An Assessment of child welfare: The value of training and family engagement

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An Assessment of Child Welfare: The Value of Training and Family Engagement

Abstract
Child maltreatment in the United States continues to be one of the nation’s most serious social problems. Child welfare practice is intended to ensure the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and families. One of the ways child welfare systems can achieve positive outcomes for vulnerable children is to utilize the most current best practices in training, focused on family engagement and strengths-based empowerment. To this end, child welfare training programs that are family centered, culturally competent, and focused on preventing out of home placements, should be implemented nationwide to better prepare child welfare agencies to meet the needs of vulnerable families. As child welfare workers learn to successfully engage families using the core helping conditions of genuineness, empathy and respect, families will feel empowered to make needed changes in their lives that provide safety, permanency and well-being for their children. This research is a review of the literature on current best practices in training for child welfare agency staff, specifically training on engaging families, and the impact it has on child welfare outcomes.

Introduction
Over the past 110 years, policies and social change have shaped child welfare and evolved into the system that exists today. Prior to 1874, laws protecting children from abuse and neglect did not exist. The first legal intervention against child abuse was brought under the sponsorship of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Reilly, 1999). Subsequently, major movements towards establishing orphanages, institutions, foster care, and adoptions set the tone with the belief that children were better off away from their parents (Fraenkel, 2006). However, recent studies lend support to the importance of keeping families together, avoiding removal, and engaging families through genuineness, empathy, and respect (Nevada Partnership for Training for 2011). It has been 31 years since policies were initiated to prevent out-of-home placements and to affect reunification, where possible. Although there have been some successes in reducing the number of maltreatment cases in the past decade, in some states, rates of child abuse and neglect are increasing. On the other hand, efforts have been made to decrease the number of children in the system, prevent foster care drift, and maintain the family unit (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration on Children Youth & Families, 2009).

Data and Statistics

National Statistics

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Types of Child Abuse in the Nation in 2009

- Neglect: 78.5%
- Physical Abuse: 17.6%
- Sexual Abuse: 9.5%
- Psychological Maltreatment: 9.6%
- Medical Neglect: 2.4%
- Other: 1.6%

Children Maltreatment Fatalities in the United States

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<tr>
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Types of Child Abuse in Nevada in 2009

- Neglect: 71.5%
- Physical Abuse: 27.9%
- Sexual Abuse: 7.8%
- Psychological Maltreatment: 2.9%
- Medical Neglect: 1.7%
- Other: 1.5%

2010 Nevada Children's Report Card

Overall Grade: D-

- 2010 Summary of Grades
  - Safety and Security of Children in 2010: C-
  - Child Maltreatment: C-
  - High School Violence: C-
  - Dating Violence: D+
  - Fear of Violence: F
  - Child Deaths: D


Child Maltreatment Fatalities in Nevada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Rate</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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Children's Advocacy Alliance (2006-2008). National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank the Nevada Partnership for Training for sponsoring this research and specifically those at the Nevada Child Welfare Institute, MHRM, CSLE and Training Coordinators for the Nevada Partnership for Training and School of Social Work at University of Nevada Las Vegas. Specifically, I would like to thank Amy Turner, Master's Graduate Student and Lauren Foster-Rowe for assistance with research and data collection. Without their support and guidance this research would not have been possible.

Literature Review

❖ Training within the child welfare profession is an important component in achieving systemic goals of safety, permanency, and well-being. Additionally, the engagement of children and families in child welfare is deemed crucial in achieving positive outcomes through clients’ full participation in case planning (Nevada Partnership for Training, 2011).

❖ “Child welfare supervisors and workers are expected to be highly skilled practitioners who can implement ethical and culturally competent practices that result in improved outcomes for children and families. However, current practice indicates it is difficult to actualize these roles. Additionally, it may not be feasible to train and supervise workers to find these attributes in one individual.” (Social Work Policy Institute, February 2011).

❖ Training is one of the major systemic challenges to supervision and casework in child welfare. Research indicates a lack of adequate training and competency for workers and supervisory roles, and inadequate knowledge of the changes in population and communities they serve. Along with these challenges, child welfare workers have insufficient time to attend training or to remain current with the research literature (The Social Work Policy Institute, 2011).

❖ “The value of training and professional development in a child welfare agency cannot be overstated.” The Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) recognizes the significance of training in improving the equity and efficacy of child welfare organizations and practice that are making new strides towards achieving better outcomes for children and their families (Kanak, Baker, Herz, & Macciolek, 2008).

❖ The 2009 Child and Family Services Review found that the state of Nevada needs improvement on involving children and families in case planning and providing ongoing training for staff that addresses the skills and knowledge base needed to carry out their duties. As part of Nevada’s Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), goals were set to incorporate training in order to enhance the capacity of child welfare staff to effectively engage children, youth, and families in case decision-making. Training was identified as an avenue in which to effectively change child welfare agencies’ culture and place emphasis on relationship-based practice, crisis intervention, and placing children with families while engaging in the behavioral change process (Nevada DCFS: Final Report, 2009; Nevada Division of Child and Family Services: Performance Improvement Plan, 2010).

❖ Family engagement is extremely important to the child welfare system. Training aims to prepare workers to engage with both voluntary and mandated families. By joining with families through engagement, workers will be more likely to develop case plans that reflect families’ strengths (Depamphilis & Salus, 2003) and help to avoid child removal. In many ways, the child welfare system is particularly reliant upon the concept of engagement, for without it, there is less likelihood that families will want to work with the system.

❖ Research suggests that well-developed trainings especially those offered through partnerships with universities are most effective in teaching child welfare worker and supervisor trainees the skills they need to achieve child welfare outcomes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000).

Conclusion
Child welfare training prepares workers and supervisors to engage with children and families, to be culturally competent, and to utilize the skills of empathy, genuineness, and respect in daily practice. By utilizing these tools, workers can increase stability in the home and decrease maltreatment and fatality rates in Nevada and across the country. Supervisors and workers assume many roles when working with children and families, therefore training provides additional research to support the actualization of roles. Nevada currently participates in a child welfare training program which focuses on enhancing the abilities of child welfare workers and supervisors and creating an environment that supports relationship building with clients.

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