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a comprehensive look at a prevalent child welfare issue

The Evolving Role of Technology in Child Welfare

INSIDE

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From the Editors

Welcome to the latest issue of *CW*360° from the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) at the University of Minnesota. As technology continues to rapidly transform every corner of society, it has become impossible to ignore its expanding presence in child welfare. From artificial intelligence to social media platforms, mobile apps to virtual reality, technology is reshaping the way child welfare professionals work and engage with families.

In this issue of *CW*360°, we explore the multifaceted and evolving role of technology in child welfare. The promise of technology lies in its ability to enhance our practice—whether through virtual reality simulations that provide immersive training for caseworkers, or apps designed to better connect families with critical resources. As child welfare professionals, we must consider not only the vast potential for positive change but also the challenges and complexities that technology introduces to an already demanding field.

Throughout this issue, we delve into the use of cutting-edge innovations such as virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI), and how they are increasingly integrated into training, assessment, and case management. Virtual reality, for example, is becoming a powerful tool for simulating real-world scenarios that help train workers to handle difficult and sometimes dangerous situations in a safe and controlled environment. AI has the potential to support data-driven decision-making, identifying trends and risks that might otherwise be overlooked.

We also look at the role of social media and technology platforms in both supporting and complicating the work of child welfare. On one hand, social media can be a vital tool for outreach, creating communities of support for families and workers alike. On the other hand, it poses new risks related to privacy, security, and the ethical challenges of virtual interactions. Apps designed for case management, family support, and worker well-being hold great promise, but their effectiveness depends on equitable access and careful implementation.

As we examine these emerging technologies, we also consider their impact on the workforce. Technology offers the potential to reduce administrative burdens, streamline communication, and improve access to services. However, it also requires a new skill set from workers, along with the need for ongoing training and support. The digital divide remains a significant issue for both families and workers, and these gaps must be addressed if technology is to realize its full potential in the field.

In this issue, we invite you to explore the ways in which technology is already reshaping child welfare practice. Throughout the overview section, we offer a broader understanding of the latest trends and research. The practice section provides expert insights on implementing these technologies in ways that are practical, ethical, and inclusive. And in perspectives, we hear from a range of voices—including social workers, researchers, and advocates—on how technology is influencing their work and lives.

Lastly, we'd like to sincerely thank this year's contributing authors. We hope readers will enjoy and learn from their submissions. This issue of *CW*360° includes a list of helpful resources as well as a discussion guide to further support knowledge and growth. You can also find a full list of the article citations on our website at z.umn.edu/CW360_2025.

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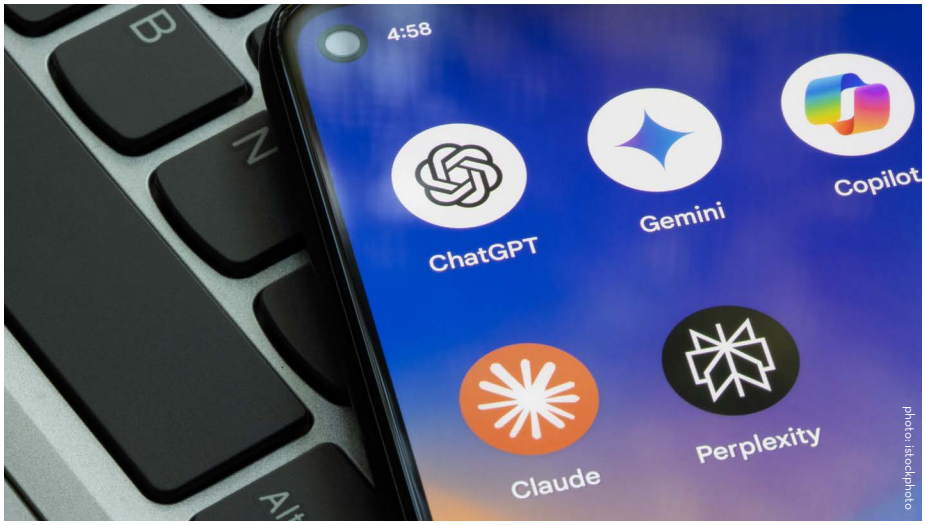
Child Welfare Intelligence? Opportunities and Challenges of Artificial Intelligence Tools in the Child Protective Services Arena

Lauri Goldkind, PhD & Adrienne Holmes, MSW Candidate



Child protective services and artificial intelligence (AI)? Can high-powered digital tools support families and children? We think they can, when used with care and forethought. No commissioner or supervisor wants to read about a career ending incident caused by a computer, and the best way to avoid digital mishaps and maximize the potential of AI tools is 1. Be clear about AI use policies and 2. Offer staff professional development opportunities to try AI tools out and engage critically in thinking about AI use.

Pro-active AI use policies and practice guidelines can help leadership and staff safely manage the use of LLMs and other AI tools, in service of protecting workers and families.

Generative AI like ChatGPT, Gemini and Claude, called Large Language Models (LLMs) may feel new, but computer scientists have been working on building computer "intelligence" since the 1950s and 60s. These systems use masses of data, think of all of the works of Shakespeare, plus all of Wikipedia, Reddit and the New York Times, plus more, to "train" computer algorithms or formulas to work. In many more corporate or commercial fields, such as retail operations, human resources, or sales and marketing, artificial intelligence has been used for decades. However, in child and family protection agencies, AI systems have not been as widely used, for all the reasons we can imagine. AI systems have been accused of making biased decisions, for accelerating existing structural inequalities, and for "hallucinating" or delivering the wrong answers. In our settings, where families' and children's safety and security is on the line, caution in adopting AI tools is appropriate and necessary.

The biases baked into predictive systems are well documented, and newer AI tools, like ChatGPT, also pose risks to workers and the families they serve. However, the newer LLMs which can process and output text, audio, images and video, offer significant potential for improving internal operations of child welfare agencies and systems, but should be deployed only with great care and internal oversight. This article describes what AI is, offers examples of the potential AI use cases, as well as examples of unsuccessful AI deployments, ending with suggestions for AI governance in child protection. Pro-active AI use policies and practice guidelines can help leadership and staff safely manage the use of LLMs and other AI tools, in service of protecting workers and families.

What is AI?

AI is not one specific digital tool, it is a range of computational processing tools that encompass everything from computer vision, think self-driving cars, to sensing technologies, think automatic doors, to LLMs, think ChatGPT (among others). These tools use massive amounts of all kinds of data including videos, text, photos and songs to make probabilistic decisions about what data comes next. Traditional or narrow AI uses big sets of existing data to make predictions about what will happen in the future. These kinds of systems have been used in child and family protection systems for the last ten years, most famously in Allegheny County, PA. Newer Generative AI tools, like LLMs are designed to create new data. While the answers from predictive analytic models are designed to be reliable, or report the same response, every time the model is used, Generative AI models are designed to produce new responses, so it would not be surprising for a generative digital tool to create a different case note every time it was given the same data. LLMs also can make mistakes. Hallucinations are the cute name given to the wrong answers that an LLM can potentially deliver. LLMs work by probabilistically linking sequences of words together. Sometimes, a model can link the wrong set of words. For example, when the New York City Mayor's Office released a chatbot delivering fake information on the City's small business regulations (Offenhartz, 2024).

AI in Your Agency?

Generative AI and LLMs are so new that there are no evidence based practices, and the technologies are changing all the time. There are, however, promising practices and policy guidance to help agencies assess and guide staff on AI use. Leaders and supervisors are wise to get ahead of their use and application. Units where AI may be right for an agency include compliance and evaluation offices. For example, an LLM can draft "low stakes" documents such as executive summaries, request for proposals, and impact reports, in seconds. In the marketing and outreach arena, communications staff might use a Generative AI to draft newsletter articles, social media posts, program descriptions, commissioners remarks and speeches, and press releases. Another application where AIs have significant potential is in training and staff development. There are a myriad of places where even a free LLM offers the opportunity to: create instructional materials, conduct role plays, create PowerPoints, but also to summarize academic materials and engage case workers in new ways.

For most of us, digital literacy and AI literacy in particular was not a part of our formal educational training. There is a great opportunity for staff and leadership to learn together about what AI can do, what it shouldn't be doing, and how to think constructively about adopting AI tools. Offering staff guidance on AI use and its limitations so everyone understands how a question should be developed ("prompt

engineering"), what response to anticipate, and how to evaluate its appropriateness and accuracy, can help to mitigate potential risks. Many of us in the academic community are eager to help our local partners to learn about these tools and to provide resources.

AI Pitfalls, Potholes and Problems

All AIs are designed to synthesize massive amounts of data toward solving a problem. In the past there have been implementations like: taking twenty years of past hotline call data and using it to immediately predict if a call should be screened in or out of the system, or using masses of case records to understand the risk of possible abuse, in seconds. While these algorithmic strategies have the potential for avoiding the human biases in hotline safety screenings, we also know that historic decision making in child welfare settings has been tainted by humans biases, including racism, and bias against poor families, leading to scenarios where Black and Brown families were screened into the system at twice the rate of white families (Emanuel, et al., 2023). If we are using these historically biased data sets to make future predictions, they also will bring forward old biases. For example, in 2017, Illinois stopped using a predictive analytics tool to make triage decisions for its risk assessment scoring tool for managing hotline calls. The system, called Rapid Safety Feedback, was meant to assist hotline operators with decisions on screening families into or out of a child welfare case. Instead of serving as a support, the system made faulty decisions, screening in low risk families, and missing many high risk cases (Cournoyer, 2021).

Most recently, we've been hearing all about LLMs, and maybe ChatGPT specifically. It uses advanced computing power to create images, text and audio. One of the biggest innovations in these LLM systems is how they can respond to a "regular question." For instance, you can enter some basic facts into ChatGPT or Gemini and in 10 seconds it can give you a curriculum for professional development on motivational interviewing, including suggested readings. For workers unfamiliar with AI tools, these models can seem like magic. But the mistakes they can potentially make come with a high price tag. Last year, a case worker in Australia was fired for using ChatGPT to write their case summaries. The worker had entered personal identifiable information (PII) into the chatbot, disclosing important and identifying details of the case into a proprietary software (Taylor, 2024). The companies that build and support these models are a billion dollar industry and they train the AI tools with data. Yes, the models get smarter the more we use them, but they are basically taking the information we enter and learning from them.

AI Governance and Policy

While there are real risks associated with making use of Generative AIs, the upside potential is undeniable – especially for those of us in under funded and staff strapped agencies. Using an LLM like a very quick intern can be a huge boost for productivity and efficiency, making time for the human work which staff should be focusing on. Lower stakes tasks – meaning those that don't involve client data or personally identifiable information – called "PII" in the AI world – can be automated with oversight and guardrails. Training and staff development are a good place to start if your agency is thinking about how to approach artificial intelligence. Bringing staff together to learn about what AI is and how it could be applied in practice can help to demystify these new tools, potentially celebrating people who are already making use of them in their workflows, to start a conversation about how as an agency these systems could make sense.

Once your agency has a basic level of AI literacy, an AI use policy is a concrete next step. Establishing a policy for how and when workers can use generative AI models, publishing communication about that policy in training, and regular communication will help to support workers and also make clear what the limitations of AI use are in your setting. Policy guidance and model policies for AI in human services offer agencies tangible support for how to use AI tools in practice. Good resources include: the Trustworthy AI (TAI) Playbook from the U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES (2012), Unicef's Policy guidance on AI for children (2021) and the recent AI Plan for State and Local Governments, (HHS, 2024). AI can be infused safely, ethically and responsibly into the complicated systems of child welfare agencies, we look forward to hearing about how it goes.

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Fostering Responsible Tech Use: Balancing the Benefits and Risks Among Public Child Welfare Agencies

Maddy Dwyer, Policy Analyst, Equity in Civic Technology

Across the country, child welfare agencies work with over 390,000 youth in foster care each year by temporarily placing them in foster homes, facilitating adoption if parental rights are terminated, and managing their cases (Ford & Hetro, n.d.; Children's Bureau, 2023). These agencies are tasked with the high-stakes responsibility of ensuring the safety and well-being of youth in their care, but face many challenges, such as lack of coordination across agencies that work with foster youth, insufficient or biased data about a child's environment, and heavy administrative burdens that contribute to high rates of social worker turnover.

To address these issues, child welfare agencies are using, or considering, data and technology systems including artificial intelligence (AI) tools. However, despite the promises that data and technology provide, these systems risk entrenching racial and socioeconomic disparities, stigmatizing foster youth based on social and academic achievement, and compromising the privacy and security of personal data. This article, based on the Center for Democracy & Technology's (CDT) detailed report, highlights the ways that data and technology can mitigate some of the problems that child welfare agencies face, while also recognizing their inherent risks.

How Data and Technology, Including AI, Can Help Child Welfare Agencies Better Serve Foster Youth

There are a number of stated goals in incorporating data and technology, including AI, into the foster care system, namely:

Data sharing and portability can lead to better coordinated care. Inter-agency data sharing and portability can support youth in foster care who have complex physical and psychological health issues (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021; Chuang & Wells, 2010). Improved coordination allows caseworkers and foster homes to have access to necessary information, even as the children they work with/care for change locations. One example of a solution to this issue is automated, secure data sharing between state child welfare agencies and Medicaid, which covers over 99 percent of foster youth (Children's Defense Fund, n.d.).

Data sharing can support timely school enrollment and appropriate class placement. Foster youth switch schools more frequently than other children. Due to their high mobility, youth in foster care may experience changes in academic expectations, like differences in graduation requirements or course offerings, along with incomplete or delayed transfer of records that result in late enrollment or incorrect course placement (Barrett & Berliner, 2013; Laird & Quay de-la Vallee, 2019). Robust, secure data sharing between child welfare agencies and state education agencies can enable better communication and ensure that foster youth are receiving the educational support they need (The Data Quality Campaign, 2017). With this shared knowledge, child welfare and state education agencies can work together to facilitate proper class placement and enrollment based on a foster child's specific needs.

Effective technology and data use can reduce caseworker burden. Technology such as chatbots and robotic process automation (RPA) is being touted as assisting with easing some of caseworkers' workload. Just as other public agencies have begun to leverage chatbots with generative AI capabilities, child welfare agencies could adapt chatbots to connect foster care families to proper resources faster than a caseworker might be able to (Desouza & Krishnamurthy, 2017). For example, a foster parent who is curious about what financial resources their state or locality might be able to offer them can ask a chatbot, which can provide them with links to benefits programs they may be eligible for. RPA can also potentially assist with time consuming data entry so that caseworkers can spend time on more productive tasks, such as interfacing with families (Wroblewska, et al., 2023). An RPA can, for example, trigger an alert to a caseworker that they need to schedule a check in with a specific family or can notify them that a foster child was truant

> Efforts to use data must account for biases embedded in that data, which is even more important if it is incorporated into algorithmic decision systems. In this case, algorithmic bias — the tendency of algorithms to make decisions that systematically disadvantage certain groups — may occur because pre-existing societal prejudices are baked into the data itself.

photo: istockphoto

from a class. RPA may also perform tasks such as triggering timely notification for foster homes, which can include when new support programs become available (Northwoods, 2023).

Assist and expedite in caseworker decision making. In addition to reducing administrative burden, emerging uses of data and technology claim to assist and expedite caseworker decision making through technology like predictive risk modeling (PRM). PRM is a form of data analysis that purports to use historical data to understand relationships between many factors to estimate a level of risk for a child. Both the factors that are considered and the definition of risk are determined by those that develop the model (Whicher, et al., 2022). For example, PRMs can assign risk levels, which can be used in conjunction with the caseworker's knowledge of the case, helping to make more informed decisions about which cases need to be prioritized. This technology may also prevent children whose families otherwise might not have been investigated from "slipping through the cracks" (Hurley, 2018). As discussed in more detail below, the complexity of PRMs and their potential to affect crucial decisions means that risk assessment and mitigation is particularly important.

Irresponsible Data and Technology Use Can Harm Foster Youth

Unfortunately, the stated benefits of data and technology are not always realized and can result in more harm than good, such as:

Lack of access controls and improper disclosures can lead to stigmatization of foster youth and create safety and well-being concerns. Youth in foster care can suffer significant emotional, physical, and general well-being harms if their sensitive personal information is exposed, especially within the school context. Thus, it is important to limit access to individuals who need it to provide services to foster youth, and for those individuals to not disclose it to unauthorized third parties (Laird & Quay de-la Vallee, 2019; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 2022; Foster Love, 2022).

Data and algorithmic bias. A pervasive, well documented issue within the child welfare system is that members of historically marginalized communities, specifically Black families, who come into contact with the system face disparate treatment. In Illinois in 2007, for instance, African Americans made up 19 percent of the state's population but comprised 59 percent of foster youth population and 34 percent of subjects of reports to protective services for maltreatment (Horton & Watson, 2015). This overrepresentation of Black children and families in investigations for maltreatment and subsequent placement in the child welfare system may be attributable, in part, to biased decision making.

Efforts to use data must account for biases embedded in that data, which is even more important if it is incorporated into algorithmic decision systems. In this case, algorithmic bias – the tendency of algorithms to make decisions that systematically disadvantage certain groups – may occur because "pre-existing societal prejudices are baked into the data itself" (Friis & Riley, 2023).

PRMs, RPA, or other AI tools trained using biased case data risk causing biased decision making and exacerbating racial or socioeconomic disparities (Gawronski, 2019). Because Black, Latinx, and Native American families and children are overrepresented in the child welfare system, it is possible that PRMs in particular may inadvertently further entrench existing disparities (Whicher, et al., 2022). Additionally, "government administrative data include more information on certain racial or ethnic groups compared to others because those groups are more likely to be involved in government programs," potentially exposing those groups to further algorithmic scrutiny (Whicher, et al., 2022), and failing to accurately identify needs in other communities. For example, a study found that use of the Allegheny Family Screening Tool in Pennsylvania was on its own "more racially disparate than workers, both in terms of screen-in rate and accuracy" (Stapleton, et al., 2022). A recent ACLU report similarly found that the Allegheny tool perpetuates racial and disability bias due to "arbitrary" algorithmic design choices (Gerchick, et al., 2023).

Over-reliance on AI. AI tools inherently lack the human judgment that experienced caseworkers possess to make decisions about foster youth cases (Whicher, et al., 2022). Over-reliance on PRMs and other AI tools may result in children being removed from homes where they are not actually at risk and when their situations might be improved by different forms of support.

Redirecting resources to unproven technology. Not all child welfare agencies will benefit from spending resources on data and technology, particularly when a product's efficacy is unproven (Ho & Burke, 2023). Data and technology tools that lack independent evidence that they work as intended can actually create more work for child welfare agencies.

Cybersecurity and transparency risks. Intra- and inter-agency data sharing and technology use can increase the risk of data breaches (Wroblewska, et al., 2023). Depending on how these data and technology systems are set up, unauthorized people could have access to case data, putting foster children's privacy at further risk. As a public serving entity, child welfare agencies may also risk public backlash if they fail to disclose their use of personal data (Whicher, et al., 2022).

As discussed in "Fostering Responsible Tech Use: Recommendations for Public Child Welfare Agencies," located in the practice section of this publication, there are critical steps that public administrators should take to mitigate the potential harms of data and technology in the foster care system to have a chance at realizing their benefits.

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For the full Report visit https://z.umn.edu/ResponsibleTechUse

Recommendations to maximize benefits and mitigate the harms:

- Identifying the problems that data or technology may solve, and the potential harms it could introduce;
- Engaging affected stakeholders, from caseworkers to foster youth;
- Establishing and/or enhancing inter- and intra-agency data and technology governance to guide decision making;
- Implementing and managing AI tools safely and responsibly, and;
- Being diligent in vetting third party vendors.

Though these recommendations pertain to all data and technology uses, they are especially important as more and more public agencies are looking to take advantage of AI-powered tools. Full report available at: https://z.umn.edu/ResponsibleTechUse

Technology in Child Welfare: Balancing Innovation and Ethics

Chad McDonald, PhD, Matt Davis, PhD, Cole Benson, MS, LCSW

Social work has long emphasized the importance of human connection and relationship-building, but emerging technologies are reshaping how services are delivered and outcomes are achieved. Advancements in technology are impacting all aspects of social work, including direct service delivery, administrative efficiency, decision support, and professional training. As these tools become integral to practice, practitioners must navigate the opportunities they provide alongside the ethical challenges they pose.

Expanding Access Through Digital Service Delivery Platforms

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of telehealth and other remote service delivery platforms, enabling social workers to engage with families across distances. These platforms offer real-time video conferencing, secure document sharing, and digital signature capabilities, removing geographic barriers to services (Ådnanes et al., 2024; Mishna et al., 2021). Such tools are particularly beneficial for families in underserved or rural areas, fostering inclusivity and flexibility in service delivery.

Streamlining Administrative Processes with AI and Data Systems

Modern case management systems powered by artificial intelligence (AI) have transformed administrative workflows by integrating data sources and automating tasks like documentation and report generation. These tools enable seamless information sharing among agencies, improving coordination and freeing practitioners to focus on direct client engagement. For example, AI can analyze large datasets to produce insights that guide resource allocation, helping social workers operate more effectively (Hall et al., 2024).

