-eight percent to 73% of respondents rated the training as effective to help them to develop the skills, but 27% to 52% offered neutral or negative appraisal. The subscales for "deepening perspectives on diversity" (M = 3.4) and "skills in action" (M = 3.5) had lower average scores compared to other areas, suggesting that these aspects of training may require more focus or improvement in future iterations.

Variables that Could Support or Hinder Learning from the Initial Simulation Training

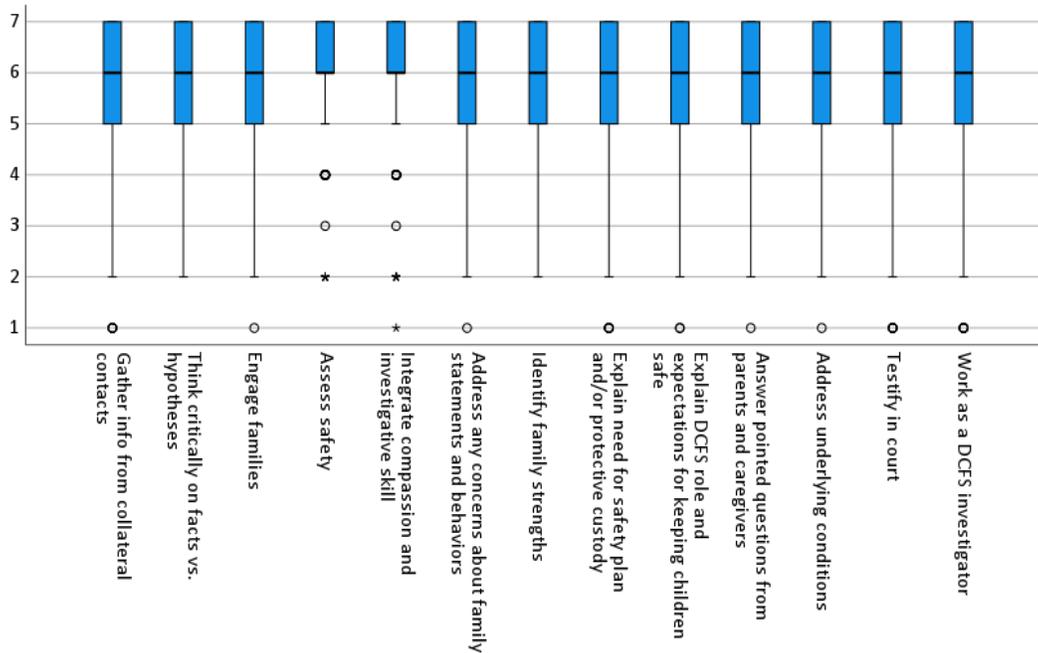
The survey participants were also asked to rate how three influential factors from simulation training supported or hindered them: supervision, caseload, and the checklist of things required by policy. Sixty-three percent of respondents found supervision somewhat or strongly supported using what they learned from the simulation training and 57.9% found the checklist of things required by policy supported it. However, 40.9% of respondents found that caseload hindered the use of what they learned in their initial simulation training.

Trainees' Current Confidence in Child Protection Skills and Possible Explanatory Factors

Respondents rated their confidence in thirteen key child protection skills on a Likert scale from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest). Most respondents felt confident in their ability to perform these skills, with average ratings for eleven skills clustering between 5 and 7, while there were a few outlier ratings as low as 2. Notably, the skills "assess safety and integrate compassion" and "investigative skill" received the highest confidence ratings (between 6 and 7).

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to understand the factors influencing these confidence levels. The analysis revealed that their appraisal of simulation training was moderate to highly related to their current confidence in their child protection. The more they felt satisfied with the training, better prepared for the competency, and better supported at work, the more confident they felt currently. The effect of the variables that supported and hindered their ability to use their simulation training is also highly correlated with their current confidence. Caseload, particularly, was viewed as an obstacle for them to use the learning from the initial simulation training as 28.4% of the respondents carried more than 25 cases, and 33.6% carried 11–25 cases in the past 30 days.

Figure 2. Trainees' Current Confidence in Child Protection Skills from STF Survey



Qualitative Findings from STF Open-Ended Questions

The majority of respondents (62%) provided text comments in response to the open-ended questions.

