



BEGINNING THE “NEVER-ENDING” LEARNING PROCESS: TRAINING EXPERIENCES OF NEWLY HIRED CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

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BACKGROUND

Pre-service training is an essential component of retaining child welfare workers and promoting child outcomes.^{1,2} Training that does not align with the day-to-day experiences of child welfare workers contributes to feelings of incompetence and influences workers’ decisions to remain in the field.^{3,4} This study uses data from interviews with newly-hired child welfare workers in Florida to consider workers’ pre-service training experiences and their perspectives on what facilitated successful preparation for their work responsibilities.

METHODOLOGY

Case managers (CMs) and child protective investigators (CPIs) were randomly selected from the Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF) and invited to participate in interviews regarding their transition from training to independent caseload. The FSPSF team conducted 38 interviews with participants from across the state who were: 1) CMs or CPIs; 2) had recently completed pre-service training; and 3) maintained independent caseloads. Workers were asked to describe their training and transition experiences and their level of general preparedness for independent casework. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were analyzed for general themes.

FINDINGS

Workers expressed a variety of reactions to their training with almost one-third describing it in universally positive terms ($n = 11$, 29%), one-third describing it in universally negative terms ($n = 13$, 34%), and the largest number identifying both negative and positive components ($n = 14$, 39%). CPIs were more likely to rate their experiences as uniformly positive than CMs (43% versus 12%) largely because CMs expressed that the training content was too focused on CPI tasks. From their experiences, workers identified five attributes of pre-service training that were meaningful to their transition to independent work: 1) structured, non-redundant content relevant to their positions, 2) interactive content delivery, 3) practice with job responsibilities, 4) practice with system protocols, and 5) recognition of a never-ending learning process. The sections below describe each theme and suggest ways to promote meaningful pre-service training experiences.

STRUCTURED RELEVANT TRAINING CONTENT

Workers identified that training content was central to their success, and they desired structured, new, non-redundant, and relevant information. Workers were evenly split on whether they felt the training provided relevant content. A structured schedule of training helped workers see the “big picture” and connect training content, exam material, and field responsibilities. Some workers with child-welfare education backgrounds or prior professional experience felt the content was a “refresher” and desired additional field experiences to expand their current knowledge. Workers commonly expressed that training content focused on “theoretical” foundations at the expense of procedural knowledge or focused too heavily on job tasks that did not align with their positions.

INTERACTIVE CONTENT DELIVERY

Almost universally, workers wanted an engaging training atmosphere that gave them a “feel” for the job rather than the overuse of presentation slides and trainer “scripts.” Approximately one-half of workers described interactive training experiences with fewer workers describing primarily lecture-based experiences. Workers who reported lecture-based experiences requested more interactive training segments to “break up the monotony” and were disappointed when they did not have the opportunity to apply material in “what-to-do situations.”

PRACTICE WITH JOB RESPONSIBILITIES

Workers wanted to practice job responsibilities while in training and desired classroom practice opportunities with case scenarios that exposed them to “the full, the realness, the rawness” of child welfare work. Workers also wanted more field experience. Successful field experiences typically contained three characteristics: finding a certified worker to shadow, completing job tasks in the field (as opposed to clients not being available), and discussing the completed job tasks with the certified worker. Multiple workers mentioned the need for them to be “aggressive” or “hustle” to find a worker willing to let them shadow.

PRACTICE WITH SYSTEM PROTOCOLS

Workers desired and appreciated training practice with case documentation, specifically with the necessary computer software systems. Most workers who discussed system protocols identified practice with protocols as a central missing training component. Workers recognized that proper case documentation was a required element of the “nitty gritty” of child welfare work. They desired guidance with navigating the computer software documentation system and what makes a “good note versus just satisfactory.”

NEVER-ENDING LEARNING PROCESS

Regardless of the quality of their training experiences, workers generally recognized they could never be fully prepared for child welfare work when they transitioned to independent caseloads. Several workers identified the unpredictability of their work and diverse needs of their caseloads as a primary reason for the need for continuous learning in their jobs. Workers mentioned the importance of their supervisors, mentors, and co-workers as supports for continuous learning. Lack of support for workers made the transition from classroom to casework difficult. These workers felt vulnerable and reported only receiving instructions after making mistakes. Those without support often felt “alone” and discouraged.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings yielded five main implications to enhance pre-service training content and delivery.

- Workers want structured classroom and field training tailored to their position (i.e., CPI, CM), focused on real-world job tasks and case documentation, and with less emphasis on theoretical foundations of child welfare. Evaluating the curriculum and training structure to ensure that adequate attention is given to each role’s future job tasks is needed. This is particularly true when CMs and CPIs are being training together.
- Workers valued trainers who 1) incorporated a variety of learning modalities; 2) limited lecture-based, scripted delivery of content; and 3) facilitated interactive, discussion-driven training sessions. Anonymous evaluative feedback from workers focusing on these areas could improve future trainings.
- Workers want a step-by-step manual and checklist for accomplishing key job responsibilities to guide them during the transition to independent casework. To promote consistency, administrators could collaborate with supervisors and frontline workers to develop a manual and checklist. These resources may help workers see the “big picture” in their work, a description that several workers missed in their trainings.
- Variability in workers’ academic or practice backgrounds is inevitable. Alternatives such as exemption tests could offer an opportunity for workers with more incoming knowledge to test out of training components, perhaps in exchange for more procedural practice experiences or shadow time in their agencies.
- Workers identified the need for classroom training to extend into their agencies; the never-ending learning process means that expecting newly-hired workers to work independently is unrealistic. Proactive agency policies that allow experienced workers to mentor as part of their job responsibilities, in exchange for reduced caseloads or other benefits, could be an important investment in increasing worker wellbeing and retention.

¹ Antle, B. F., Barbee, A. P., & van Zyl, M. A. (2008). A comprehensive model for child welfare training evaluation. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 1063-1080. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2008.02.002

² Mandell, D., Stalker, C., de Zeeuw Wright, M., Frensch, K., & Harvey, C. (2013). Sinking, swimming and sailing: Experiences of job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion in child welfare employees. *Child & Family Social Work*, 18, 383-393. doi: 10.1111/j.13652206.2012.00857

³ Mor Barak, M. E., Nissly, J. A., & Levin, A. (2001). Antecedents to retention and turnover among child welfare, social work, and other human service employees: What can we learn from past research? A review and metaanalysis. *Social Service Review*, 75, 625-661. doi: 10.1086/323166

⁴ Ellett, A. J., Ellett, C. D., & Rugutt, J. K. (2003). *A study of personal and organizational factors contributing to employee retention and turnover in child welfare in Georgia: Final project report*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia.

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