Enhancing Decision-Making Through Predictive Analytics

Predictive analytics tools leverage historical data to identify risk factors and anticipate outcomes, enabling more proactive interventions. For instance, predictive modeling can flag families in need of preventive services before crises escalate (Kawakami et al., 2022). However, practitioners must be cautious of potential biases embedded in these systems, as reliance on flawed or incomplete data can perpetuate inequities (Narayanan & Kapoor, 2024).

Advancing Professional Development with Virtual Reality

Immersive technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), are revolutionizing social work training by providing simulated environments for skill development. Practitioners can practice tasks like home assessments, caregiver interviews, or motivational interviewing in controlled, risk-free settings, refining their competencies before applying them in the field (Accenture, n.d.; McDonald et al., 2021). Such tools are especially valuable in geographically diverse or resource-constrained areas, where traditional training opportunities may be limited.

Opportunities and Risks: Navigating the Dual Nature of Technology

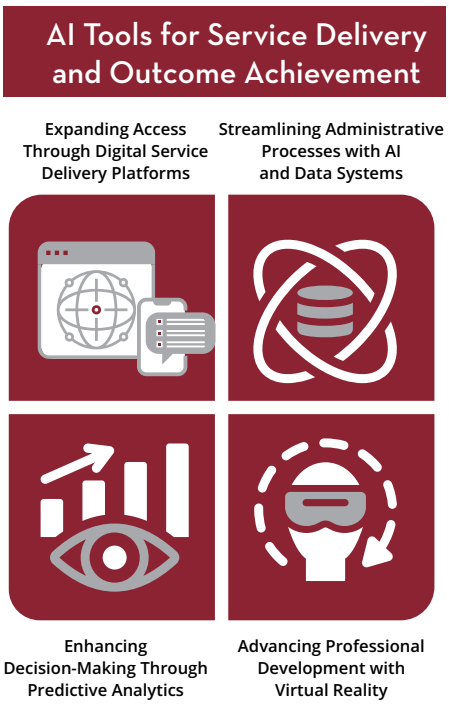
The integration of technology into social work practice offers significant opportunities to enhance outcomes, while simultaneously posing risks, including privacy concerns, data breaches, and ethical dilemmas. The comparative advantage that many technology-based innovations may have has not been thoroughly researched. For example, the effectiveness of remote service delivery platforms compared to in-person service delivery has received scant empirical attention. Privacy and confidentiality concerns are heightened with digital platforms, increasing the risk of data breaches that could expose large amounts of sensitive client information. Practitioners should ensure clients understand how their data is used and stored, maintaining informed consent, and transparency.

Ethical challenges arise in using AI in decision-making as it may reinforce existing biases, lack transparency for necessary oversight, and over-rely on historical, limited data that does not capture nuanced, individual circumstances further exacerbating inequitable outcomes (Hall et al., 2024; Narayanan & Kapoor, 2024). Further, the design of these systems often focuses on the technological challenges of the task with relatively less attention paid to the complicated interplay between human and AI decision-making (Kawakami et al., 2022).

Ethical challenges arise in using AI in decision-making as it may reinforce existing biases, lack transparency for necessary oversight, and over-rely on historical, limited data that does not capture nuanced, individual circumstances further exacerbating inequitable outcomes.

Innovative technologically-based approaches are usually expensive and require significant expertise. Given this, it is important to limit efforts to those areas that may show the largest effect on client outcomes. For example, skills that cannot be adequately learned or practiced using training as usual approaches should be prioritized when creating computer or virtual-based simulations.

The rollout of technology-based approaches should be paired with robust implementation plans that consider the ability of workers to learn and use technology within their practice setting with an understanding that over-reliance on technology could diminish the relational aspects central to social work (McDonald et al., 2021). Finally, clients must be informed about how their data is used, safeguards must ensure that technologies do not undermine trust or equity in service delivery and are accessible to all, irrespective of economic or technological disparities (Davis et al., 2021).



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Leveraging Technology to Empower Families: Supporting Foster Parents' Essential Role in Child Welfare

Children's Bureau Division of State Systems Staff, originally published by Children's Bureau Express May 2024

Within the world of child welfare, foster parents (including those providing kinship and relative foster care) are often the unsung heroes in the lives of many children and young adults. Sometimes, with little advance notice or under challenging circumstances, these special individuals choose to provide a safe home to a child or youth in need of a stable environment.

What motivates some people to become foster parents, and how can we learn from their experiences? Let's explore the pivotal role of foster parents and see how technology can better enhance their impact and our knowledge.

Why do some people foster children?

The path to becoming a foster parent is generally paved with purpose, good intentions, and a genuine concern for children. Becoming a foster parent is usually a decision made through the lens of compassion for others and the sincere desire to make a difference in ways such as the following:

- Being a voice for a vulnerable person
- Changing the course of someone's life
- Watching a child grow mentally, emotionally, and socially
- Providing a temporary shelter or safe haven
- Offering caring family experiences
- Teaching a child how to deal with life's joys and challenges

How can technology help foster parents and agencies?

Today's technology, information systems, and websites play an important role in supporting both foster parents and child welfare agencies.

For foster parents, including those providing kinship and relative foster care, current technology can help with these aspects:

- Application process. Having access to user-friendly online platforms can simplify a foster parent's application process. For example, an agency's centralized portal might allow potential foster parents to submit their documents, track their application progress, and receive real-time status updates.
- Training and education. Today's technology can provide foster parents with training and instruction on relevant topics such as parenting techniques, child development, legal aspects, and other essential information. Additionally, this knowledge transfer can occur using various forms of technology, such as interactive modules, webinars, online courses, and videos.

Today's technology can provide foster parents with training and instruction on relevant topics such as parenting techniques, child development, legal aspects, and other essential information.

- Upcoming reminders. With mobile apps, foster parents can more easily receive reminders about their foster child's medical appointments, court dates, school activities, or other important life events.
- Support networks. Foster parents can also use technology to connect with their peers via online forums and request advice from virtual support groups.
- Retention strategies. Technology can provide foster parents with access to ongoing training. Websites can offer educational resources on important topics such as behavioral management and self-care.

For agencies, technology can help with the following:

- Finding suitable foster parents. For recruitment purposes, technology allows agencies to reach a wider audience via online platforms, focused foster parent campaigns, and social media. Websites can present success stories, dispel myths, and encourage potential foster parents to step forward.
- Streamlining the approval process. An agency's child welfare system can automate paperwork, track background checks, and facilitate needed training.
- Placement efficiencies. Agencies might use automation to get information that helps with placement decisions or obtain information that a caseworker needs to improve placement stability.
- Enabling real-time communications. Agencies can use websites and mobile apps to allow real-time communication channels between foster parents, caseworkers, and families of origin. By using these communication tools, activities such as updates, appointments, and progress reports can be shared more seamlessly.
- Using data exchanges. Data exchange technology can help agencies do the following:
  - Support information collection processes to prevent data duplication
  - Allow private agencies or child welfare contributing agencies to share information
  - Support safety through access to foster parent background checks
  - Provide efficiency when accessing information related to child welfare

A foster parent's dedication, resilience, and love can shape the lives of vulnerable children and youth. But most importantly, their impact will still be felt even when that child or youth leaves their care. By harnessing today's technology, agencies can further empower these dedicated people to ensure brighter futures for children and youth in need.

Child Welfare Information Gateway
www.childwelfare.gov

A Brief Overview of Predictive Analytics in U.S. Foster Care

Ka Ho Brian Chor, PhD, Research Fellow at Chapin Hall

Predictive analytics encompasses statistical methods that detect underlying patterns in large-scale data to predict a future outcome (Redden, 2020). In the past decade, predictive analytics in the U.S. child welfare system has focused on the frontend, child protection system. Predictive risk modeling has emerged as the more common and contentious application of predictive analytics, where "risk scores" are generated to denote children's risks for a serious injury or fatality from child maltreatment (Church & Fairchild, 2017; Jackson & Marx, 2017) or foster care placement following a child protection investigation (Chouldechova et al., 2018). When these risk scores are used to inform or justify high-stakes decisions, from initiating an investigation to removing a child from their home, predictive analytics has received much warranted scrutiny, let alone growing concerns about prediction accuracy and systemic bias (Keddell, 2019). Coupled with failed high-profile implementation (Jackson & Marx, 2017) in the backdrop of the social justice movement (Dettlaff & Copeland, 2023) and the abolitionist vs. reformist debate about the child protection system (Dettlaff et al., 2020; Garcia et al., 2024), state and county agencies that are adopting or continuing to implement predictive analytics in child protection do so with caution and high standards for scientific rigor, prediction accuracy, and bias reduction (Grimon & Mills, 2022).

The controversial, if not negative, reputation of predictive analytics in child protection overlooks, if not stymies, the potential of predictive analytics to contribute to foster care system improvements for existing youth in care. Here we highlight two proof-of-concept research studies in Illinois that demonstrate the potential of predictive analytics to support: (1) prevention efforts, (2) caseworker decision-making, and (3) resource allocation. Using administrative data on the Illinois foster care population, two time-to-event predictive risk models were developed and validated to predict youth's risks for running away from foster care placement (Chor et al., 2022) and for experiencing residential care placement (Chor et al., 2023), respectively, after youth's entry to foster care.

Because youth remain in foster care in Illinois longer than any other state (Children and Family Research Center, 2023), using these models to prevent running away and divert from residential care can have downstream impacts on shortening foster care stays and promoting permanent exits. Prevention efforts during a calibratable prevention window (e.g., first 3 months in foster care) can be tailored to youth's model-predicted risk or need scores. For higher-need youth, their individual needs can be deconstructed into contributing factors in the form of significant or important predictors derived from the models. For example, demographic factors might suggest age-appropriate programs (e.g., peer mentorship), placement factors might highlight the importance of co-sibling placement (e.g., in the same foster home), while complex emotional behavioral needs might indicate evidence-based interventions (e.g., Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) in intensive community-based care (e.g., therapeutic foster care). As such, when developed, validated, and deployed carefully, predictive risk models can shape a proactive foster care system that preempts rather than reacts to a crisis.

When developed, validated, and deployed carefully, predictive risk models can shape a proactive foster care system that preempts rather than reacts to a crisis.

Predictive risk models in foster care can also support caseworker decision-making for the high-stress, heavy-caseload workforce. A caseworker juggling 20-plus cases can differentiate the intensity and urgency of individual case needs when provided with timely, individual need profiles derived from the models. A higher-need case might prioritize the caseworker's attention toward resources at the ready (e.g., placement stabilization services, emergency foster care placements), whereas a lower-need case might signal resources that can afford to be waited (e.g., an afterschool program with a long waitlist). Over time, the caseworker can use their caseload's need scores as a barometer for case progress as need scores change when the models are re-run.

Predictive risk models can quantify foster care resource capacity and allocation at the system-level. Both runaway and residential care predictive risk models provide transparent information associated with each risk score threshold on the number of youth detected, predicted to experience the outcome, and model accuracy metrics (e.g., precision and recall). Because the models are not prescriptive, a foster care system, in collaboration with stakeholders, should consider important tradeoffs and system disruption in model selection: Should prediction accuracy be prioritized at the expense of serving too few youth (i.e., minimizing false negatives)? Should benefiting the masses be prioritized at the cost of over-surveilling youth and squandering limited resources (i.e., maximizing false positives)? Should fairness and equity be prioritized (i.e., prioritizing disproportionate racial and ethnic minorities) over prediction accuracy? Well-constructed, transparent predictive risk models can illuminate these discussions that are critical to the foster care system.

Predictive analytics could potentially support:

Human services systems tend to be laggards in technology adoption. As our society ventures into the nascent era of artificial intelligence (AI), including large language models and generative AI, it is prudent that a foster care system establishes a robust understanding of the potential and limits of predictive analytics, a prerequisite for more advanced AI applications. The time is now.

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How Child Welfare Workers Reduce Racial Disparities in Algorithmic Decisions

Logan Stapleton, Assistant Professor of Computer Science at Vassar College

Predictive algorithms are used by about a dozen U.S. child welfare agencies and have been considered by more (Samant et al., 2021). Agencies look to predictive analytics with hopes to make decisions more standardized, accurate, and less biased (Chouldechova et al., 2018; Levy et al., 2021).

This overview summarizes key findings from a study evaluating one particular algorithm, the Allegheny Family Screening Tool (AFST) (Vaithianathan et al., 2017). In the study, we used government data to audit the AFST and went to Allegheny County DHS to observe workers as they used the algorithm (Cheng et al., 2022). We focus on the AFST because it's been used since 2016 and serves as an example for many other algorithms.

From worker observations and interviews, we hypothesize that workers reduced racial disparities by disagreeing with the algorithm to correct for racially biased patterns of overscoring.

How the AFST Works

The AFST uses data on individual families, including demographics (sans race), child welfare records, and other government data like criminal, juvenile justice, or public medical records.

Based on the data in a referral, the AFST predicts if children in the referral will be removed from the home within 2 years of the referral — designers use home removal as a proxy for risk of maltreatment. When call screen workers get a new referral, the AFST gives a score from 1 to 20, where higher scores are interpreted as higher risk. Workers read the referral, the family's records, and the algorithm's score, then decide whether to screen-in the family for investigation.

Data and Racial Disparities

One big reason why child welfare agencies are interested in algorithms is to reduce racial biases, ostensibly because algorithms are seen as more objective and consistent than workers (Hurley, 2018). A previous study suggested that the disparity between Black and white children screened-in by Allegheny County DHS fell from 9% before the use of the AFST to 7% after it (Goldhaber-Fiebert & Prince, 2019). DHS then claimed that the AFST caused workers to make less racially disparate decisions (Allegheny County DHS, 2019). Following these claims, more agencies have started using algorithms like the AFST (Samant, 2021). However, we found that the AFST gave more racially disparate recommendations than workers.

From 2016 to 2018, we argue that the AFST would have recommended screening in 68% of Black children and 50% of white children referred to DHS. Workers actually screened in 51% of Black children and 43% of white children. So, workers reduced the screen-in rate disparity from the algorithm's recommended 18% down to 7%.

From worker observations and interviews, we hypothesize that workers reduced racial disparities by disagreeing with the algorithm to correct for racially biased patterns of overscoring. Although the AFST didn't use race as a variable, most workers thought the AFST was racially biased because it uses public systems data to measure risk, and Black families are more likely to be involved in public systems, like welfare, the criminal system, child welfare, etc.

One worker said, "if you're poor and you're on welfare, [the AFST is] gonna score [you] higher than a comparable family who has private insurance."

By contrast, workers looked at administrative data about families in the context of the report and made decisions holistically. Workers looked at families' records for relevant information, but didn't treat public systems involvement as an automatic strike against the family like the AFST might. For example, when a referral alleged drug abuse, one worker would often look through recent criminal records. But, they said, "somebody who was in prison 10 years ago has nothing to do with what's going on today."

Accuracy and Proxy Outcomes

Prior evaluations of the AFST have claimed that it is more accurate than workers — so much more accurate that Allegheny County DHS said, "not using [the AFST] might be unethical because of its accuracy" (Allegheny County DHS, 2018). Our audit found that 51% of the AFST's recommendations were accurate, versus 46.5% for workers' decisions.

Yet, these results may be misleading. Accuracy is measured based on the outcomes that the algorithm predicts — namely, home removal and re-referral within two years. If a referral is screened-out and the child is then removed from the home within two years of the referral, then the screening decision is deemed inaccurate.

This puts workers at a disadvantage, because they did not make predictions like this when making screening decisions. Many workers said these outcomes were not good proxies for risk.

For example, workers said home removals often occur because a teen chooses to live with relatives, not because their parents are maltreating them.

Furthermore, workers made decisions based on immediate safety concerns, whereas the AFST made predictions on a much longer two-year timespan. This is intentional: Agency leadership designed the AFST to push

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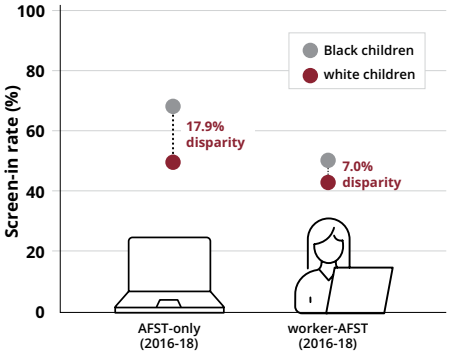
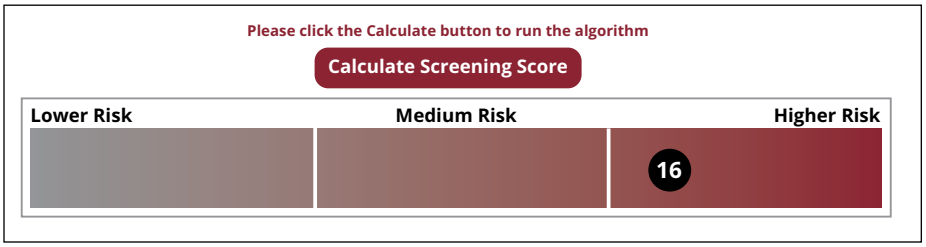
Black-white screen-in rate disparities



Allegheny Family Screening Tool



Algorithmic Harms in Child Welfare: The Burden of Unreliable Decision-Making and Constant Repair Work

Devansh Saxena, PhD & Shion Guha, PhD

In recent years, child welfare agencies across the globe have been under increasing pressure to handle growing caseloads and complex family needs with fewer resources. These agencies, charged with protecting a vulnerable population, children, often face harsh critiques for delayed interventions or, conversely, for overreach and unwarranted family separations. In the face of such scrutiny, algorithmic tools have emerged as potential saviors. They promise data-driven insights that, ideally, can detect patterns of risk more accurately than a single human could. Indeed, it can be tempting to view algorithms as objective arbiters capable of cutting through the complexity of each case and providing a clear direction.

However, while these systems may offer an appearance of objectivity, they are inherently shaped by the data fed into them and the assumptions baked into their design. These assumptions fail to capture the full spectrum of lived experiences. Moreover, the risk scores or recommendations they produce can be misleading or incomplete, particularly when they remain insensitive to local contexts and cultural nuances. In theory, algorithms can make patterns visible; in practice, they can obscure vulnerabilities and amplify biases that already exist in the system.

Unreliable Street-Level Decision-Making

Caseworkers are street-level bureaucrats who directly interact with families and operate where institutional policies meet real-world circumstances. They are uniquely positioned, balancing the demands of policy guidelines with the messy reality of individual cases. When agencies introduce algorithmic tools into this environment, the expectation is that the technology will alleviate some of the uncertainties and administrative burdens that caseworkers encounter. Unfortunately, the opposite can happen. AI systems, which are far from flawless, often create new kinds of uncertainties. Rather than trusting an algorithmic recommendation at face value, caseworkers may find themselves questioning its validity: Did the system account for a family's history of domestic violence? Is a criminal offense from several years ago even relevant to the case? Are the recommended services appropriate for a household that speaks a different language or has cultural nuances the system fails to reflect?

> Crucially, repair work extends beyond mere data entry or fixing technical glitches. It involves ethical and emotional labor as well.

Thus, AI-assisted decision-making becomes a juggling act, often adding a layer of confusion rather than eliminating it. When an algorithmic assessment clashes with a caseworker's professional judgment or firsthand observations, it can erode trust. Some caseworkers might defer to the algorithmic "expert," fearing liability if they depart from the official recommendation, while others are left second-guessing their professional expertise. The result is a process rife with tensions between human experience and AI-based predictions.

The Hidden Labor of Repair Work

The concept of "repair work" (Jackson, 2013) describes the invisible labor performed by caseworkers who must resolve the discrepancies between algorithmic outputs and the real-world contexts they observe. For instance, in Wisconsin, the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) algorithm evaluates a child's needs and risks and then determines both the appropriate foster care level and the financial compensation for foster parents. Because of a shortage of quality foster homes, caseworkers often inflate CANS scores so foster parents receive higher compensation, incentivizing them to keep children placed with them. Over time, such manipulation undermines trust in the system, as altering data becomes the only reliable way to secure needed resources. Repair work can entail data verification, repeated consultations with families, and extensive documentation to override or correct an algorithmic recommendation. It is far from trivial: each case can require hours of additional effort, all while new cases continue to pile up.

Crucially, repair work extends beyond mere data entry or fixing technical glitches. It involves ethical and emotional labor as well. Caseworkers regularly grapple with the moral weight of deciding whether to remove a child from a potentially dangerous environment. When the algorithm delivers a risk score that conflicts with a caseworker's assessment, that worker must justify any deviation from the "data-driven" path. This places caseworkers in a precarious position. If their professional judgment is correct, they may avert a crisis. If they misjudge or the algorithm's data proves more accurate, they face the burden of explaining why they overrode the system.

Furthermore, the labor of reconciling algorithmic outputs and human expertise often falls unequally on different members of the team, especially new or less experienced caseworkers. These individuals may feel less confident challenging an algorithm, turning to seasoned colleagues for help. This dynamic not only strains organizational workflows but also underscores the problematic assumption that algorithms are infallible, when in reality they can be just as prone to errors as humans, if not more so.