Key Insights from Positive Feedback on Simulation Training

Over half of the respondents who answered open-ended questions about the training provided positive feedback, indicating that the simulation training was beneficial in several areas. Key positive themes include:

- **Realistic Investigative Scenarios:** Respondents valued the opportunity to practice real-life investigative scenarios, particularly those that involved challenging family dynamics. Many felt that engaging in these situations helped them develop critical skills for working with families.
- **Skill Development:** Trainees highlighted improvements in critical skills such as engaging families, conducting interviews, and assessing needs. Several mentioned how simulation training improved their mental abilities for the work. Respondents also noted an increase in their overall awareness and the development of enhanced critical thinking.
- **Self-Reflection and Confidence:** The training allowed for self-reflection, and many participants reported feeling more confident in their abilities after the simulation training.
- **Effective Facilitators:** Several respondents commended the training facilitators, describing them as supportive, knowledgeable, and skilled in guiding the simulation training.
- **Problem-Based Learning:** Many respondents emphasized the value of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) in their practice, suggesting that this method is particularly helpful in real-world applications.

Key Concerns in Negative Feedback on Simulation Training

Although most participants provided positive feedback, 23.9% expressed strong concerns, primarily related to the following issues:

- **Conflict with Investigator Safety Standards:** Some respondents felt that the training conflicted with DCFS safety standards, particularly in scenarios where facilitators encouraged trainees to engage with actors in "worst-case" family dynamics that they considered unsafe or unrealistic. These participants expressed concerns about feeling unsafe and stressed during these exercises.
- **Inappropriate Behavior of Actors:** A number of respondents described the actors' behavior as inappropriate, which contributed to feelings of discomfort and frustration.

Some trainees believed the interactions in the training were not aligned with real-world practices, especially when it came to managing family dynamics in actual investigations.

- **Unrealistic Scenarios:** Several respondents felt the training did not accurately reflect their real-world job experiences. They felt the scenarios were more extreme than what they had encountered in their own work and were not representative of standard investigative procedures.
- **Challenges with Trainer Interactions:** A small number of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their interactions with trainers, describing experiences where they felt belittled or mocked. There were also concerns about the trainers' qualifications, with some feeling that the facilitators lacked child protection experience or provided incorrect information.

Suggestions for Improving Future Simulation Training

In addition to feedback on strengths and weaknesses, respondents offered valuable suggestions for improving future training:

- **More Extensive Simulations:** Many respondents called for more in-depth simulations and additional training time. They expressed a desire for more comprehensive and diverse scenarios, as well as more hands-on practice, such as incorporating child interviewing techniques.
- **Expanded Scope of Simulation Training:** Some participants recommended expanding the training program to include more simulations and to reduce classroom instruction in favor of practical experience. This could involve covering all necessary steps in an investigation and usage of the SACWIS client information system, which many trainees felt was underrepresented in the training.
- **Realistic and Specific Scenarios:** Respondents suggested that simulations focus on single cases or cover specific aspects of investigations more comprehensively. They felt that focusing on particular steps in the investigative process would provide more clarity and practical insights.
- **Addressing Online Training Challenges:** Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with online training, noting that it was not as effective as in-person simulations. They felt the online format lacked the interactivity and immersion necessary for a valuable training experience. On the other hand, a few respondents highlighted practical obstacles to attending in-person training, such as long commutes and scheduling conflicts with virtual sessions.
- **Timeliness of Training:** A few respondents mentioned delays in receiving simulation training, especially for courtroom simulations, which they felt delayed their licensure process. Timely access to all aspects of the training was noted as an important factor in improving overall satisfaction.

Conclusion

The findings from the simulation training follow-up survey suggest that the simulation training program for DCFS child protection specialists has been largely successful in equipping participants with the necessary competencies for their work. Trainees expressed high levels of satisfaction and confidence in their abilities, particularly in procedural skills like communication and safety assessments. However, the study also highlighted several areas for improvement, including the realism and safety of scenarios, as well as the need for more comprehensive and varied simulation experiences. By responding to these concerns and incorporating the suggestions offered by respondents, future iterations of the simulation training can be enhanced to better prepare child protection specialists for the complex and evolving challenges they face in the field.

Recommended Citation

Kim, Y. Y., & Chiu, Y. L. (2024). *Training to Practice: Insights from Simulation Training Follow-Up Survey for DCFS Investigators*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Acknowledgment

Funding for the evaluation was provided by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. The information and opinions expressed herein reflect solely the position of the authors and should not be construed to indicate the support or endorsement of its content by the funding agency.

Related Publications

Chiu, Y. L., Cross, T. P., Tran, S., & Kim, Y. Y. (2024). *FY2024 Program Evaluation of the Child Protection Training Academy for New DCFS Investigators*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-020-00777-6>
- Chiu, Y.-L., Cross, T. P., Wheeler, A. B., Evans, S. M., & Goulet, B. P. (2023). Development and Application of a Self-Report Measure for Measuring Change During Simulation Training in Child Protection. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 17(2), 239–257.
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