The tension between algorithmic outputs and street-level decision-making has far-reaching organizational implications. For one, burnout becomes a real and pressing concern when caseworkers face mounting caseloads in tandem with the relentless need to correct technology's missteps. Agencies that deploy algorithms without sufficient training, oversight, or reevaluation risk undermining

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Social Media in Child Welfare Practice: The Critical Role of Supervision and Policy

Melanie Sage, PhD, Todd Sage, PhD, Melissa Wells, PhD

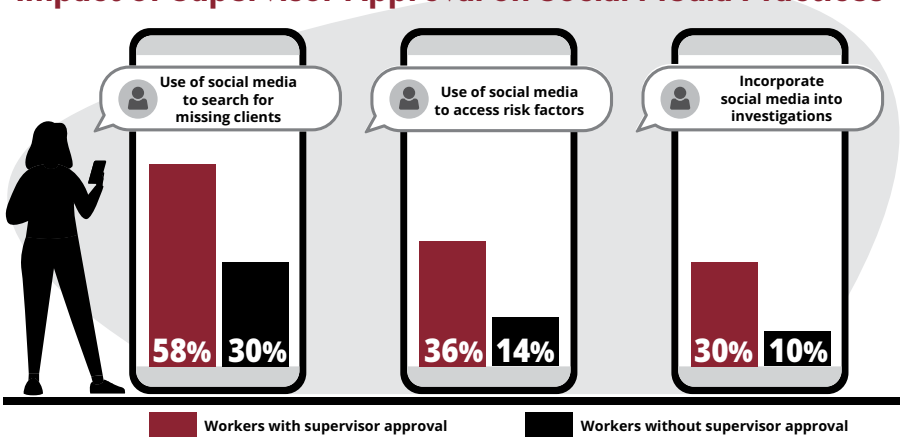
As social media becomes increasingly integrated into daily life, child welfare workers have begun incorporating these tools into their practice - often with limited guidance. Our 2017 study of 171 child welfare workers across eight states revealed insights about how supervision and agency policies shape social media use in child welfare settings, with significant implications for practice and policy development (Sage, Wells, Sage, & Devlin, 2017). This research demonstrated that while social media has become a common tool in child welfare practice, there remains a significant gap between its use and formal institutional support or guidance. In the last seven years, little has changed regarding the use of social media in child welfare agencies; our conversations in the child welfare community reveal that many agencies still lack policies and procedures about the use of social media in practice. Workers get little consistent supervision about best practices (Cooner, Beddoe, Ferguson, & Joy, 2020).

Social Media Use in Child Welfare

Child welfare workers told us that they commonly use social media for various work-related purposes, from searching for missing parents to gathering information about potential child risk factors.Workers report using these platforms to conduct assessments during investigations, maintain contact with youth and families, and build connections with foster parents and community partners. Many have found creative ways to leverage social media to enhance their practice and better serve families. However, there is considerable variation in how agencies approach and regulate this practice. The study found that only 43% of agencies had formal social media policies, while just 12% provided any training on social media use. Despite this lack of formal guidance, over half of workers reported their supervisors approved of using social media for work-related purposes, highlighting a disconnect between institutional policies and on-the-ground practice.

The qualitative data revealed several areas where workers struggle with boundaries and best practices. Many expressed uncertainties about whether to accept friend requests from foster parents or how to handle pre-existing social media connections when clients enter the system. Workers also sought guidance about appropriate social media use with youth who have aged out of care and how to balance investigation needs with privacy concerns. Documentation and management of information gathered from social media platforms emerged as another area requiring clarification. The complexity of these issues is compounded by the rapidly evolving nature of social media platforms and the varying comfort levels of both workers and clients with technology.

Impact of Supervisor Approval on Social Media Practices



Implications for Supervisors and Agencies

One of the study's most striking findings was the strong correlation between clear supervisor approval of social media use and workers' social media practices. Workers whose supervisors approved of social media use were significantly more likely to utilize it across multiple domains. For instance, 58% of workers with supervisor approval felt it was appropriate to search for missing clients, compared to only 30% of those without such approval. Similarly, 36% of those with approval used social media to assess risk factors (versus 14% without approval), and 30% incorporated it into investigations (compared to 10%). Supervisor approval was a stronger predictor of worker use of social media than agency policy; yet, many workers in our study had never spoken to a supervisor about whether they could use social media on the job. These findings suggest that supervisors play a crucial role in shaping how social media tools are adopted, even more so than formal policies. This highlights the importance of ensuring supervisors receive adequate training and support to guide their teams in appropriate social media use.

> Policies should be specific enough to provide clear guidance while remaining flexible enough to accommodate new platforms and evolving best practices. For instance, instead of a specific Facebook policy, it is better to have a general policy about conversing with clients over non-agency platforms so that the policy is adaptive to platforms that have not yet been built.

These findings also highlight the important role of supervisors in providing clear guidance about appropriate social media use in different contexts. Supervisors must help workers think through ethical implications and boundary issues, document discussions about social media use in supervision, and stay informed about emerging platforms and trends. Regular case consultations should include discussions about social media use and its impact on case progress. Supervisors might also consider developing unit-level protocols for commonly encountered scenarios, such as guidelines for documenting social media findings or procedures for handling friend requests from clients.

Agencies face the challenge of developing comprehensive social media policies that specifically address child welfare contexts. This includes providing regular training on social media best practices, creating clear protocols for documenting information gathered from social media, establishing

guidelines for maintaining professional boundaries, and considering the use of designated social media accounts for agency use. Policies should be specific enough to provide clear guidance while remaining flexible enough to accommodate new platforms and evolving best practices. For instance, instead of a specific Facebook policy, it is better to have a general policy about conversing with clients over non-agency platforms so that the policy is adaptive to platforms that have not yet been built. Similarly, agencies should be mindful of overly restrictive policies; for instance, social media has emerged as a good platform for family-finding (Goering et al., 2024), and it would therefore be counter-productive to completely prohibit social media. In terms of training frameworks, studies have suggested including topics such as assessing risks and opportunities and careful consideration of how to integrate technology into professional activities (McInroy, 2021).

Best Practices and Systematic Integration of Social Media

Workers need to maintain an ongoing dialogue with supervisors about social media use, carefully document their rationale for social media searches, maintain clear professional boundaries, and consider privacy and safety implications in all their social media activities. Transparency with clients about social media use is also best practice; for instance, if a foster care worker plans to search for a teen client on social media if they run away, this agency practice should be a part of informed consent. Workers should document all social media-related activities in case records so that searches are not confused with unacceptable or unauthorized use. This includes maintaining clear records of information gathered through social media and how it influenced case decisions. They should also consider that one's self-presentation on social media is selective (Fabio,& Tripodi, 2024); anyone can present themselves as more (or less) safe or vulnerable on social media.

As social media continues to evolve and integrate into child welfare practice, agencies must move beyond the "experimental" phase of social media use in practice toward more intentional and systematic approaches. This requires formalizing policy and reviewing it with staff and supervisors, regular policy review and updates, ongoing training and professional development, clear protocols for common scenarios, documentation standards, regular supervision discussions, and evaluation of effectiveness and outcomes. Agencies should also consider developing mechanisms for sharing successful strategies

Study Highlights & Social Media Tips

Highlights from the 2017 study	Tips For Supervisors	Tips For Agencies	Tips For Workers
• 56% of workers reported their supervisors approved of searching for clients on social media for work purposes	• Provide clear guidance about appropriate uses of social media in different contexts	• Develop social media policies that specifically address child welfare contexts, such as client or foster parent friend requests, family finding, and assessment	• Discuss social media use with supervisors regularly
• Workers whose supervisors approved of social media use were significantly more likely to use it for: » Locating missing parents/clients (58% vs. 30%) » Assessing risk factors (36% vs. 14%) » Conducting assessments (30% vs. 10%)	• Help workers think through ethical implications and boundary issues proactively. Bring discussion scenarios to unit meetings	• Provide regular training on social media best practices	• Document rationale for social media searches
• Only 43% of agencies had social media policies	• Document discussions about social media use in supervision	• Create clear protocols for documenting information gathered from social media	• Maintain clear professional boundaries
• Just 12% of agencies provided training on social media use	• Stay informed about emerging social media platforms and trends	• Establish guidelines for maintaining professional boundaries and keeping private case information off of social media communications	• Be transparent with clients about social media use
• 10% completely restricted social media use at work	• Consider developing unit-level practice protocols for common scenarios	• Consider designated social media accounts for agency use if social media will be used to search for or contact clients	• Consider privacy and safety implications
	• Talk with other supervisors and agency leadership so messages are consistent		

and learning from challenges across units and organizations.

Implementation benefits from an agency-wide assessment of current social media use, followed by policy development that incorporates input from all stakeholders, including clients when possible. Comprehensive training for supervisors and workers, along with clear documentation protocols, creates a foundation for effective practice. Agencies that establish mechanisms for regular policy review and updates, monitor outcomes and effectiveness, and share successful strategies across units and agencies will benefit from consistent practice. This might include creating working groups to address emerging issues, understanding the perspectives of service users, including foster youth, parents, and other community members who might react to policy, developing training materials, and establishing feedback loops to ensure policies remain relevant and effective.

By taking a thoughtful, systematic approach to social media use, agencies can help ensure these tools enhance rather than complicate child welfare practice. The key is providing clear guidance while maintaining enough flexibility to adapt to evolving platforms and practices. Findings from our 2017 study and more recent research from Long and colleagues (2021) make clear that social media is already an established part of child welfare practice. The challenge now is to move from informal, individual approaches to more systematic, well-supported integration that promotes positive outcomes while managing potential risks.

By taking a thoughtful, systematic approach to social media use, agencies can help ensure these tools enhance rather than complicate child welfare practice. The key is providing clear guidance while maintaining enough flexibility to adapt to evolving platforms and practices.

Any successful policy that shapes day-to-day practice requires an ongoing commitment to developing and refining policies, providing comprehensive training, and maintaining an open dialogue about best practices. For instance, additional consideration is needed to understand how child welfare professionals may be using technology in their communications with children and families (Henze-Pederson, 2024). As social media continues to evolve, so must our approaches to its use in child welfare practice. Success will require collaboration among workers, supervisors, and administrators to create systems that support effective, ethical social media use while protecting the interests of children and families served by the child welfare system.

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Data Sharing and Interoperability in Child Welfare: A Path to Better Outcomes for Children, Youth, and Families

Kristine Piescher, PhD & Michael Hoffmeister, PhD

In child welfare, where decisions can have profound, long-term effects on children and families, the ability to share data seamlessly across systems is crucial. Data sharing and interoperability—terms often used interchangeably—represent a fundamental shift in how information is exchanged between different organizations, agencies, and systems. In the context of child welfare, these concepts are not just about efficiency. As experience tells us, children and families served by child welfare are often also involved in and affected by other public systems.

Given the critical role of data in making informed decisions within and between systems, the Children's Bureau established data exchange standards for state child welfare agencies to consider in developing their Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS). Those standards require that CCWIS are "capable of sending data to, and receiving data from, other data systems" in a way that "ensures the context and meaning of the data are preserved." (Children's Bureau, 2022). Effective data exchanges help agencies coordinate services, eliminate redundancies, improve client outcomes, and improve data quality (Administration for Children & Families, 2016). While these standards are a useful starting point for jurisdictions initiating data exchanges between systems, interoperability and integration of data systems should not be bound only within the recommendations from the Children's Bureau. In fact, much more can be learned when we exceed those boundaries.

The Need for Data Sharing in Child Welfare

In child welfare, the goal of data sharing and interoperability is to create an integrated, holistic system that supports children and families by allowing professionals from various sectors to work together seamlessly. However, variations in data standards, privacy and security measures, policies governing data sharing, and inconsistencies in data documentation practices between agencies and jurisdictions create complexities for successful integration.

In child welfare, the goal of data sharing and interoperability is to create an integrated, holistic system that supports children and families by allowing professionals from various sectors to work together seamlessly.

In the United States, many jurisdictions have begun to address these barriers and initiate cross-system data integration to support data-informed decision-making in research, policy, and practice. The University of Pennsylvania's Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy (AISP) suggests that over 50 state and local jurisdictions use integrated data systems to inform research, policy, and practice. States using integrated data to inform their budget, policy, and management decisions have seen significant, positive results (Dunn & Jenkins, 2018), yet few of these systems employ full system interoperability.

The structure of many administrative data systems, in Minnesota and across the country, makes it difficult to integrate information across sectors. In fact, the only single data system in Minnesota that crosses some service sectors is the Social Service Information System (SSIS) — a system that spans health and human services. There are however, innovative data linkage platforms utilized to advance research, practice, and policy in Minnesota. Minnesota's P-20 Statewide Longitudinal Education Data System integrates data from pre-kindergarten through completion of postsecondary education and into the workforce to assess the effectiveness of current programs and to design targeted improvement strategies to help students. While education is at the heart of this system, some foster care data have been integrated - allowing for a deeper look at the educational experiences and outcomes of children served in child welfare.

The Minnesota Linking Information for Kids (Minn-LInK) project at the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) is an integrated data project with a long-standing focus on child welfare. Minn-LInK has served as an important tool for

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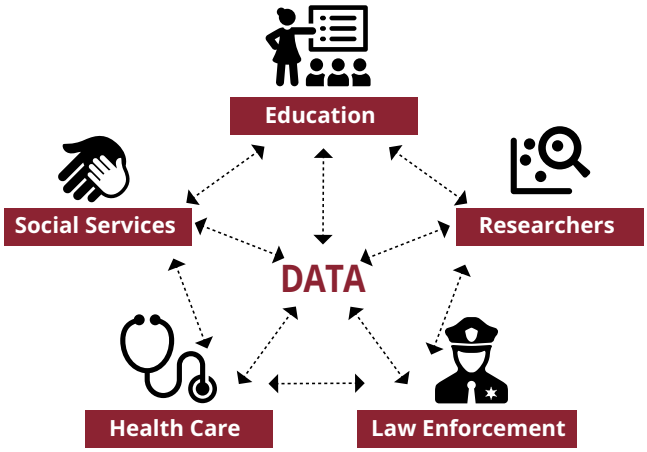
Understanding Data Sharing and Interoperability

Data sharing refers to the practice of making data available across different entities, allowing authorized individuals to access, exchange, and use the information. In child welfare, this means social service agencies, healthcare providers, law enforcement, educational institutions, and other relevant parties, such as researchers, can collaborate by exchanging information under strict privacy and security guidelines. By sharing data across systems, these organizations can support more informed decision-making and early intervention, identify effective practices, and improve child welfare policy.

Interoperability, on the other hand, focuses on the ability of different systems and technologies to work together. For data sharing to be effective in this context, the systems used by various entities must be compatible, allowing them to exchange data without barriers. Interoperability goes beyond merely sharing data; it ensures that data can be understood and used appropriately (often in real-time), regardless of the system or platform.



The Impact of AI Technology on the Social Work Profession: Benefits, Risks, and Ethical Considerations

Marina Badillo-Diaz, LCSW

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming more widely prevalent in social work practice (Reamer, 2023). AI uses computer science to replicate human intelligence to enable problem-solving while using machine learning that uses historical data to predict and shape new outputs. Generative AI is a subset of AI technology that has the capacity to create generative images, text, audio, and videos based on pre-trained data sets. As AI technologies continue to evolve and integrate into social work practice, it's crucial to examine the impact on the profession. This article explores the benefits and risks associated with AI in social work, as well as the important ethical considerations and responsible use.

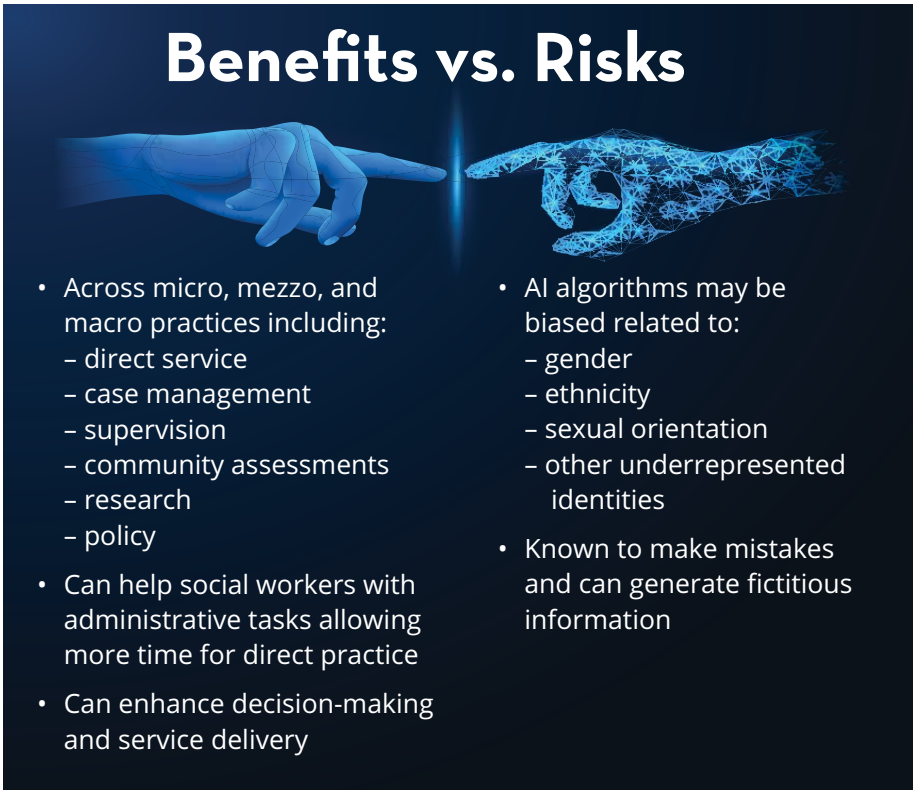
Potential Benefits

The integration of AI in social work offers several potential opportunities and benefits that could enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of social work services for clients, organizations, and communities (Reamer, 2023). It can be used across micro, mezzo, and macro practices including direct service, case management, supervision, community assessments, community organizing, grant writing, research, and policy.

Specifically, generative AI tools can help social workers with administrative tasks allowing them to have more time for direct practice services (Tomita et al., 2024). For example, ChatGPT can create and generate client notes, create psychoeducation materials, and develop treatment plan goals (Goldkind et al., 2023). There are also AI behavioral health chatbots like Woebot that can stimulate therapeutic conversations and Wysa is an AI chatbot service that uses evidence-based cognitive behavioral techniques to assist people (Reamer, 2023). Predictive AI Analytics, known as data forecasting, can also be used to enhance decision-making and service delivery (Goldkind, 2021).

Potential Risks

Despite these potential benefits and opportunities, utilizing AI can also pose some risks for social workers (Goldkind et al., 2023; Reamer, 2023). One risk of utilizing AI tools is that they are inherently biased. AI is dependent on machine learning that uses very large existing data sets of human knowledge and information which may not be fully representative of social workers' clients (Reamer, 2023). As a result, AI algorithms may be biased related to gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other underrepresented identities (Patton et al., 2023).



AI tools are also known to make mistakes and can hallucinate generating fictitious information (Alkaissi & McFarlane, 2023). Therefore, social workers must utilize their social work expertise and knowledge when reviewing the content generated by AI tools and make the necessary edits when appropriate. AI should never replace social work knowledge (Meilvang, 2023); instead, AI technology should be used as a tool alongside social work practitioners.

> Interdisciplinary collaboration between social workers and technologists will be essential in developing AI tools for social workers that ensure ethical practice.

Ethical Considerations

The integration of AI in social work raises several important ethical considerations that must be carefully addressed. Social workers should exercise professional competency when using AI tools (Pascoe, 2023). This includes attending trainings and building their knowledge about AI tools to ensure responsible practices. Responsible and ethical practice includes clients being fully informed about how AI is being used in their care and having the right to opt out of AI-driven services if they choose (Reamer, 2023). Social workers should also ensure that the AI tools they are using have data encryption and data security to the greatest extent when possible (Reamer, 2023). Social workers should also not enter any identifiable or confidential information into the generative AI chatbots for ethical and responsible practice.

Social work agencies and organizations should develop comprehensive AI guidelines for their staff to ensure the ethical and effective use of AI in practice. In clinical supervision, it is equally important for supervisors and supervisees to discuss and explore how AI can be integrated as a teaching and training tool, enhancing the overall supervision experience for social workers for transparency and accountability. Currently, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has not established specific ethical guidelines for the use of AI in social work practice. The last ethical standards for technology use and social work practice were published in 2017 (NASW, CSWE, ASWB, & CSWA, 2017). This was published before

generative AI technologies. Therefore, it is recommended that agencies and practitioners take proactive steps to develop their own ethical frameworks for AI use, ensuring that AI is applied responsibly and in alignment with social work values.

Conclusion: Future Considerations

Social work education and training programs will need to evolve to include teaching AI literacy to make sure that future social workers are equipped to use these technologies effectively (Hodgson et al., 2022). Additionally, interdisciplinary collaboration between social workers and technologists will be essential (Patton et al., 2023) in developing AI tools for social workers that ensure ethical practice.

Overall, the integration of AI in social work presents opportunities, risks, and ethical considerations. While AI has the potential to enhance social work services and save time for administrative tasks, it also raises concerns about bias and ethical implications. It's crucial to approach this integration responsibly and ethically. AI should not replace the human aspect of social work practice; instead, our professionals should still promote and practice interpersonal interaction, genuine communication, and empathy (O'Leary & Tsui, 2023).

AI Resources for Social Workers

Resource	Website	Description
The AI Social Worker	• www.theaisocialworker.com/ • www.theaisocialworker.com/guidebook • www.theaisocialworker.com/prompt-library • www.theaisocialworker.com/blog	*Free resources for social workers on utilizing generative AI including a free AI & Social Work Guidebook, an AI Prompt Library for Social Workers, and The AI Social Worker Blog.*
ChatGPT	• openai.com/chatgpt/	*A generative AI chatbot tool that can answer questions, and help with tasks by understanding and generating text.*
Social Work Magic	• www.socialworkmagic.com/	*Social Work Magic is an AI-trained generative AI tool using ChatGPT technology with social work expertise to help Social Workers streamline their work and administrative tasks.*
Bastion GPT	• bastiongpt.com/	*BastionGPT is a private and compliant edition of ChatGPT specially designed for US healthcare professionals. They are a trusted Microsoft Partner and utilize a HIPAA-compliant version of ChatGPT that is not publicly available.*
Berries AI	• www.berries.icu/	*Berries is an AI scribe for mental health professionals that writes case notes for clinicians. The tool is HIPPA compliant.*

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Generative AI in Child Welfare Practice: Opportunities and Risks

Melanie Sage, PhD, Todd Sage, PhD

As generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT become increasingly integrated into daily life, professionals have begun incorporating these technologies into their practice—often with limited guidance. A recent incident in Victoria, Australia, where a child welfare worker inappropriately used ChatGPT to write a sensitive case report, highlights both the allure and potential dangers of these powerful new tools. This article examines the opportunities and risks of generative AI in child welfare settings and provides guidance for practitioners, supervisors, and agency leadership.

Understanding Generative AI

Generative AI tools like ChatGPT can take the information or directions you provide and generate new content, from simple lists to complex reports. These tools can help with writing, editing, organization, and idea generation. However, the tools are not always accurate. They may make up information to fill gaps (referred to as hallucination) or draw from inaccurate information in their training data. They also pose unique risks in child welfare settings where confidentiality, accuracy, and professional judgment are vital.

Victoria, Australia: A Case Report

In 2024, a public child welfare agency in Victoria, Australia, made news when a worker used ChatGPT to write a sensitive case report (Taylor, 2024), highlighting significant concerns about the risks of AI use in child welfare practice. The caseworker's ChatGPT-generated court report included inappropriate interpretations of concerning situations and writing that did not meet the agency's standards. Specifically, the case alleged sexual charges against the parents. After the worker used ChatGPT to help format their notes for a report, ChatGPT generated a report that referred to a doll that a parent used in sexually deviant ways as an age-appropriate toy that was a protective factor, demonstrating family capacity. The AI tool did not appropriately understand the context of the family situation. The worker, who admitted to using ChatGPT to save time and appear professional, compromised the agency by submitting personal details of the case and family names into the online tool, and clearly did not carefully review the final report as they did not discover the misinformation. This case uncovered a lack of agency policy regarding the use of generative AI. Upon further review, the agency found that 900 caseworkers (13% of all agency staff) had accessed ChatGPT from the agency and used the tool in at least dozens of cases.

Benefits and Risks

If used appropriately, AI tools could potentially enhance child welfare practice. For administrative support, AI tools are good at breaking down complex tasks into steps, creating meeting agendas, organizing case documentation, and improving professional writing and communication. In resource development, AI can assist in generating lists of community resources, creating parent education materials, developing age-appropriate activity ideas, and drafting workshop outlines. For knowledge development, AI tools can help workers understand complex policies, learn about specific populations or issues, generate discussion points for team meetings, and create training scenarios for staff development. AI might help workers better understand and explain complex systems and requirements to families.

But agencies considering AI tools must carefully weigh the tradeoffs between efficiency and security. While AI can provide accurate and relevant responses for psychoeducational information for self-help or to provide clients information about a diagnosis, for instance, it raises considerations in practice about when we should use these tools or even encourage clients to use them (Maurya et al., 2024). Organizations should develop clear policies specifying when and how AI tools can be used, ensuring all staff understand both the benefits and risks of AI-generated content.

While AI can help reduce administrative burdens and streamline paperwork, most AI platforms do not meet HIPAA requirements for protecting sensitive client information (Goldkind et al., 2024). As Patton et al. (2023) emphasize in their analysis of ChatGPT in social work settings, practice communities need to understand risks, including bias that these tools can introduce based on the unknown sources of their training data and concerns about data privacy. The fact that many AI companies retain and use inputted data to train future iterations of their models poses additional ethical concerns about client privacy and informed consent. Child welfare agencies should explicitly address in which situations workers can use AI, issues of data privacy, documentation requirements, and how to maintain clear professional boundaries around what information can and cannot be shared with AI systems.

Child welfare agencies should explicitly address in which situations workers can use AI, issues of data privacy, documentation requirements, and how to maintain clear professional boundaries around what information can and cannot be shared with AI systems.

Confidentiality concerns are key. Workers should never input client information or identifying data into public AI tools. Information input into these systems may be stored and used for AI training. Quality control presents another challenge. AI can generate inaccurate or biased information, produce writing that lacks professional nuance and misses important cultural contexts. Perhaps most importantly, AI cannot replace professional judgment in child welfare practice. Risk assessment, understanding complex family dynamics, and making ethical decisions all require human expertise and wisdom. Workers must maintain their professional skills and judgment rather than becoming over reliant on AI tools.

When developing guidance around AI use, agencies should consider policy approaches based on their needs and comfort level with the technology. A conservative approach might prohibit AI use without explicit supervisor approval and limit use to specific administrative tasks. A moderate approach could allow AI for basic tasks and resource lists while requiring supervisor review of AI-generated content. A more liberal approach might encourage AI use for efficiency in certain types of scenarios while maintaining strong confidentiality protections and requiring transparency about AI use. All AI-generated content requires thorough fact-checking, human review, and professional judgment to ensure accuracy and appropriateness.

Looking Ahead

The use of generative AI in social service settings is rapidly evolving, so it may not be long before we find generative AI in mainstream social work settings. New HIPAA-compliant platforms like

AI Best Practices

Tips For Workers	Tips For Supervisors	Tips For Agencies
• Never input client information into AI tools	• Include AI use discussions in regular supervision	• Develop clear policies about appropriate AI use
• Use AI only for approved administrative and resource development tasks	• Help workers identify in/appropriate uses for AI tools	• Provide regular training on AI benefits and risks
• Document any use of AI in your work	• Document discussions about AI use in supervision notes	• Create documentation requirements for AI use
• Always thoroughly review and verify AI-generated content	• Review AI-generated content before it's used with families	• Establish clear consequences for policy violations and accidental disclosures
• Maintain professional judgment and seek supervision when unsure	• Stay informed about emerging AI capabilities and risks	• Regularly review and update AI policies as technology evolves

BastionGPT (BastionGPT.com) are emerging to provide secure environments for AI-assisted documentation in the mental health field. Similarly, specialized tools like SocialWorkAIMagic (socialworkmagic.com) offer pre-formatted templates for common child welfare documentation needs while explicitly warning users not to input actual client information into their non-secure platform. The key is finding ways to harness AI's efficiency benefits while maintaining strict privacy protections and professional judgment. AI should be viewed as a supplemental tool to augment, rather than replace, human expertise in documentation (Singer et al. 2023).

The Victoria case reminds us that while AI tools offer potential benefits for child welfare practice, they must be used with careful consideration. The person who uses a tool like this should always carefully review and take responsibility for the output. If Victoria is an example, it may be likely that workers across the United States are currently accessing tools like ChatGPT without agency guidance or attention to ethical risks. Given the pressures for efficiency, the temptation is understandable, which speaks to the need for agencies to address AI in practice. By developing policies, providing adequate training, and maintaining strong supervision, agencies can help ensure the use of these tools does not compromise the quality of child welfare services.

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Moving from Procedure to Practice: Lessons Learned at the Frontline

Betsy Goulet, DPA, Theodore Cross, PhD, Yu-Ling Chiu, PhD and Amy Wheeler, DPA, LCSW

Less than a decade ago it was not uncommon for child protection professionals to step into their new careers without any skill-based or experiential learning, with the exception of a few role-play sessions that lacked authenticity or "real-world" insight. Most pre-service trainings in child protection consisted of a steady diet of PowerPoints and handouts, focusing on procedural guidelines that could not sufficiently address and capture the essence of child protection in the field: communication and engagement. The volume of didactic content in child protection training continues to be a central component for understanding the policies and procedures, but the transfer of learning in simulation training greatly enhances the acquisition of skills needed for critical decision making in child protection.

When the University of Illinois Springfield (UIS) partnered with the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in 2015, the goal was to move new child protection investigators out of the classroom and into the Residential Simulation Lab located on the UIS campus, providing a space where the trainees could practice their engagement skills, adding new scenarios each day that brought them into contact with "family members" involved in allegations of child maltreatment (Goulet et al. 2020).

The first group of DCFS trainees entered the new UIS Child Protection Training Academy (CPTA) in February of 2016. Prior to this group's arrival on campus the CPTA team had spent several months developing a facilitator's guide that outlined the core competencies for the 4-days of scenarios, established a contract with the SIU School of Medicine's Standardized Patient program for providing actors skilled in feedback, and furnished the Residential Simulation Lab with essential items to create a realistic home environment in which the investigation could occur. The CPTA team recruited numerous criminal justice professionals to volunteer their expertise for the courtroom scenario – these volunteers included several prosecutors and defense attorneys as well as two former juvenile court judges who agreed to participate in order to improve the trainees' ability to accurately testify in both criminal and juvenile proceedings.

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Learners participate in a training simulation at the Residential Simulation Lab located on the UIS campus.

Even more vital to the project was the critically important partnership with the University of Illinois Urbana – Champaign's Children and Family Research Center's evaluation team. The CPTA team, DCFS administrators and the evaluation team were committed to determining the level of efficacy of the new simulation training and contributing research articles to the field that demonstrated how the new model impacted not only the transfer of learning but the overarching goal of reducing workforce turnover.

Members of the UIS CPTA team were keenly aware of the need to prioritize training as a strategy for workforce retention, since several of the team's facilitators as well as the CPTA's director, had spent time in the field investigating child maltreatment. The fast-paced, changing landscape of child protection requires considerable nimbleness and confident decision-making, skills that cannot be acquired through classroom lectures. Only the opportunity to practice under conditions that replicate, as closely as possible, the challenging aspects of child protection investigations will allow professionals to gain the crucial skills to interact effectively, empathically and competently with families (DePanfilis, 2018, Chiu & Cross, 2020).

When the Children and Family Research team began collecting the existing research on simulation training in child welfare it was clear that they were going to have to develop a model for measuring the impact of simulation experiences on the transfer of learning. Their innovative approach focused on the trainee's reflections on their level of confidence in response to each simulation scenario over the four days of training. Participants responded to inquiries about their experiences in the simulation labs and they also provided narrative responses that detailed their reactions to what took place during their interactions with the "family members," the facilitators' debriefing process, and the residential sim lab environment. The "Daily Experience of Simulation Training" (DEST) is a unique model that recognizes the role that confidence plays in the development of good practice in child protection (Chiu et al. 2021) The DEST has been used since 2019 and is one of the few, possibly only child protection simulation evaluation models in use. For more information on the DEST, see the Children and Family Research Center's website https://www.cfrc.illinois.edu/trained-on-maltreatment.php.

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The outside of the Residential Simulation Lab located on the UIS campus.

Lessons Learned

Over the seven years working with child protection professionals, the CPTA team identified key strategies and best practices that were later transferred to their work with other frontline professionals: law enforcement, teachers, mental health practitioners and the students at the University of Illinois Springfield enrolled in the Child Advocacy Studies Minor and Certificate Program. These lessons learned were also highlighted in the numerous articles published by the research team and in the evaluations that provided a close examination of the trainees' experiences during their simulation scenarios. In brief, the primary lessons learned are those that the UIS team discusses with other states during the "replication consultations" that have developed over the years. There are five that are central to conducting successful simulation scenarios:

1. **Strength-based Debriefing:** The UIS team created a model inspired by the simulation facilitators in the nursing field, building a process that "strives for five" positive comments during the initial part of the feedback before asking the trainee if there were any actions that they felt they could have done differently.
2. **Psychological Safety/Safe Environment:** From the beginning of their program the UIS team emphasized transparency about the process, providing a comprehensive classroom orientation to what would take place in the simulation and offering safeguards to the participants - recognizing that the environment and the interactions can bring emotions to the surface for many people. It is this recognition that reinforces the value of simulation once again, noting that it is far more beneficial to have a reaction in the simulation than in the field.
3. **Small Cohorts:** Maintaining a limit on the participants ensures that there is sufficient observation, interactions, and feedback. The UIS team set a limit of 10 for the child protection professionals in order to build in one on one time with the trainees and respond to any concerns that might need to be addressed.
4. **Problem-Based Learning (PBL):** Critical thinking is fundamental to making good decisions in child protection yet most new professionals cannot identify how they intentionally utilize critical thinking. The PBL model introduced by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network is a framework for decision-making that minimizes bias and encourages trainees to consider "what else could explain this?" The UIS team has embedded PBL in all of the subsequent trainings developed for other frontline professionals.
5. **Worker Wellness:** Similar to the emphasis on psychological safety in the simulation environment, the UIS team developed wellness strategies throughout the training and in the classroom, encouraging the participants to create their own well-being efforts that they could sustain in the field.

These lessons learned as well as other components of simulation training will be included in a 2025 national publication focused on best practices for child, parent, family & community wellbeing simulation training through the UIS Alliance team's partnership with the Child Welfare League of America.

Supporting the Child Welfare Workforce Through AI-Assisted Evidence-Based Practice Implementation

Michael Tanana, PhD, Emily Smith Goering, PhD

The Use-Case for AI in EBP Implementation

Child welfare in America stands at a critical crossroads. With turnover rates exceeding 50% in many jurisdictions, the workforce crisis threatens the sector's ability to serve vulnerable families effectively (CWLA, 2022). Yet simultaneously, the field is undergoing a revolutionary transformation: shifting from a system historically focused on foster care placement to one prioritizing family preservation and in-home support. With turnover linked to negative family outcomes, a well-trained, well-supported staff is critical to doing this quality prevention work (NCWWI, 2023).

The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) holds promise in supporting this transformation by enabling states to implement evidence-based practices (EBPs) with families as prevention strategies.

> *"Minnesota required a solution that was scalable and accessible. Other tools relied on human coders for assessments, which would be less practical for implementing a statewide rollout of FFPSA MI fidelity monitoring. Lyssn's artificial intelligence (AI) platform offers immediate feedback, meeting the workforce's needs efficiently. Key considerations included monetary factors relating to time, such as the staff and supervisor time needed for training and ongoing use of the tool, as well as the capacity needed for implementation and training at both local and state levels."*
>
> — Amber Forrester, FFPSA Research and Evaluation Consultant & Michelle Ndely, FFPSA Change Management Specialist

The platform serves dual functions: quality monitoring and workforce development. Caseworkers receive instant feedback on their MI skills after 'real plays' (i.e. role plays simulating actual clients interactions), while supervisors and administrators access aggregated data on EBP implementation quality. When skill development needs arise, workers can utilize AI-assisted training tools that provide expert-level feedback on practice sessions.

The Minnesota initiative demonstrates how AI can serve, not as a replacement for human expertise, but as a tool to enhance and scale it—supporting caseworkers in delivering evidence-based services that strengthen families and keep children safely at home. This innovative approach may offer a blueprint for other jurisdictions grappling with similar challenges.

However, this opportunity comes with significant challenges for an already overtaxed system and staff as it requires training the ever-changing workforce in EBPs and quality monitoring of these services to qualify for funding reimbursement.

Minnesota's Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) is pioneering an innovative solution to this challenge through artificial intelligence (AI). Partnering with Lyssn, a technology company focused on improving health and human service quality, Minnesota's DCYF has become one of the first child welfare systems nationally to implement AI-powered quality monitoring in a county-administered system. The initiative centers on Motivational Interviewing (MI), an approach proven effective in child welfare contexts. Traditional MI fidelity monitoring requires resource-intensive processes like expert review of recorded sessions—a practical impossibility across Minnesota's diverse communities with its stretched workforce. Lyssn's AI platform transforms this dynamic by providing immediate feedback on MI skills using speech signal processing and machine learning, calibrated to gold-standard fidelity measures.

The Minnesota initiative demonstrates how AI can serve, not as a replacement for human expertise, but as a tool to enhance and scale it—supporting caseworkers in delivering evidence-based services that strengthen families and keep children safely at home.This innovative approach may offer a blueprint for other jurisdictions grappling with similar challenges. As child welfare continues its transformation toward prevention using EBPs, technologies that support workforce development and quality monitoring will be crucial to success.

Assessing Risk of AI Use in Child Welfare

Since AI is relatively new to the field of child welfare and being used in wide-ranging ways throughout society, it's imperative that those in child welfare, and other helping professions, understand what AI is and how to use it ethically. Academics and researchers in the field of social worker have begun calling for more education around generative AI and its use in helping professions (Rodriguez, 2024). There are a variety of types of AI (i.e. generative, classification, etc.) and prior to decision making about what is appropriate to use in child welfare practice, we recommend the following questions be thoroughly explored (Pogue, 2024):

1. ***Are the models validated and are they transparent?***

   The developers of the AI tools should provide detailed access to performance data from peer reviewed sources, not just internally developed marketing materials.

2. ***Do they assess model bias?***

   Bias of the AI models should be assessed regularly and results should be published, along with ways any issues identified will be addressed. For instance, Lyssn publicly releases annual analyses examining potential biases in the system's assessments across demographic groups, language patterns, and cultural expressions (Tanana, Pruett, & Pace, 2023).

3. ***Is the proposed AI tool being used for a high-risk task?***

   For instance, using an AI tool to support workforce training is lower-risk of human harm than using it to predict high risk situations, like predicting future abuse. If the risk of human harm should the tool not work 100% accurately is high, this may not be an ethical tool to use in child welfare settings.

4. ***Assessing the quality of how the AI was developed?***

   There are many factors to consider about the quality of how the AI was developed. One critical element is that if the tool was developed for child welfare settings it should be built from data and models that are specialized for that setting. 'Off the shelf' models built on platforms like ChatGPT should be viewed with caution.

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Technology as a Bridge to Preserving and Strengthening Relationships

Jennifer Jacobs, PhD

Stephanie* is a teenager in Virginia who moved through 12 foster placements in six years following the adoption of her biological sister by the foster family they shared. Finally, Alicia, a social worker, used Connect Our Kids' software tools to find Lisa, a paternal aunt, who works in the mental health field. Lisa was able to connect with Stephanie and provide her a stable home with the support and understanding of her trauma-driven behaviors that Stephanie desperately needed.

This sounds like an incredible story about the success of technology in solving a foster placement problem. But it's not.

I am the CEO and co-founder of Connect Our Kids, a nonprofit that builds software and other tools and trainings to improve foster care outcomes. I'm always deeply heartened when our tools help youth like Stephanie. So you may be surprised to know that I regularly counsel our potential software users that **technology is not the answer!**

This may seem counterintuitive. To explain, let's take a closer look at Stephanie's story.

Sadly, Stephanie's story started with a number of failures driven by humans misunderstanding her need for connection and for an ongoing relationship with her family – her sister, her birth parents, perhaps neighbors and friends. No technology can ever replace the role that human connection plays in an individual's life. This is especially true during childhood when the brain is forming physical connections that will shape how that child reacts to the world for the rest of her life.

But technology could have played a supporting role. Skilled and caring team members could have used software to help Stephanie's birth parents meet important requirements, surround them and Stephanie with a known network of support, or even help Stephanie's unfortunately long chain of caregivers build a cloud-based lifebook of childhood memories. Technology might have helped humans mitigate some of the hurt Stephanie experienced. But in each of those steps, thoughtful humans need to be in the driver's seat.

Alicia's use of Connect Our Kids' software is a good example of technology as an appropriately applied tool. I like to compare our tools to a bridge over a wide chasm on a path. It can make a world of difference to the path-walker's ability to continue. But Alicia had to be trained and committed to the goal. Aunt Lisa and her specialized abilities didn't drop immediately into Alicia's lap. Instead, Alicia first found dozens of relatives, drew them in through human connection about

Connect Our Kids Software is just one tool that can help to improve foster care outcomes.

Stephanie and her journey, and eventually brought them together in a meeting. Then, Aunt Lisa's suitability for Stephanie became apparent – and, crucially, Stephanie herself decided to try again–this time with her family.

It is important to acknowledge that used inappropriately, technology can be harmful. Tools that find people and information can be invasive, intruding on a family's life. This isn't the fault of the technology itself, however. Take, for example, a power saw. It can be used to build a safe warm house or it can cause a very serious injury. No tool is inherently good or bad – it depends on how and when it is used, and the skill and intent of the one wielding the tool.

Consider, for example, a difficult case of substance-addicted parents. They love their child and want to parent him, and he is deeply attached to them despite their difficulties. Yet the parents constantly fall short of the county's requirements, despite their genuine efforts. Technology helps the case manager discover a wonderful former neighbor who wants to start a family and would like to adopt this vulnerable child. For the overwhelmed case worker, termination of parental rights and adoption might seem to offer a cleaner, easier path than trying to find a way to keep the child in a relationship with his struggling parents as they fight their addictions.

Child welfare professionals wield a life-changing government power – to dismantle a family. When technology is brought to bear, it should be done with the full awareness of how it can affect decision making. Professionals should not reach for technology as a shortcut to clearing cases, but instead as a bridge to preserving and strengthening relationships. When this happens, we have seen the results be the difference in a youth choosing life over death.

Many foster care professionals are drowning in cases, and can be forgiven for hoping that technology will be the magic solution.

No technology can ever replace the role that human connection plays in an individual's life. This is especially true during childhood when the brain is forming physical connections that will shape how that child reacts to the world for the rest of her life.

But the real magic is in the pairing of skilled and caring team members who understand the vital role of relationships, with thoughtfully designed technology, applied as needed. A commitment to this combination with every child's case could completely change child welfare and, most importantly, the outcomes for children and families.

**Name has been changed to protect privacy. Stephanie represents an example for the purpose of this article.*

Jennifer Jacobs, PhD is the CEO and co-founder of Connect Our Kids, a nonprofit that believes Relationships Matter – crucially so for child welfare affected families. Contact jennifer@connectourkids.org

Harnessing AI in Child Welfare: Balancing Innovation with Safety and Privacy

Weilin Li, PhD, Senior Data Scientist at Child Trends

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force in many sectors, and child welfare is no exception. AI has the potential to significantly enhance the well-being of children and families. For example, AI tools have been used to predict risks of child maltreatment (Ahn, et al., 2024), optimize resource allocation in case management, and identify early signs of behavioral and emotional challenges (Stanley, et al., 2024 & Mengi & Malhotra, 2021). However, with this promise comes a profound responsibility to ensure AI systems are being implemented and used with safety and privacy considerations. This responsibility is especially critical given the sensitive nature of child welfare services. This article explores the nuanced differences between AI deployment and usage regulations, offering strategies and case studies that underscore the importance of programmatic and policy oversight in these domains.

The Dual Facets of AI Implementation: Deployment vs. Usage

AI systems typically progress through four stages: design, development, deployment, and use (AIRMF, 2023). While safety and privacy assessments are critical at every stage, the scope and focus differ markedly. In the design and development stages, assessment criteria are broadly defined because the underlying AI techniques are intended for applications across diverse fields. In contrast, the deployment phase requires a tailored evaluation specific to the context in which the AI system is introduced. Deployment regulations are applied when the AI product enters the market to ensure that it meets rigorous standards before becoming accessible to users. Meanwhile, regulations around the use of AI systems guide the everyday operation of AI systems, concentrating on behavioral expectations and support mechanisms within communities. This article focuses primarily on the deployment and use stages to ensure that AI applications in child welfare are safe and protect the privacy of children and families.

Securing AI Deployment: Establishing Robust Data Security and Privacy Protocols

The deployment stage is a critical juncture where technical innovation meets real-world application, and ensuring robust data security and privacy becomes vital. To make AI systems specifically useful for child welfare users, agencies should consider implementing rigorous security audits and certification processes. These processes should involve collaboration among cybersecurity experts, regulatory bodies, and child welfare practitioners to evaluate the AI system's resilience against potential threats. Regular penetration testing and vulnerability assessments help identify weak points in the system, while robust encryption protocols and secure data storage solutions protect sensitive information from cyberattacks. By undergoing such stringent evaluations, AI products can enter the market with confidence, ensuring that the systems are not only innovative but also secure.

Collaboration between technology experts and child welfare practitioners is also crucial during the deployment phase. This interdisciplinary approach not only strengthens the system's security measures but also ensures that the deployed AI product aligns with the unique needs and ethical considerations of the child welfare community. During the deployment phase, regular sharing sessions and joint workshops can bridge the gap between technical requirements and practical application, ensuring that all stakeholders remain informed and proactive in maintaining data security and privacy.

Navigating Daily AI Usage: Establishing Community Guidelines

For AI systems to be safely effective in child welfare, community guidelines must be established to guide their usage by practitioners, educators, and other stakeholders. These guidelines should address several key areas:

- Privacy Protection. Clear rules must be in place to ensure that the data collected and processed by AI systems is handled with the utmost care. This involves not only technical measures but also regular training for users on data privacy practices.
- Reporting and Support Mechanisms. There must be robust, accessible systems for reporting uncomfortable or harmful content. These mechanisms could be integrated into the operational framework of agencies, providing real-time support and ensuring that issues are swiftly addressed.
- Education on AI Limitations. Over-trust in AI can lead to complacency or misuse. Therefore, it is important to ensure that all stakeholders, especially children and their parents, fully understand the limitations of AI and use it as a complementary tool rather than a definitive solution.

AI Systems Assessment

To ensure safety and ethical functionality of AI systems, developers often employ "red teaming" – a method involving the use of extreme, often harmful questions to uncover weaknesses and test resilience. However, as the psychological impact of red teaming activities on participants is well established, it's crucial that children and youth are not engaged in red teaming activities. Instead, assessment of AI systems should focus more on a comprehensive and detailed evaluation process (IBM, 2022).

Implementing these guidelines, however, is not without challenges. The administrative load involved in the upkeep, surveillance, and assistance associated with AI usage could be significant. This often necessitates collaboration among various agencies (e.g., the education and child welfare departments), which can sometimes lead to cross-functional tension. Nevertheless, with clear communication channels and shared objectives, these challenges can be managed effectively to create a supportive ecosystem for AI usage in child welfare.

Conclusion

As we look to the future, the adoption of AI in child welfare must be guided by both innovation and ethical rigor. Practitioners, policymakers, and community stakeholders must work together to create an ecosystem where AI serves as a trusted partner in safeguarding our most vulnerable populations. By distinguishing between deployment and usage regulations, practitioners can ensure that AI systems are not only robust at market entry but also operate responsibly on a day-to-day basis. With thoughtful regulation and proactive strategies, we can harness AI's potential to build a safer and more effective system for children and families.

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Embracing Technology: Advancing Family Finding Practices in Child Welfare with Binti

John Mikach, LGSW, Sr. Product Launch & Enablement Manager at Binti

Investing in technology to support caseworkers has the potential to increase job satisfaction and promote quality practice, which is crucial when it impacts the lives of children and families (Atwood & Cooley, 2021). Family finding – the process of identifying and engaging relatives and kin – plays a vital role in improving outcomes for children in care. Yet many social services agencies rely on outdated or generic software systems which create communication silos, duplication of effort, and delays that prevent children from forming these life-changing connections and better outcomes (Gillingham, 2019; Leon et al., 2016).

Binti addresses these challenges with a focus on designing software specifically for child welfare workers. Every decision in the software development process is guided by extensive on-the-ground research, ensuring that our tools align with the real-world challenges and workflows across the United States. Binti offers individual solutions for licensing of caregivers, child placement, case management, family finding and engagement, and service referral and prevention services alongside an end-to-end Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) solution (Binti, 2024).

One of Binti's newest products, the Family Finding & Engagement Module, is an exciting step forward in promoting the placement of children with relatives and kin, while strengthening family connections and support systems. A review of 120 research studies concluded that children and youth placed with relatives and kin experience increased placement stability and improved mental and emotional outcomes (Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2015).

Through conversation with our customers, Binti learned that poor communication and fragmented workflows increase the time and effort required for family finding; for example, many agencies use search tools to identify relatives, but then separately rely on pen and paper or other fragmented tools to track outreach and engagement (Binti, 2023). Research supports these findings, suggesting that family finding outcomes are often negatively impacted due to challenges with cross-organizational communication (Vandivere & Malm, 2015). This includes communicating across departments and needing to enter the same information in multiple systems. These challenges create delays that can prevent children from building critical connections with relatives and kin.

Binti's Family Finding & Engagement module provides a centralized hub for managing every aspect of family finding efforts. From potential kin searches to documenting outreach attempts and relationship tracking, the module organizes critical information in a user-friendly dashboard. By consolidating tasks into a single system, caseworkers save time and maintain accurate, up-to-date records. To ensure maximum impact, we designed Binti to be suitable for agencies regardless of the family finding practice model used. This means Binti is just as effective for a small private agency as it is for a statewide human service agency.

At Binti, we believe technology should enhance – not replace – the skills and expertise of child welfare workers. Our Family Finding & Engagement module reduces the burden of behind-the-scenes tasks, empowering caseworkers to focus on building meaningful connections with families. You can learn more and get in touch by visiting us at https://binti.com.

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Six Ways Binti Improves Family Finding Practice

The Family Finding & Engagement module is designed to simplify workflows, enhance collaboration, and improve outcomes for children. Here are six key ways Binti transforms family finding practices:

1. **Potential Kin Online Search:** Binti's Potential Kin Online Search directly integrates with Thomson Reuters' Risk & Fraud Solutions to provide access to a vast collection of public and proprietary records. Binti transforms lengthy, multi-page documents into concise, relevant data, making family finding more efficient and focused. This integration eliminates manual data entry and reduces the need to use multiple tools.
2. **Cloud-Based, Mobile-Friendly Collaboration:** Binti is a cloud-based platform, allowing caseworkers to collaborate anywhere. Binti allows agencies to customize access allowing family-finding specialists, licensing social workers, and placement staff to seamlessly share information and collaborate. This flexibility removes silos and enables teams to work together more effectively to support children and families.
3. **Automated Documentation of Relative and Kin Outreach:** Save hours of time with Binti's automated relative notification features. Caseworkers can send communications to relatives and kin in bulk with a single click, whether by email, text, or printed letters. All outreach efforts are automatically logged. This saves time, reduces documentation burdens, and ensures compliance.
4. **Automatically Generated Genograms:** Visualize family connections at a glance with Binti's automatically generated genograms. These relationship maps provide valuable insights into relational strengths and challenges, not only guiding caseworkers but also serving as a meaningful resource for children, helping them understand their connections to others.
5. **Data-Driven Insights and Analytics:** Binti provides actionable insights to measure the impact of family finding efforts. From tracking response rates to documenting outreach and engagement outcomes, these reports enable workers and managers to make informed decisions and improve practices.
6. **Interoperability with Existing Systems:** Binti is a modern tool that can communicate with existing systems that your agency uses. This integration eliminates duplicate data entry, reduces errors, and ensures consistency across platforms.

Highlights of Evaluation Findings Regarding Use of Case-Supportive Technology on Child Welfare Workforce Outcomes

Dana Hollinshead, PhD, MPA and Anita Barbee, PhD, MSSW

Technological supports for child welfare caseworkers have long been touted as a critical means to support a workforce beleaguered with administrative, documentation, and travel tasks (APHSA, 2005). Increasingly, agencies have implemented case-supportive technology supports, emphasizing perceived benefits such as time savings, enhanced opportunities for family engagement, as well as reductions in staff stress and turnover (Hughes, 2018).

In response to child welfare caseworker concerns about excessive administrative, travel, and documentation burdens, the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) implemented two technological interventions across the state: transcription services in 2017-2018 and COMPASS|Mobile in 2019-2020. The Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development (QIC-WD; www.qic-wd.org) supported implementation and evaluated the case-supportive technology in 18 of 120 local departments of social services (LDSS).

The two interventions were chosen for different purposes. Transcription services were a simple support that could be introduced to the field quickly. Caseworkers could call a number, dictate their notes, and receive transcriptions within 1-5 days for review and insertion in the case file. COMPASS|Mobile was an iPad application available to all caseworkers who managed caseloads in child welfare. It could be used in both online and offline mode to enter new case contacts, intakes and investigations (I&Is), read the last 90 days of contacts/I&Is, access and update demographics, educational information and medical information, upload photos, access policy manuals and job aids, view available placement providers, complete forms, obtain digital signatures, and share forms through encrypted email. Supervisors could oversee casework through a parallel computer-based portal. Given the state still relied on an antiquated information system platform, these innovations enabled them to employ contemporary standards to data collection and access while maintaining strict data security even though the back end of the system needed an update.

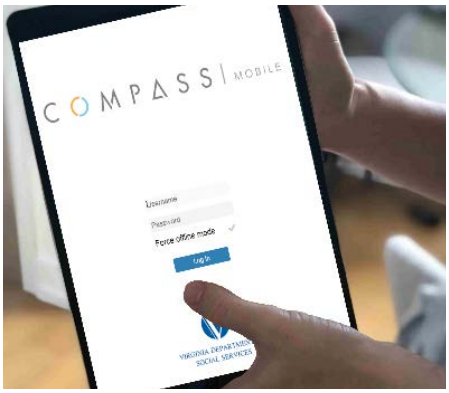
Evaluation Methods and Findings

Short-term outcomes were examined using rapid diary studies, documentation data from the state's SafeMeasures® information system, and three staff surveys (one just prior to transcription roll out, one before the COMPASS|Mobile roll out and a final follow-up). Rapid diary study results indicated that staff appreciated the state's focus on supporting their work by providing technology to facilitate real-time reporting and flexibility in when and where casework was completed. They reported time savings, particularly with respect to information access and documentation and felt their time was freed to accomplish other tasks including spending more time with families. Workers reported that families were more engaged with them when using COMPASS|Mobile than they were before its implementation.

Staff also reported that the accuracy of the information they documented improved due to the mobile work supports. In fact, the timeliness of case visit documentation improved. The percentage of overdue visit documentation that occurred more than a month after the visit was reduced 30-50%, depending on the type of case. Furthermore, the staff surveys suggested that over the course of the study, there were small but statistically significant improvements in (1) reductions in work stress, (2) increases in positive feelings about supervisors and co-workers, and (3) increases in optimism.

Turnover was assessed longitudinally based on both statewide HR data and a monthly QIC-WD survey to the 18 localities regarding the status of each case carrying employee. Over the 44 month course of the study (February 2018 – September 2021), 39% of child welfare staff departed the agency, a large reduction in the number of staff who typically would have left over a 3 year period. However, chi-square analyses did not detect an association between use of technology and turnover, a result suggesting that the interventions by themselves, may not have been adequate to address the full array of concerns that typically prompt departures from child welfare agencies.

On the other hand, organizational culture and climate data from the 18 participating localities suggested that overall, the dynamics of the workplaces operated within a fairly normal range for child welfare agencies. Even so, shifts in organizational dynamics over time were generally favorable, but variation at the locality level was evident, with some localities consistently struggling or outperforming others. Still, in general, smaller localities tended to be associated with more positive and less adverse work environments.



During COVID-19, the iPads served as a ready resource and means for the state to communicate critical COVID-19 resources and related policy updates to caseworkers across the state in real time. Existing security mechanisms also enabled the quick rollout of a HIPPA- and HITECH-compliant tool for virtual visiting during lockdown.

In terms of implementation, the state learned a great deal from the way they installed these case-supporting technologies. In particular, participating localities expressed immense gratitude for the state's engagement of directors, supervisors, and caseworkers early on and throughout the COMPASS|Mobile planning, design, and implementation process. The state also created a robust support system to ensure training and ongoing resources were available to support staff using COMPASS|Mobile across the state. Their work should be considered a model for such endeavors.

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Fostering Responsible Tech Use: Recommendations for Public Child Welfare Agencies

Maddy Dwyer, Policy Analyst, Equity in Civic Technology

Following the article located in the overview section of this publication, which covers the benefits and the risks that data and technology use present to public child welfare agencies, the Center for Democracy & Technology (CDT) offers recommendations to maximize benefits and mitigate the harms to better serve youth in foster care. Though these recommendations pertain to all data and technology uses, they are especially important as more and more public agencies are looking to take advantage of artificial intelligence (AI)-powered tools. For additional details on these recommendations, see the full report https://z.umn.edu/CBXVol3No4.

Public child welfare agencies should, among other steps, take the following actions to deploy data and technology including AI in responsible, rights respecting ways:

Identify the Problems that Data or Technology May Solve and the Potential Harms It Could Introduce

Child welfare agencies should not assume that acquiring new data and/or technology systems is necessarily the best solution (Laird & Grant-Chapman, 2021). Therefore, they should first identify the problems they seek to solve and determine whether data and technology could be helpful – and, if so, whether the benefits outweigh the risks. If the technology and/or its intended use is high-risk, child welfare agencies should conduct an impact assessment to determine whether to use it in the first place.

Engage Affected Stakeholders, From Caseworkers to Foster Youth

Community engagement should be an ongoing process throughout the lifecycle of the data or technology system, from deciding whether it should be used through post-deployment monitoring. Critical aspects of engaging foster care stakeholders are establishing goals, processes, and roles; working with communities to determine how decisions will be made and communicated; determining and implementing an ongoing governance strategy; ensuring proper representation; and identifying and communicating child welfare agencies' limitations for engagement (Laird & Grant-Chapman, 2021).

Establish and/or Enhance Inter- and Intra-Agency Data and Technology Governance To Guide Decision Making

Collaboration between child welfare agencies, education agencies, and any other agencies participating in a data sharing system is essential in maintaining high quality data that can inform how to best serve youth in foster care. Agencies can work together to determine which data sources are best for a particular measurement and flag any inconsistencies for remediation (The Data Quality Campaign, 2017).

To support effective governance, it is important that public administrators and policymakers take steps like:

- **Ensure adequate capacity among data stewards and users**. Caseworkers should be properly trained on the benefits and risks of the particular data or technology system acquired. Understanding the limitations and risks that come with predictive risk models (PRMs), for example, will allow caseworkers to spot when the system may be incorrect either during the information gathering process or in the determination phase.
- **Enable secure, appropriate access management controls.** Caseworkers assigned to a specific foster child and any other personnel an agency deems absolutely necessary should be the only individuals with access to sensitive case data. Within the foster care context, Role-Based Access Control or Attribute-Based Access Control may be the best fits, since they offer the ability to make access to documents or data contingent upon the role of the employee or attribute of the employee or document or data, respectively (Quay-de la Vallee, 2022).
- **Practice data minimization.** Child welfare agencies should determine what data is necessary to collect, especially as it pertains to a child's sensitive personal information. Agencies should weigh the utility of data against the risks of collecting it, and ensure they have a plan for the data, rather than collecting data "just in case" it will be useful in the future.
- **Create data retention standards.** Agencies should not keep data beyond the time it is needed to serve the individual in question, and must have policies and procedures for data retention and deletion. This is particularly pertinent for the child welfare context, since youth in foster care age out of the system.
- **Ensure other agencies meet minimum security requirements.** When deciding to share data across agencies, it is imperative to review and consider their data privacy and security policies, and whether they align with an agency's basic requirements. If they do not, officials must establish a way to share data without compromising security measures (Laird & Quay-de la Vallee, 2019).

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Implement and Manage AI Tools Safely and Responsibly

Deciding to procure and implement an AI tool is a choice that affects children in foster care, foster homes, and caseworkers. Notifying these stakeholders in a timely, transparent manner about what tool an agency is considering, how it would be used, what data it collects, what data it omits, and how it makes determinations is imperative in building community trust (Laird, 2021).

In addition to prioritizing transparency, it is also important that public administrators and policymakers:

- **Establish clear human-in-the-loop policies and procedures.** Left on their own, AI tools may make mistakes that significantly impact the outcomes of foster youth, so it is critical that caseworkers use their expertise to double check that information has been input correctly and know when they should override or correct a determination made by a machine. Accordingly, agencies should have policies in place that make it clear that caseworkers should not simply defer to automated tools.
- **Establish a process for remedying mistakes.** Child welfare agencies should have a process in place for remedying errors when they are presented with new

evidence. An example of this is when a child is improperly entered into the foster care system or not reunited with their birth family. A caseworker or other agency personnel must be aware of how to review what went wrong in the system's determination and how they can prevent a similar situation from happening in the future. This should be done in partnership with the developer of the system, which may be someone from an agency or third party vendor.

- **Establish a process to measure efficacy, equity, and financial impact.** Child welfare agencies must ensure there is a process in place to measure the efficacy, financial impact, and equity impact of newly acquired data or technology systems. This should be a lifecycle process – done before acquisition, in addition to ongoing monitoring.
- **Audit current child welfare data for bias.** Child welfare agencies should prioritize reviewing their administrative and case data for indicators of bias, so the data and technology systems built on it are best positioned to avoid perpetuating existing disparities (Dwyer, 2024).

Be Diligent in Vetting Vendors

Child welfare agencies have a responsibility to ensure that data and technology systems purchased through vendors do not cause harm to the foster youth and families they serve. They can do this if they:

- **Develop and apply clear standards, requirements, and processes for procurement.** To the extent they will have access to personal data, vendors must follow the same standards (e.g., data deletion, privacy, retention) as a child welfare agency, especially in dealing with sensitive foster youth data. For example, vendors must have secure data storage methods that meet minimum requirements and should by no means sell or use data for purposes other than those contracted for. If vendors are unable to provide critical information or adhere to established standards, the purchasing decision should be reevaluated.
- **Audit for disproportionate impact.** Asking vendors if their products have been audited for disproportionate impact, requesting copies of the test results, and evaluating whether the product is suitably unbiased for the expected purpose (either in the child welfare or other contexts), is vital. It is unlikely that their tool has been developed specifically to support the foster care system, which is why having an understanding of its potential pitfalls is critical. Agencies should also require vendors to include in any contracts the obligation to audit again for such impacts on the agencies own data, since results may vary when used in different contexts. If vendors cannot supply the above documentation or comply with contract requests – or if an agency is not completely comfortable that the vendor's product is not biased (whether by evaluating a vendor's own testing or commissioning its own) – the purchasing decision should be reevaluated.
- **Ensure capabilities for turning off unnecessary features.** Vendors, particularly ones that provide predictive systems, may perpetuate bias by feeding discretionary or other inappropriate data points into their algorithms. Choosing a product that enables a child welfare agency to turn off those specific features can better suit their goal of providing high quality, equitable services to youth in foster care.

Incorporating data and technology into the foster care system comes with inherent privacy, security, and equity risks; however, these risks can be minimized by taking the actions described above.

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Wearable Biometric Technology in Child Welfare: A Catalyst for Change

Austin Griffiths, PhD, Chloe Corley, BS, and Rachel Wyatt, LCSW

Child welfare professionals make a difference every day. They listen, assist, advocate, and intervene in some of the most challenging situations in society. Many choose this profession and describe it as a calling. Without question, it can be very rewarding work. However, it can also be uniquely stressful. A recent study by Link et al. (2023) found that 93.3% of surveyed child welfare professionals reported a heightened level of perceived stress (e.g., moderate or severe) in the previous 30-days. One of the biggest complications of stress in child welfare workers is burnout and secondary traumatic stress (Sprang, et al., 2011). The implications of turnover, case severity, and moral taxing all generate significant stress on child welfare workers (Fuseini, 2024). There are implications to this stress, as far as it relates to the professional's health. Captured through an open-ended text response, a state-wide sample of child welfare workers stated that the stress of their positions resulted in the development of unhealthy eating habits, struggles with sleep disruption, substance use, limited exercising, self-neglect, and more (Griffiths, Royse, & Walker, 2018). While decades of research have sought to address the considerable problem of occupational stress in child welfare and the related implications (e.g., turnover, cost, service delivery, etc.) the problem remains a global concern. A new approach may be needed to finally address this issue.

Biometric assessment devices from the Kentucky Child Welfare Workforce Wellness Initiative ready to be delivered to workers in the field.

Collecting Evidence

Imagine receiving a survey that asks you about your perceived level of occupational stress. As a child protection worker, you are "used" to *the struggle*. This is what you do. You get surveys often, and you do your best to respond. The question asks, "on a scale of 1 to 10, how much does the stress of your job impact your personal health?" You intend to be honest, but you are a bit distracted as you prepare to leave for your home visit. It's 4:00pm on a Friday and you are ready for the weekend. Quickly, you select the 3, thinking "I don't look sick" and this is just "how it is" when working in child welfare. As you prepare to leave for your home visit you take a minute to finish your Red Bull and realize that you now have a headache forming. You think to yourself, "Maybe I should have selected a 4 or a 5 for that question?" Feeling a little bit fatigued, you decide to simply press on. You've got work to do.

The Problem with Subjectivity

The problem with subjectivity is multifaceted, including but not limited to concerns about perception, the influence of bias, and recall. This is not meant to discount the value of the contribution of the individual, but as it pertains to making progress with assessing occupational stress, other "similar" professions have made significant progress by integrating the collection of objective data (e.g., nursing and law enforcement). Yet, this type of progress has not occurred in child welfare.

> Findings from Cohort 1 reveal an obvious contrast between the participant's own perceptions of their stress and the objective physiological data collected by the technological devices.

A New Approach

The good news is that there are options as it pertains to accessible, feasible, and flexible technology that can assist agencies in collecting objective data. One example comes from a study in Kentucky, entitled the Kentucky Child Welfare Workforce Wellness Initiative (KCWWWI). With a sample of 81 child welfare workers, the research team chose to use the Firstbeat Bodyguard 2 (a wearable and minimally invasive physiological measurement device that tracks the autonomic nervous systems (ANS) and heart rate variability (HRV)) to gather participant data (Griffiths, et al., 2023). The device is lightweight (24 grams or .05 pounds), holds a charge for 6 days, and sticks to the participant's body with adhesive electrodes that are attached to both ends of the device (e.g., just below right collarbone and left side of chest). The device captures an exhaustive amount of ongoing biometric data in participants (e.g., heart rate variability, the root mean square of successive differences between normal heartbeats or RMSSD, heart rate, sleep time, recovery time, exercise and movement data, etc.). Basically, there is a formidable return on investment with this device and a quality design can create strong research.

In this novel study, the KCWWWI research team sought to innovatively collect biofeedback from child welfare workers – during work hours and over time, and then compare their objective data with their self-reported assessments of stress, etc. While data is still being analyzed, a few salient findings from Cohort 1 reveal an obvious contrast between the participant's own perceptions of their stress and the objective physiological data collected by the technological devices. For example, on the Perceived Stress Scale, 77% of the 31

participants reported a "moderate" level of stress and 29% of the sample stated that they obtain a "good" quality of sleep on the Brief Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index. Objective physiological data was tracked every 4th week, for 6 months, across 72-hour windows. There was a notable difference in the quality, depth, and utility of the objective physiological data when compared to cross-sectional survey data. Specifically, the biometric devices indicated that these individuals experienced 15.88 hours per day of heightened physiological stress and only 2.88 hours per day of "relaxation time." The comprehensive ongoing data collected from the biometric devices allowed the researchers (and participants) to understand the issue of occupational stress at more than a surface level, and over time. While almost a third of the sample stated that they were getting "good" sleep on the PSQI, the biofeedback stated that even when these individuals were asleep, they were not achieving the required levels of recovery (Griffiths, et al., 2023).

Turning Evidence into Advocacy

The Kentucky Child Welfare Workforce Wellness Initiative sets the table for future action. This study is a call to action for two reasons: 1. Integrating objective data into child welfare research, and 2. Utilizing wearable biometric technology as a catalyst for data collection. To be clear, the Firstbeat Bodyguard 2 was chosen as the most operational conduit for achieving the goals of the study, and the research team was satisfied with its use. However, there are other options and the Firstbeat 2 may not be an accessible tool of measurement for every research team. Technology is improving daily and there are sure to be new options for utilization. Next, this article does not seek to undermine the significance of subjective research, only to highlight opportunities that exist and pathways for assisting the workforce. If anything, objective data (especially when collected through least invasive wearable biometric technology) can augment the subjective contributions of workers and create new and formidable evidence that can be leveraged for effective advocacy. Importantly, the participants continually described having positive experiences when using the technology and shared an appreciation for obtaining a new level of insight into their personal health. In closing, wearable biometric technology in child welfare may be a catalyst for change. Leveraging this new approach may be the secret to protecting workers, creating more equitable policies, and ensuring better outcomes for families and children.

Kentucky Child Welfare Workforce Wellness Initiative staff prepare Firstbeat 2's for the study.

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Why Objective Measures Are Needed

The inclusion of objective measures, as it pertains to occupational stress in child welfare, are essential for three main reasons:

1. Objective data can provide a more complete understanding of the phenomenon. For example, physiological indicators (e.g., cortisol and heart rate variability) can provide robust insight into stressors that workers may not consciously recognize.
2. Objective data assists by counterbalancing the personal contributions that can be influenced by personal bias (intentionally or unconsciously).
3. Subjective data is also more appropriately aligned with immediate feelings, and objective data provides the opportunity to look at trends and patterns (acute vs. chronic).

Simulation Based Training for Tribal Child Welfare Professionals

Dallas W. Pettigrew, MSW & Cortney A. Bolt, MSW

Simulation Based Training for Tribal Child Welfare Professionals

Airline pilots, lawyers, firefighters and other professionals participate in simulation-based learning to enhance their skills in safe, but realistic settings, and now child welfare professionals train in simulated environments, too (Landsman et al., 2018; Zamoff, 2024; Stevenson, Warwick, & Bilzon, 2024). The University of Oklahoma has used simulation-based training for a decade with social work students, medical, nursing and allied health students, interprofessional groups, and community organizations (News on 6, 2016). A state-of-the-art facility opened in 2015 (Rahal, 2015) with 17 rooms dedicated to simulation experiences; two full-service surgical suites, 10 primary care examination rooms, four interview rooms/living rooms and a one-bedroom apartment, complete with a working bathroom and kitchen. These rooms are all wired for video and audio recording. There are 10 two-person viewing stations set up for real-time observation of the simulations.

The Training Pilot Development

As the Center for Tribal Social Work was developing, social work faculty and collaborators from the Eastern Oklahoma Regional Office (EORO) of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), began developing simulation-based training for Tribal child welfare programs. OU-Tulsa sits within the Reservation of the Muscogee Nation and borders the Cherokee Nation and Osage Nation. There are 39 federally recognized Tribes in Oklahoma, and nearly all of them provide child welfare and other social services. Oklahoma is home to two regional offices of the BIA and social workers provide services there, too. We saw the potential to provide training opportunities using the tools of the University, the talented faculty of the School of Social Work, and the experience, skill, knowledge and expertise of Tribal child welfare professionals.

The National Association of Social Workers (2021) Code of Ethics lists six Core Values of the profession. One, however, is incredibly important when working with Tribes, the Importance of Human Relationships. In Indian Country, relationships are vital. Reputations are enduring and when sullied, repairs can take years. We knew Tribes had been exploited by universities in the past (Harmon, 2010) and we had to approach them respectfully and with assurances they would not be exploited by our collaboration.

We invited Tribal elected officials to a meeting where we would propose the training initiative. We asked Tribes to bring their child welfare leaders, too. We hosted the meeting in the Simulation Center at OU-Tulsa (SCOUT) so they could get a tour of the facility and hear our idea. Nine Tribes were represented at the meeting, and afterward all agreed to participate. To win their trust we offered these assurances:

1. We will develop a workgroup of Tribal child welfare professionals, selected by Tribes, who guide development of all parts of the training.
2. Tribal child welfare professionals will be invited to co-train the learners and would receive support from us to develop materials like slideshows and handouts, if needed.
3. The project would be overseen by the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of the Muscogee Nation and the University of Oklahoma. We would abide by both IRBs, but would go to Muscogee Nation's first, then to the University's IRB to concur or require changes.
4. Nothing about the project, including any data, evaluation findings, identities and Tribal affiliations of individual participants, participating Tribes, etc., would be disseminated without first obtaining permission from the Tribal Child Welfare Training Workgroup. The workgroup would be credited in all forms of dissemination.

Over the course of several months, the Tribal Child Welfare Training Workgroup and OU social work faculty members met to develop a set of Tribal Child Welfare Competencies and associated Practice Behaviors which the training would center on. Additionally, scenarios were developed to provide context and act as scripts for the Standardized Participants (SPs) who would act in the roles of parents for our training. The scenarios contained a brief history of the family, learning objectives, a series of if/then prompts, and advice for giving feedback to the learners after their time in simulation.

> The pre-survey indicated 76% felt moderately or highly hopeful. Post-surveys indicated 93% felt that level of hope.

Elements for Successful Implementation

Our simulation-based training incorporated these elements for increased success:

1. Pre-reading, viewing videos, or other forms of homework to prepare for the training.
2. Classroom training to start the day. The morning lecture and discussions taught the learners about the intended competency, and engagement strategies to accomplish it.
3. Lunch was provided to save time compared to going out for lunch.
4. Specific standardized participants (SPs). The SPs add immeasurably to the learning experience. They were paid employees of SCOUT and trained to portray characters. They were not previously known to the learners, so it was more realistic. To the extent possible we used Native American SPs.
5. Detailed scenarios. Scenarios provide the framework of the simulation. It contains names and brief histories of all characters.
6. Staging of the environment. Since the setting was controlled, we could incorporate any number of items to make the scene more realistic.
7. Technology. The technology, CAE Learning Space, enables recording the entire interaction. The recording can be annotated by observers. During playback, those notes appear on-screen at the time the behavior occurred.
8. Facilitated Debriefing. This kind of guided debriefing is a powerful tool. Following learners' simulation experience, the SPs switch from participating as clients to providing feedback from the clients' points of view. Their feedback helped the learner understand how they made the clients feel during the experience. After all the learners have completed their simulation, they were gathered for a strengths-based debriefing facilitated by the trainers.
9. Financial support. Unlike role-plays, simulations have expenses. The SPs are paid by the hour. The software can be prohibitively costly, along with the cameras, microphones, control boards, and computers for operations. On-site lunch has a cost, but the value of time saved makes

it worthwhile. The costs can be reduced while keeping the simulation beneficial.

10. Partnership from Tribes. While the faculty members leading this work were Tribal citizens with years of experience working in Tribal and state child welfare, there is no substitute for the partnership with Tribal child welfare supervisors, managers and directors. They provide excellent feedback to learners, keep the material relevant with their knowledge of current trends from the cases they supervise. They also lend credibility to the university while safeguarding the interests of their Tribes.

A Second Pilot Implementation

In a second deployment of this training pilot, BIA Social Workers from all the U.S. Regional offices attended. Most had graduate social work credentials and several years of experience, so they were starting with a high level of competence. Learners complete pre- and post-training surveys we used to evaluate the training. The pre-survey indicated 76% felt moderately or highly hopeful. Post-surveys indicated 93% felt that level of hope. Learners rated their level of knowledge at 71.4% high or very high before the training. Post-training, scores increased to 92.9%. When asked what aspects of the training could be improved, learners left seven comments; six recommended more time in training and one reported the training room temperature was uncomfortable.

Adaptability

Simulation-based training can be deployed with less cost, in off-campus settings, and even without the recording equipment and software. We delivered Qualified Expert Witness Testimony Training in an actual Tribal courtroom. Private practice and Oklahoma Indian Legal Services attorneys volunteered as SPs acting as judge, prosecutor, and parents' attorney. The learners were sworn in and testified from the witness stand, responding to questioning from attorneys using the same line of inquiry typical in actual cases. We used all learners as observers/evaluators giving them paper evaluation tools to annotate during each simulation. Evaluation results were as positive as the training done in SCOUT. With imagination and help from others, this work can be done effectively in all kinds of ways.

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Authors' Notes

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WorthIt: A New Financial Wellness Tool for LGBTQ+ Young Adults

Nia Clark, MSW

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation (HRCF) has developed *WorthIt*, a dedicated financial wellness platform aimed at supporting LGBTQ+ people in achieving financial security and stability. This initiative is critical, as financial wellness can be a significant concern for many within the LGBTQ+ community, often due to systemic challenges and discrimination faced in various sectors including employment, housing, and healthcare. For youth and young adults transitioning out of the child welfare system, financial literacy is even more essential.

Understanding Financial Wellness

Financial wellness refers to the overall health of an individual's financial situation. It is the ability to meet basic needs and manage money for the short- and long-term. This includes budgeting, saving, investing, and preparing for the future. For LGBTQ+ individuals, the path to financial wellness can be difficult. According to HRCF's "Financial Wellness Report" (Flohr, C. Goldberg, S., Delpercio, A., Rivers, M., 2024), the LGBTQ+ community faces significant financial challenges compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers.

For instance, more than half (58%) of young LGBTQ+ adult respondents ages 18-24 said they are not doing well financially. Black (49%) and Latine (52%) LGBTQ+ respondents reported feeling more financially unwell compared to their white counterparts (Flohr, et. al, 2024). The report also posits that LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to experience higher rates of unemployment and lower household incomes. Furthermore, it reveals that discrimination in the workplace and while accessing financial institutions and services, continue to impact the financial well-being of the overall LGBTQ+ community. These statistics underscore the need to intentionally address these economic inequities by promoting policies and programs that support financial stability and equality for LGBTQ+ individuals, most especially young adults standing at the precipice of adulthood.

Features of WorthIt

WorthIt is a free, user friendly, web based app made specifically for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) queer & transgender young adults who need help meeting their financial goals. It can be accessed 24 hours a day via mobile phone, tablet, or laptop. WorthIt responds in real time and offers financial health and wellness resources based on individual responses. Aside from a device with internet, no additional technology is needed to use WorthIt.


photo: istockphoto

The app offers a range of resources that include educational materials, videos, articles, and interactive tools designed to empower users in managing their finances effectively and provides a wealth of information on various financial topics. The resources are tailored to meet the specific needs of LGBTQ+ individuals. The platform also includes budgeting tools that invite users to assess their financial situations and plan for the future, allowing them to visualize their financial health and set both realistic and actionable goals.

Achieving financial wellness is not a one-time effort; it is an ongoing and life-long process. WorthIt encourages users to set both short- and long-term financial goals, whether that means finding scholarships for college or vocational training, buying a new or used car, or creating an emergency fund. Other topics include establishing good credit habits, connecting finances to physical and emotional health, budgeting for holiday travel or apartment furnishings, as well as steps to open a traditional savings account or certificate of deposit (CD). By providing the tools and knowledge necessary to create a solid financial plan, WorthIt can help young people build a brighter financial future.

The Importance of Financial Education for Transition-Aged Youth

Financial literacy is crucial for youth aging out of the child welfare system as it equips them with essential skills and knowledge necessary for navigating the complexities of adulthood. Many young people face significant challenges when transitioning to independent living, including managing bills, buying groceries, and utilizing personal loans & credit cards responsibly. Without proper financial education, many are likely to experience difficulties in securing housing, consistent food sources, employment, and their overall well-being. With the use of financial literacy tools like WorthIt, these youth can develop the confidence and competence needed to make more informed financial decisions, ultimately promoting their long-term success and self-sufficiency.

Financial literacy is crucial for youth aging out of the child welfare system as it equips them with essential skills and knowledge necessary for navigating the complexities of adulthood.

Conclusion

WorthIt is an essential resource for individuals seeking to improve their financial health. By offering tailored educational materials and practical tools, the platform addresses many of the unique economic challenges faced by LGBTQ+ young adults. WorthIt not only promotes individual financial wellness but also advocates for systemic changes that can lead to greater equity and opportunity for all. As the landscape of child welfare in the U.S. continues to evolve, we must equip young people with the knowledge and resources they need to navigate their financial futures confidently. The journey to financial wellness is personal and unique for everyone, but with the right support and education, it is a journey that can lead to lasting security and peace of mind.

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CaseAIM: Information and Communication Technology for Child Welfare Case Management Services

Lauren H.K. Stanley, PhD, LCSW, Melissa Radey, PhD, Sophia Lutz, BS, Dina J. Wilke, PhD

The ability of a child welfare case manager (CM) to engage with, and coordinate care for clients depends in part on workload size. A CM's caseload, or the number of cases assigned to a worker at one time, is commonly used as a proxy indicator for workload. High caseloads are associated with lower quality relationships between workers and families associated with poor outcomes for children (Griffiths et al., 2020).

Supporting workers to complete caseload tasks is critical to effective child welfare service provision (Griffiths et al., 2020). Many agencies have turned to Information Communication Technologies (ICT) — tools that support efficient communication, information sharing, and information management — to increase service efficiency (Craig & Lorenzo, 2014). Common forms of ICT include online record-keeping systems, social media, text messages, online platforms, or phone applications (apps).

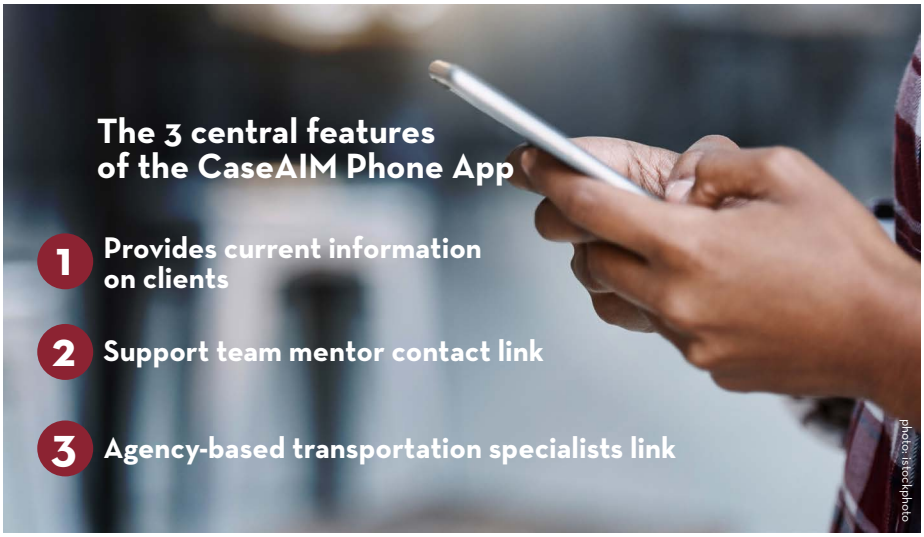
In our article published in The Journal of Public Child Welfare, "CaseAIM: Child Welfare Workers' Experiences Using Information and Communication Technology for Case Management Services," we interviewed 11 CMs to explore their experiences using one form of ICT, a mobile phone app, CaseAIM, designed to support workers in completing administrative tasks to increase workers' direct time with clients. The CaseAIM phone app has three central features:

1. The CaseAIM 'Hub,' designed to provide CMs with current information on their clients.
2. A link to contact a support team mentor while in the field.
3. A link to schedule agency-based transportation specialists for their clients.

Thematic analysis of interviews revealed four main themes related to CM CaseAIM experiences: a tool for time management; increased engagement with children and families; increased case management support; and challenges.

Tool for Effective Time Management

Almost all CMs appreciated the brief in-person or Zoom CaseAIM training and reported that hands-on practice enhanced their understanding and navigation of the app. CMs emphasized the necessity of organizational skills to manage their tasks effectively, recognizing CaseAIM as a crucial tool for tracking deadlines and coordinating



referrals, which significantly alleviated their stress and improved their efficiency in completing work responsibilities.

Increased Engagement with Children and Families

CMs widely regarded CaseAIM transportation support as essential for parent engagement, as it helped overcome barriers to appointments, allowed them to manage more clients effectively, and provided crucial stress relief by alleviating transportation responsibilities.

CMs felt that CaseAIM significantly improved communication and care with providers and families by reducing referral wait times and enabling real-time updates, which fostered greater engagement and satisfaction among parents seeking services. Nearly all CMs reported that CaseAIM allowed them to spend significantly more time with children and families on their caseloads, enhancing the quality of home visits and overall service delivery compared to their previous practices.

Increased Case Management Support

CMs overwhelmingly recognized the essential role of CaseAIM specialists in streamlining the client referral process; providing crucial support to facilitate timely client contact and engagement; and expanding their referral networks. CMs highlighted the importance of clear and timely communication from CaseAIM specialists appreciating their efficient responses and comprehensive updates on referrals.

Challenges

While CMs acknowledged the positive impact of CaseAIM, they expressed frustration with app malfunctions that disrupted their workflow. In response, they developed workarounds to maintain service delivery. Additionally, many CMs felt that CaseAIM specialists and supervisors increased their expectations of CMs regarding client engagement because of the app, which sometimes resulted in no net decrease in workload responsibilities.

Nearly all case managers reported that CaseAIM allowed them to spend significantly more time with children and families on their caseloads, enhancing the quality of home visits and overall service delivery compared to their previous practices.

Implications

This study yields several implications. First, efficient and flexible training experiences helped CMs recognize CaseAIM as a convenient, useful tool. Investing in accessible, comprehensive training can contribute to higher user satisfaction and acceptance of new ICTs in the workforce. Second, supporting a previous study examining technology's potential (Gross et al.,

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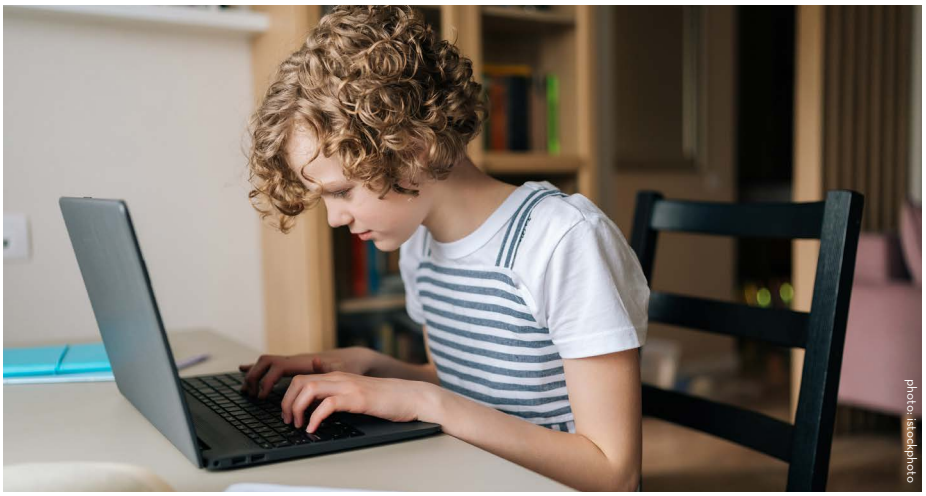
Achieving System Change: A Case Example

Reid Cox, Co-Founder & CFO, iFoster

This article is about how a large coalition of partners and funders have implemented a permanent solution to one of the greatest challenges in child welfare – lack of access to technology. This is a huge problem, and it has taken an immense effort, but we've created a working model to address this nationwide.

First, a quick description of iFoster. We were founded in 2010 and have built the largest national online community of people with lived experience in foster care – youth, caregivers, front-line workers and supportive organizations. We used the following methodology, and engaged hundreds of partners, to implement a permanent solution to technology access in California which we are working on implementing nationwide.



How?

1. Listen to the community.

Each year we ask our community of over 90,000 members serving every child and youth in foster care, "what are your greatest barriers to success?" Each year, access to technology has been a top answer. The reason – foster care stipends are not approved to be used for technology. The challenge – while this issue was widely known, we could not find any research that showed: a) young people in foster care did not have the technology that they needed, and b) providing them with technology had a measurable impact on their lives. So…

2. Collect the data.

From 2013 – 2015, we worked with researchers from USC to conduct a series of 3 studies on 730 foster youth in California to assess access levels to computers at home. The results found that only 5% of rural foster youth, and 21% of urban foster youth reported access to a computer at home vs. 90% of youth in the U.S. Providing access to a computer resulted in measurable improvements in each of the 3 study dimensions: academic performance, social connectedness, and life satisfaction. Shockingly, providing access reduced depression and suicidality (Goldbach, 2016). Armed with this data…

3. Address the challenge – pilot & iterate.

Based on iFoster's relationship with the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and a network of hundreds of foster care agencies and organizations across California, in 2019 the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) invited us to design a pilot program to ensure all foster youth had access to the Internet and were connected to their support and safety networks. From 2019 to 2024, iFoster delivered over 22,000 devices to foster youth in California, even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Asking the community what they need and how they need it is very powerful. In the absence of this information, it is convenient to form opinions, programs and policies based on what those with influence think the community needs.

4. Achieve system change – the system adopts the solution.

The goal of the iFoster Pilot was to design and implement a culturally competent program for foster youth that could be turned over to the CPUC to include in their existing LifeLine program. While it took 3 pilot program extensions before the system felt prepared to take this on, and numerous formal comments from the coalition to make sure that vital elements of the pilot were not removed, in May 2024 the CPUC adopted the iFoster Pilot as a permanent part of the overall LifeLine program. This is a huge win. A coalition of partners in California were able to take a pilot program to scale, fight to make sure the permanent solution maintained the integrity of the pilot, and now the system is running a program designed by our community to suit our needs.

System change is not easy. We think there were two key elements that enabled this program to go from concept to system adoption.

1. Power of the voice of the community.

Asking the community what they need and how they need it is very powerful. In the absence of this information, it is convenient to form opinions, programs and policies based on what those with influence think the community needs. The data from the community about what they need; and the research proving they did not have access to technology and their lives are improved when it is provided; this replaced opinions with facts.

2. Power of partnerships.

The proverb "it takes a village to raise a child" perfectly applies to this process. It takes focused effort by many to change a system. There are reasons why a system operates as it does, and some within the system may resist change. It took the combined, sustained efforts of hundreds of organizations and thousands of individuals, armed with the unifying conviction of the voice of the community, to literally speak up and fight for the change that was needed.

The next step is a national effort with new partners joining alongside to institutionalize technology access for all foster youth. Please stay tuned, and if you are interested in the results of our national surveys, "Voice of the Foster Care Community Report 2024" and the "Lived Experience Guide to Fixing Foster Care" (iFoster, 2023). Please visit voiceoffostercare.org.

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Child Welfare Should Go Slow on AI

Paul DiLorenzo, ACSW, MLSP

This article was originally published in The Imprint on July 6, 2023 (http://imprintnews.org/opinion/child-welfare-should-go-slow-ai/242819)

Though I am barely literate in technology, I believe that the unfettered advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) into child welfare has dangerous implications for how we interact with families. I'm wondering how our profession is going to behave when the bells and whistles of technology draw us toward new, shiny objects and we have little, or no criteria about which technology is helpful or hurtful.

We are learning more about how AI might impact our lives, including human service settings. The short version: it's frightening. Even the so-called "godparents of AI" fear its implications (Metz, 2023). In the meantime, the AI predecessors are already in our agencies, further destabilizing the fragile relationships we have with families and residents of the communities we should be serving.

There's still no clear formal screen or standard for our profession on the use of AI that will help us to distinguish what might be helpful for families and what is not. It's also why we should be stepping up efforts to create smaller, personalized, community-based relational approaches for our practice and systems of support that keep kids safe and boost family well-being,counterbalancing the temptation to open our arms to more technology.

The slow creep of technology began years ago, when social service agencies started greeting clients with automated response systems, even though the initial engagement process with clients is critical. That was a subtle reminder that those with power can use that influence to control as much of the process as possible — and it could happen again with an uninformed AI.

In the meantime, the state of technology and AI has evolved exponentially. This might lead us to ask ourselves a few questions about the appropriate use of technology, so it passes a family-friendly test.

Can we assure data security? Can we readily explain to families,what we are doing, how we are doing it and how it will help? Is the family at the top of the list of beneficiaries anytime we employ a new strategy? Will this new gizmo make their lives better and not just make our work more efficient? For example, inter-departmental operability can be wonderful for all involved, but only if we can guarantee that families understand the nature of that deep dive in their personal lives.

We are learning more about how AI might impact our lives, including human service settings. The short version: it's frightening.

Do we want to follow other professions whose use of AI is alienating their consumers? Our profession is among the last where personal contact and relationship-building is still seen as essential. Our peers in medicine have seen their connections to patients become so depersonalized that the notion of bedside manners is archaic.

What do we gain from further eroding our already tenuous connection to families?

How do we expect that AI will create trusting relationships with families when by all accounts, we can't assure the absolute objectivity of these tools?

What should we do while we wander through the unknown? Part of my caution is wrapped up in the adage that trust is won in drops and lost in buckets. For a profession that trades on trust, how much control are we willing to cede to flawed, impersonal tools whose mistakes can change the course of a family's life?

Think about the ongoing controversy related to jurisdictions utilizing algorithms for assessing risk and safety, including the legitimate concerns about racial, class and disability bias. How do we expect that AI will create trusting relationships with families when by all accounts, we can't assure the absolute objectivity of these tools?

Will AI make our team members smarter or wiser? I think we would all prefer wiser, but AI seems like a shortcut to smarter in the moment. In a brilliant article from The Atlantic, "The Coming Humanist Renaissance," author Adrienne LaFrance writes, "We should resist over-reliance on tools that dull the wisdom of our own aesthetics and intellect." Currently, when it is hard to recruit and retain new staff, AI can be tempting and problematic if it is not driven by best practices.

Finally, how can we use human intelligence to create and scale up effective and common-sense, community-based models that prioritize family safety and support? We want to improve "customer service" for families, not replicate their experience of being depersonalized or disregarded. Let's prioritize enhanced personal, respectful connections, not efficiency.

Any technology we choose should be done in conjunction with families, who should both understand and value tools that actively assist them in accomplishing their goals of self-sufficiency, safety and stability — and enhancing the helping experience.

Centralizing records to avoid duplicative and repetitive questions with multiple systems comes to mind as a positive example.

Streamlining our work doesn't make it better. Invasive procedures won't win over families. Efficiency isn't necessarily effective nor empathetic. Let's not get distracted from our current desire to build communities that support families. The more personal our approach, the more likely we are to be taken seriously by those whom we serve.

Paul DiLorenzo is the Executive Director of the Salem Health and Wellness Foundation and a Senior Fellow for CWLA.

Algorithmic Decision Making and Law and Child Welfare

Matthew Trail, Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods

Algorithmic predictive models are increasingly being seen in the child welfare field. These models might help child welfare professionals determine if a child is in danger (Vaithianathan, et al., 2017), if a child will achieve permanency (Stepura, et al., 2021) or even if a family might be successfully reunified (Purdy & Glass, 2020). The goal for all of these models is to improve human decision making and ultimately improve child welfare outcomes.

However, critics of the models note that they are built using old data that contains errors along with human and racial biases that does not take into account the family in their current setting (Gerchick, et al, 2023). The critics also point out that the models predict behavior based on aggregate averages and they cannot actually know what individual parents and families will do (Keddell, 2019).

It is unclear how many jurisdictions are using predictive models currently, but an ACLU report from 2021 estimated that more than half of the states had tried some form of model, though even then, the ACLU estimated that they were undercounting the actual total (Samant, et al., 2021). When I practiced in Texas, I encountered algorithmic models without at the time even realizing that the decisions about my client's service levels were coming from a machine.

What is clear, is that the models have been primarily used internally by CPS staff for CPS related decision making and that lawyers and judges have not been involved in their use, nor does their use generally make it into court hearings. In some cases, legal professionals and the court are excluded intentionally (Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2018).

Because judges and attorneys are essential to decision making in the U.S. child welfare system, I set out to test if a predictive risk model could change legal opinions regarding removal and placement. Using a vignette survey of child welfare and juvenile justice attorneys across the country, I found that high and medium risk scores could make lawyers change their minds and favor removal and foster care placement. Conversely, low risk scores could sway lawyers the other way to favor keeping the child with the biological parents (Trail, 2024). Though this effect was not large, it is consistent with findings from other researchers showing that humans can be persuaded with advice from machines (Grgić-Hlaća, et al., 2022) and with the specific research regarding how risk scores affect CPS decision making (Fitzpatrick & Wildman, 2021).

photo: istockphoto

Because judges and attorneys are essential to decision making in the U.S. child welfare system, I set out to test if a predictive risk model could change legal opinions regarding removal and placement.

Unfortunately, the law is still playing catch up to the technology, so there are not uniform policies to guide child welfare attorneys and courts. However, the National Center for State Courts (NCSC) (2024) reports that multiple states have recently begun to enact legislation, to promulgate court rules and formulate codes of conduct about the use of artificial intelligence in legal practice. Most of these new efforts are focused on generative AI, such as large language models (LLM) and are not specific to dependency proceedings (NCSC, 2024). Still some researchers and CPS agencies are already examining ways in which LLMs might be best used in child welfare work (Field, et al., 2023).

What this means for dependency attorneys and courts is that the law and usage of models and generative AI is unsettled and rules will vary greatly between jurisdictions. Certainly though, attorneys have some ethical duties regarding the use of AI and predictive models. Recently, the American Bar Association (2024) released its first formal guidance for the use of generative AI and included duties of competence. Essentially lawyers must be technologically savvy enough to understand what the new technology does and what its limitations are. This is not the same as requiring attorneys to understand the inner workings of the algorithm itself, but does require some affirmative duty to learn how to use AI appropriately. The AI Rapid Response Team (2024) at NCSC had similar advice for courts, noting that judge's ethical duties also required them to stay current with technological advances that might impact the court. While both of these guidance papers were focused on generative AI, it seems reasonable that a similar duty would also apply to predictive models.

For child welfare attorneys and judges, this first means learning if their local CPS agency is using generative AI or predictive models and for what reasons. Lawyers need to know what program or model is being used. Was it built for that purpose? Who built it? Who at the agency actually understands how it works? The reality is that these are mostly likely questions for state offices, so asking the local caseworkers is probably not sufficient.

Ultimately, AI and predictive models have a lot of potential in child welfare, but the legal field has its own duty to challenge the use of untested technology that may have unintended negative impacts toward their clients. This technology should not become a substitute for human judgment and good case work.

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Intentional Parenting in the Age of Ubiquitous Social Media

Kimara Gustafson, MD, MPH

As a parent born in the late 70s, I occasionally take delight in describing to my kids how I used a rotary phone to call my friends, listened to my cassette singles on my Walk-Man, and played Mario Brothers on my GameBoy. It's our generation's version of "walking to school uphill both ways." This most recent holiday season, we gifted one of our children a Nintendo Switch. The "coupon" included with the device granted "free" online access so they could play with others in a digital space. Gone are the days of the GameBoy or Atari, where a friend had to come over to be able to play together.

Another digital reality is that digital-based experiences are more the norm rather than the exception, starting as early as preschool and kindergarten (Papadakis, Kalogiannakis, & Zaranis, 2018; Selwyn, 2016). A good percentage of schooling is via various apps on a school-provided iPad or Chromebook. Moreover, more elementary youth have smart devices, usually under the reasoning that they will be able to communicate with a parent but which also allows them to communicate with non-family members.

Before we rush to paint all digital devices and social media experiences as negative, let's take a step back. Technology's potential benefits have been highlighted in studies showing how it fosters creativity, access to resources, and social engagement (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014; Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011). Technology usually comes from a goal of making things "easier" for the user, and social media at its best promotes us to be social participants — allowing for increased communication, access to social culture, and interactions. In an ideal world, social media is there to help connect people, allow easier spread of information, and foster creativity. For example, if a young child wants to learn a different language, the options are seemingly endless as they are no longer limited to a language teacher in their community. Those that live in more remote areas may be able to access services, such as medical care in a telehealth format, reducing the need for excess travel.

However, we also know that technology and social media can have many downsides, including risks of psychological distress and isolation, particularly among children and adolescents (Keles, McCrae, & Grealish, 2020; Sampasa-Kanyinga & Lewis, 2015). Instead of expanding a person's world in terms of access, it may cause someone to pull further inward — having all their food and medicine delivered right to their door, only interacting with others in a digital manner. This may increase the risk of feelings of isolation and allow for the spread of misinformation or increased vulnerability to cyberbullying. We know that social media affects individuals differently based on age, role, and purpose of use (Smith & Duggan, 2013; Rideout et al., 2022).

Before we rush to paint all digital devices and social media experiences as negative, let's take a step back. Technology's potential benefits have been highlighted in studies showing how it fosters creativity, access to resources, and social engagement.

Circling back to my own experience aging in this era of exploding technology, it also poses an interesting question about how to best provide guidance. We know that kids need guidance to understand the curated nature of social media and the risks of overexposure (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008; Odgers & Robb, 2020). However, there are likely many parents, caregivers, and professionals who could benefit from additional education about the psychological and emotional effects of excessive or inappropriate social media use on children (Twenge & Campbell, 2018; Nesi et al., 2021). If you have young children in your world and you've ever watched them interact with a digital device, you know how rapidly they can learn and adapt to that device — likely much faster than if you were to try to learn and adapt to the device as a grownup.

How to best navigate social media and the digital world as a parent and caregiver? It starts by thinking intentionally about that question. With that intentionality comes guidelines and boundaries. These can apply to all family members as applicable, not just the children. Examples include time limits for screen time and tech-free zones (such as at the dinner table or in bedrooms). This also includes being well-informed as a parent about how your child is interacting with social media, including which apps and platforms they are using. Of course, there are always potential workarounds as technology advances faster than safety guidelines, so helping a child develop increased awareness and understanding of the risks and benefits of social media is crucial (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015; Tokunaga, 2010). Encouraging conversations about how social media can impact one's emotions and the development of identity is key. Prompting someone to ask, "How does this content make me feel?" and "Do I like how I feel when consuming this content?" can be powerful tools.

Mindfulness practices can also enhance this self-awareness, as studies suggest that mindfulness can reduce overuse and improve self-regulation in digital consumption (Lyvers et al., 2018). For instance, taking "screen" breaks during extended screen time or using apps that track usage can illuminate patterns of overuse. By regularly assessing the role of social media in their lives, individuals can recalibrate their habits to align with their values and priorities (Carroll et al., 2019; Roberts & David, 2020).

Applying intentionality to social media consumption is essential for parents, caregivers, and kids in a world inextricably interwoven with digital interactions. By understanding its impact, setting boundaries, cultivating awareness, encouraging positive engagement, and building resilience, individuals can harness the benefits of social media while mitigating its risks. In doing so, they not only enhance their own lives but also contribute to a healthier, more mindful digital culture for all.

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The Adoption and Use of AI in Child- and Family-Serving Systems: Key Challenges and Future Directions

Daniel J. Gibbs, MSW, JD, PhD

Understanding the Practitioner-AI Landscape

Decisions in child- and family-serving systems are often characterized by inaccuracy, inconsistency, and inequity (Fluke et al., 2014; Munro, 1999). Because practitioners must leverage limited information and resources to determine eligibility, identify needs, tailor supports, and plan for long-term well-being, the resulting decisions can be and feel erroneous, arbitrary, and biased. In response to these challenges, policymakers and agency leaders have increasingly sought to capitalize on advances in predictive and generative AI as a means of introducing more objectivity and efficiency into such work (Hall et al., 2023).

Despite the potential of data-driven approaches such as predictive risk tools and automated document preparation, initial evidence suggests that both practitioner and client communities remain resistant to their integration (Kawakami et al., 2022). This trend can be seen as both a problem and a victory as these communities may be both limiting the positive impacts of good tools and limiting the negative impacts of harmful ones. However, as a former practitioner myself and as a researcher, I believe that our response to this resistance should be neither to ignore the wisdom of those in the field nor to reject innovation entirely. Rather, we should seek to (1) understand the nature of human-AI conflicts in these systems and (2) design tools and build human capabilities that maximize the potential of AI-based approaches.

Barriers and Facilitators of AI Adoption

In a recent study, my colleagues and I found that practitioners' ability to trust predictive AI tools' outputs constituted a key barrier to adoption (Gibbs et al., 2024). Any given tool could be considered accurate enough across ***many*** cases, but practitioners must justify their actions in ***each*** case. They therefore must feel confident that every specific prediction is correct and unbiased in order to use it—a very high standard to meet. Explainability techniques that estimate the factors informing complex machine learning-based predictions can boost this trust, as can transparent implementation processes that involve users in model planning, development, rollout, and monitoring.

However, practitioners must also find AI tools to be useful, meaning that they offer some sort of significant relative advantage beyond practitioners' existing methods of decision-making or task completion. It is important to distinguish here between tools that produce actual practice improvements targeted to the underlying challenges within these systems and those that merely provide a theoretically-interesting and technologically-sophisticated means of doing the work without moving the needle on the most important outcomes. This latter type of pseudo-innovation, commonly referred to as technological solutionism (Morozov, 2013), is rampant in the current environment of AI-related excitement and can be alienating to practice communities who are more concerned with enhancements to their and their clients' well-being than with innovation for innovation's sake.

Lastly, AI must be easy to use and to integrate into practitioners' unique contexts. This obviously includes attention to the user experience and human factors of AI tools' designs, but also necessitates that those implementing such tools devote attention to the data and technology infrastructure that will make the tools work (or not work) consistently in accordance with practitioners' needs. Perhaps more importantly, it also requires that developers and leaders employ systems perspectives to understand whether practitioners can feasibly integrate new and sophisticated tools within the complexity of their agency dynamics, policy landscapes, and interprofessional collaborative networks.

Promising Future Directions

To attend to these challenges, the field must ensure that AI use cases (and their underlying data) are matched to tasks that will demonstrate positive impacts. Such tasks must not only be those of importance to practitioner and client communities but must also be ones that can actually be improved by the specific change mechanisms of AI-based automation. It may be necessary during these early stages of AI integration to therefore focus on smaller, more achievable projects such as workforce-related outcomes rather than on the most complex and immovable challenges (that may ultimately lend themselves to perceptions of solutionism) so that the field can develop greater buy-in.

Practitioners must also be equipped with the competencies they need to thrive in an inevitably more AI-centric practice landscape. AI preparedness curricula should be developed for both academic and professional development contexts that build participants' knowledge of how AI tools work and provide them with strategies for leveraging AI tools to maximize their benefits. Further, curricula must equip the practice community with the tools to think critically about AI's risks and trade-offs. This will position system practitioners to be effective users of AI in their own work, valuable co-designers of future positive interventions, and powerful advocates against potentially harmful AI-related developments in the field.

AI preparedness curricula should be developed for both academic and professional development contexts that build participants' knowledge of how AI tools work and provide them with strategies for leveraging AI tools to maximize their benefits.

Ultimately, the opportunities and challenges presented by AI integration require that this field grapple with a more fundamental question related to innovation: how do we improve our decisions while also improving ***how*** we make our decisions? Stated differently, do we truly want to be more accurate and efficient in this data-driven way, or is something meaningful lost when we lean into black-box automation? Regardless of the answer to these questions, I believe that the inevitable upheaval of AI innovation—paired with the field's demonstrated ability to be wary of unhelpful solutionism—may constitute an opportunity to further clarify our collective values, improve both the how and why of our decision-making, and better prepare ourselves for future innovation and change.

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The Impact of the CaseAIM® Model: Empowering Clients and Supporting Case Managers

Wade T. Lijewski, PhD

Being a case manager in child welfare is one of the most challenging positions in our industry. Their role is not simply to conduct home visits. They are expected to be subject matter experts on all things child related. Case managers report spending an average of 52 hours per week in their job with approximately 20 to 35 percent of their time in direct services and the rest on case-related or non-case related tasks (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016); leaving many case managers feeling that "this job cannot be done in 40 hours per week." As someone who served as a Dependency Case Manager in the early 2000's and was handed a caseload of 65 kids upon exiting pre-service training, I've held a passion for reducing case manager workload and improving outcomes for families well into my career role in quality improvement. I was extremely excited when I learned that my organization was developing a solution.

CaseAIM is a mobile app and tool that supports workload efficiency through documentation, case access, support, and transportation. It was initially implemented in 2016 within a few selected Dependency Case Management (DCM) programs. In April 2017, I was asked by our CEO to develop measurement tools for monitoring the performance and impact of the CaseAIM model and compare internal data with findings of a recent research study from our university partners from the Florida Institute for Child Welfare at Florida State University. It was during this period that I learned of a potential replication of the model into the DCM program located in my hometown where I began my career with CHS in 2004. The lead agency and funder indicated an interest in innovation to support case managers and agreed to fund CaseAIM support for 50% of the DCM program. I began collecting baseline data on case manager turnover and child outcomes such as the number of monthly permanency events, time from removal to permanency, and length of stay in out-of-home care.

At the time of implementation, morale in the program was low and the rate of turnover had reached 68%. Following CaseAIM implementation, there was a 'buzz' around the office. I overheard conversations of how the job was becoming more manageable and employees were 'finally getting the help they need'. Within 3 months of implementation, we saw the rate of turnover drop to 45%. We also identified an increase in the number of monthly permanency events for children which continued to grow over time. By February 2018, we had enough evidence for the funder to support its expansion into 100% of the program.

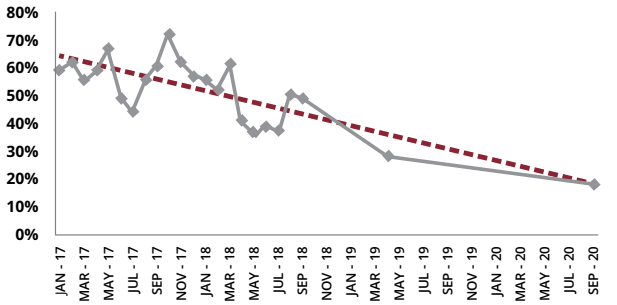
Over the next two years, I observed something that I hadn't thought possible considering the average longevity for case managers on a national level was less than 2 years of employment. At the point of initial implementation, turnover was 68% and by September 2020, the program successfully reduced their turnover to 20%!

To me, this was some of the greatest evidence possible for the added value the CaseAIM model brought to the team because it was impacting both team members and clients. Change in a child's case manager often causes delays for the new worker in understanding the elements of the case, hindering well-being outcomes. Unfortunately, in the eyes of a child, this is another example of someone who leaves them and fails to follow through on what they said they would do (Flower et al., 2005). In general, when a case is transferred between workers, often as the result of resignation, permanency for the children in the case is delayed by 6 months (Child Welfare League of America, 2010).

To me this was some of the greatest evidence possible for the added value the CaseAIM model brought to the team because it was impacting both team members and clients.

We analyzed the impact of CaseAIM on permanency events (reunification, adoption, or permanent guardianship) and observed that the number of monthly permanency events increased by an average of 5 events per month from pre-implementation to 1-year post. The program that started with only 50% CaseAIM support averaged an additional 19 permanency events each month! That's an additional 228 kids in a year's time who either went back home to live with parents, were adopted or received permanent guardianship faster instead of lingering in the foster care system.

Lakeland DCM Turnover
Jan 2017 - Sept 2020



Following the pandemic, decreases in state and federal funding left fewer dollars for funding of innovation despite its proven track record. When child welfare budgets become tight, contracts with case management providers become "skeleton contracts"; often funding only case carrying positions. However, turnover is costly and leads to higher caseloads for those who stay, which in turn, leads to more turnover once the work becomes overwhelming. This adds to financial strain of systems of care while the overall cost for CaseAIM (Support Team positions, Credentialing and Stabilify tools) is only $0.46 per day per child, over the traditional case management model.

Solutions exist. Leveraging technology to improve performance is possible and is only limited by our own creativity. In fact, the newest addition to our CaseAIM model is an application designed to standardize the case assignment process and support best practice to keep 0-3 year olds safe. Using this new tool, CHS was able to reduce the number of 0-3 year old fatalities; going from an average of 3 per year down to an average of less than 1 per year! But that's a story for another day.

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Telehealth: Opportunities, Limitations, and Ethical Considerations in Supporting Families

Jimmy Heags, MA, LSC, LPCC, LADC, ACS

Telehealth changed the field of mental health care by offering new ways to connect with families and provide therapy. As a therapist with over 20 years of related experience, I have personally witnessed how technology has created opportunities for families navigating complex interpersonal dynamics. While telehealth offers particular benefits, it also presents certain challenges that should be addressed compassionately, particularly when working with children who have experienced trauma. This article will explore telehealth's strengths, limitations, and ethical considerations therapists are tasked with navigating to effectively support families.

Opportunities in Telehealth

Accessibility and Flexibility

Telehealth's greatest strength is in its ability to overcome logistical barriers. Families who may struggle with transportation, work schedules, or geographic isolation can now attend therapy sessions from the comfort of their homes. For parents managing multiple responsibilities, this flexibility can reduce stress and improve attendance, which are critical for therapeutic progress and continuity.

For example, I've worked with families in rural Minnesota areas where in-person therapy services are limited. Telehealth allowed these families to receive consistent service, particularly for adoptive families, because it provides a way for parents to get guidance and support without disrupting the routines of their child(ren), many of whom thrive on structure and predictability.

Observing Family Dynamics in Real Time

Another unique advantage of telehealth is its ability to provide a window into the family's whole house. Virtual sessions allow therapists to observe real-time interactions within the home, which offers valuable context for understanding family dynamics and the child's lived experience.

For instance, when working with white parents raising Black children in transracial adoption scenarios, telehealth has provided an opportunity to see how parents are integrating their child's cultural identity into daily life or their application of psychoeducation on implicit bias. This visibility of telehealth allows for meaningful conversations, thus increasing a sense of belonging and addressing potential gaps in cultural understanding. Observing these dynamics in real time helps therapists offer specific practical strategies, such as integrating elements of the child's culture, family rituals or daily practices.

Trauma-Informed Practice in a Virtual Space

Telehealth also supports trauma-informed approaches by offering parents immediate, real-time coaching in moments of conflict or psychiatric dysregulation. Children who have experienced trauma—whether through instability in foster care, or attachment issues — require communal environments where they feel safe and validated. Telehealth allows therapists to counsel parents in responding empathetically during challenging moments which help them shift from reacting to their child's behaviors to better understanding their needs. For example, I use concepts from the **Nurtured Heart Approach**, which focuses on highlighting the child's strengths rather than their challenging behavior. In many cases, parents who were struggling with their child(ren)'s particular challenges were able to reframe their perspective during a telehealth session and start focusing on their resilience and adaptability as a starting point for change. Real-time moments like this can guide and foster emotional growth and resilience for both parents and children.

Virtual sessions allow therapists to observe real-time interactions within the home, which offers valuable context for understanding family dynamics and the child's lived experience.

Limitations of Telehealth

Technical and Logistical Barriers

Despite its accessibility, telehealth has its challenges. Technical issues, such as poor internet connectivity or a lack of adequate devices, can disrupt sessions and impede client participation. Some families who are less familiar with technology may find it difficult and stressful to navigate virtual platforms, especially when they are also managing the emotional demands of therapy. These barriers can be especially difficult and stressful for families already dealing with systemic inequities and/or limited resources.

To address these challenges, I, sometimes, work to ensure that families are prepared for virtual sessions. This includes giving them or their children suggestions on setting up a quiet, distraction-free space, troubleshooting technical issues, and providing resources to improve digital know-how. These small steps can mitigate disruptions and create a more focused and productive therapeutic session.

Rapport and Connection in a Virtual Format

Building and leading with rapport and trust is a cornerstone of effective therapy. This can be more difficult in a virtual setting. Non-verbal cues, such as subtle expressions or body language, are harder to perceive through a screen, which can lead to misunderstandings or missed opportunities to address deeper emotional needs. For children, especially, the absence of physical presence can make it challenging to establish the sense of safety and connection needed for meaningful progress.

To address this issue, I use creative strategies to foster engagement and connection. For children, this might involve implementing interactive activities or developmentally appropriate play-based techniques (if applicable), even in a virtual format. For parents, I emphasize clear, compassionate communication and active listening, ensuring they feel challenged as well as heard and supported. These efforts help bridge the gap created by the screen and build a stronger therapeutic relationship.

Ethical Considerations in Transracial Adoption

When working with white parents raising Black children in transracial adoption scenarios, telehealth adds another layer of complexity to the therapeutic process. A primary ethical consideration is ensuring that the Black child is not viewed as the "identified problem" within the family system. Instead, therapy must address the broader dynamics at play, including societal influences and implicit biases that may shape the child's experience.

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MYVoice: Youth Leadership and Virtual Connection

Emily Lindell, Youth Leadership Program Coordinator, Ampersand Families, with input from MYVoice participants

MYVoice is a peer support and youth leadership program for Minnesota young people ages 12 through 22 who have lived experience in the foster care and/or adoption systems. Minnesota is a state comprising almost 87,000 square miles and we have a MYVoice staff of less than two full-time employees. "How is that even possible?!" you might ask. In a word: technology! And not some fancy schmancy app or even a ring light—we use basic tech like Zoom, laptops, and cell phones. But rest assured, it's enough to make the magic happen!

MYVoice (Minnesota Youth Voice) was founded in 2018 as part of Ampersand Families, a private nonprofit that supports permanency for older youth in foster care. MYVoice started with a primary focus on in-person activities, but as in many other areas of life, the pandemic forced a big shift online in 2020. However, unlike programs that have returned to mostly in-person events, MYVoice continues to do its best work virtually.

The core place we build youth community is our monthly MYVoice Virtual Hangouts–and technology is the key.

In addition, this work is rooted in equity and accessibility, welcoming youth in highly restrictive, long-term facilities side by side with young people who have far fewer barriers to 'normal' youth development experiences. We lean into what young people have in common, regardless of location, appreciating the differences, and actively affirming the unique mosaic each virtual group creates.

The MYVoice program has many components, including free books and creativity kits we mail to youth, the chance to get paid for sharing artwork, opportunities for paid youth advocacy, and much more (check out our website myvoicemn.org for details). However, the core place we build youth community is our monthly MYVoice Virtual Hangouts–and technology is the key!

MYVoice Virtual Hangouts are 90-minute Zoom events facilitated by youth leaders who are paid a stipend of $20 an hour and supported by MYVoice professional staff. At these events, young people log on from wherever they are. In the words of one participant, the virtual hangouts are "a way to connect with others in the same situation as me." Young people join on their phone, a caregiver's laptop, the group home tablet, or a therapist's desktop computer. They may be in a treatment center conference room, a suburban bedroom, at a grandmother's kitchen table, a juvenile detention center program room, or riding in a parent's car.

After consenting to group agreements, doing a fun icebreaker, and sharing program announcements, youth facilitators might lead games like Charades or Two Truths and a Lie; they might hold a discussion about holidays or school; or they might instruct their peers in activities like gingerbread house construction or valentine making—with participants using supplies mailed to them a week prior, meaning everyone is operating with the same materials, regardless of location. At the end of the event all participants are asked to share something they liked about the event, something they didn't like or would change about it, and something they'd want to see at a future MYVoice event.

Does it seem like a simple format? Maybe. But there are several factors that make the use of this basic technology special and even transformative.

The first is rooting in our values as a program. Like we say at the end of each of our newsletters, "We support youth-centered connection, education, and change." Being informed by the values of our larger organization: dignity, belonging, and equity is also key. We really think about how to put these into practice, making sure that young people with significant structural challenges to participation feel as included and affirmed as youth with greater access to resources and support.

As a result, we build bridges to young people who have high transience, are particularly isolated, or whose circumstances create especially high barriers to accessing positive youth development experiences. In practice, this means specific outreach and relationship-building with Residential Treatment Center (RTC) and Juvenile Detention Center (JDC) staff, young people in rural placements, and youth who may find few identity-mirrors in their immediate environment. This is time-consuming and relationships may need to be reset each time a youth's case manager changes. But if we value the presence of those youth in the MYVoice community (and we do!), then this work is necessary.

We know this because it aligns with our values, and it feels right, but it's also what the data says benefits young people (the Search Institute offers information on the importance of developmental relationships).(See pg ___)

In addition, our values dictate our use of Zoom. It's free for users (though we pay for a professional account as an organization), works on phones, computers, and tablets; most youth have some experience with it, workers are often familiar with the platform, and it has a few handy safety features. In addition, using a basic platform such as Zoom means that youth can fairly easily access MYVoice no matter where they are. They can join from a group home in rural Minnesota, a placement in an out-of-state treatment center, the relative's home where they're living, or even from a hospital bed.

Practicing our values resonates with being trauma-informed and meeting young people where they're at. We make choices around backend Zoom settings and group agreements that promote respect and safety. We practice active consent around communication and encourage youth to "pass" when they don't want to speak. We permit caregivers or workers to support anxious youth just out of their camera's view. We create opportunities to lead and create that draw on the wide interests, skills, and growing edges of the youth participants. We make sure, even over Zoom, that MYVoice Virtual Hangouts feel warm, affirming, connecting—and that keeps young people coming back!

We use technology in similar ways when MYVoice is invited to present at conferences. We use Zoom for preparation meetings with youth leaders, who are paid for their time and expertise. Over the screens the participants can get to know each other, learn about strategic sharing, set goals, brainstorm content, and practice presenting. We also use Zoom to host guest speakers (shoutout Oklahoma-based author, Amnoni Myers!) and virtual learning sessions, such as Art and Healing workshops where a guest therapist leads youth over Zoom to create worry stones or the soundtrack of their life.

Through this regular use of this basic technology, we use a small staff to cover a huge area, to gather youth who have shared experiences, and to make their worlds a little more connected. In the words of one youth leader, "It brings us together and creates a sense of community even if we are cities apart."

MYVoice Best Tech Practices

Reduce Barriers to Access

- Use technology that is free, easy to use, and widely accessible, like Zoom, rather than a specialized app or platform.
- Consider not requiring passwords to access events. We have found that passwords tend to get 'lost in the sauce' and create barriers to participation. We manage security using the Zoom "Waiting Room" function instead.
- Include the "Meeting Code" number along with the Zoom link to all events. Some facilities manage Zoom access in ways that require this code.
- Find out who needs the link in an email and who needs a text message. Note who needs their worker or caregiver included in communication.
- Be prepared to give extra attention to congregate care settings. Maybe the therapist says a youth is excited to join, but did the unit manager who holds the tablet see the email with the link?
- Allow youth to turn off their cameras if low bandwidth makes their feed glitchy. Remind youth they can use the "gallery view" to see everyone all together.

Be Trauma-Informed and Meet Young People Where They're At

- Allow youth to "pass" when it's their turn to speak—supporting consent is a key part of the MYVoice culture of voluntary participation.
- Encourage youth who are hesitant to speak to use the chat function instead, while still affirming their option to pass. Some young people feel more comfortable using the chat function than speaking, especially at first.
- Conversely, know that the chat function may be inaccessible to youth who are using a staff person's computer or young people with certain learning differences.
- Provide the option for new youth to do a short introductory 1:1 over Zoom with program staff, so they can learn what to expect and have a familiar face at their first event.
- Allow new participants to visit a Virtual Hangout for only part of the event if staying for the whole thing feels intimidating to them. Don't feel surprised if they decide to stay!
- Be ready to roll with youth coming and going from virtual events based on bus schedules, differing mealtimes, work shifts, etc.
- Validate different experiences and perspectives but require respectful behavior.
- Be prepared to pivot. Maybe the plan was to play games, but after check-in the group wants to support a participant around bullying at their school. Follow their lead!

Reduce Risks for Youth

- Require at least a short online intake form to get basic information about youth participants prior to participation.
- Have youth create a set of group agreements. Review and ask participants to consent to them at the start of each online event.
- MYVoice uses a scale of thumbs all the way down to thumbs all the way up, so that young people can show absolute agreement, absolute disagreement, and opinions that are somewhere in between.
- If anyone shows a thumb that is pointed sideways or angled downward, we will stop to talk about what needs to be changed or added in order for that youth to consent to the group standards.
- We have a rule about not sharing personal contact information except through staff.
- Some prior knowledge about youth participants is helpful, especially if there are other young people with whom they are not permitted to have contact. Be prepared to manage these issues with dignity and confidentiality when they arise.

Technology Basics

- Share the event link only with registered participants and/or their adult supports, never publicly.
- Use the Zoom "Waiting Room" function but be aware that young people may use a login that has someone else's name on it. This may cause temporary confusion.
- Be aware of your powers as the Zoom meeting 'host'—you can mute participants, remove them, or chat to them individually if needed.
- Manage chat settings so that youth participants can publicly message the whole group or privately message the MYVoice professional staff, but not direct message each other. This keeps social dynamics out in the open.
- One professional staff person is often enough, but two can be helpful to assist with technology, chat, youth questions, unexpected technology glitches, etc.
- Prior to events, practice with the tech! That way chat settings, virtual whiteboards, breakout rooms, etc. can be used with confidence.
- Keep Programming Youth-Centered
- Identify youth leaders based on their expressed interest as well as observations of their skills and growing edges.
- Allow for the option of 'patchwork quilt' leadership where different youth take on different tasks when needed. One or two youth leaders may take on larger roles, but sometimes splitting up tasks allows for greater involvement and investment across the group.
- Schedule planning meetings that support youth leaders to learn and practice skills such as making an agenda, running an ice breaker, noticing who is participating and who has not spoken, getting feedback, etc. Pay youth leaders for attendance at planning meetings as well as for their leadership of virtual events.
- Be curious, attentive, flexible, and creative. Create opportunities for skills development, advocacy, and pride.
- Prepare yourself to be inspired by the support young people will demonstrate for each other, delighted by their creativity, and motivated to be the dynamic yet consistent professional staff partner they deserve!

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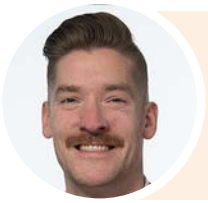

Exploring VR Simulation for Child Welfare Training

Kurt Hattenberger, MM

When I joined the Minnesota Child Welfare Training Academy as the Simulation Specialist in November of 2021, one of my first duties was to begin the search for technology to use in our New Worker Foundations training. The Academy was beginning an overhaul of its training structure, and in addition to creating human simulations (simulated family encounters with specially-trained actors) for the curriculum, it would also fall to me to begin the process of integrating virtual reality into training.

Virtual reality (VR) promises to be an exciting new tool for many disciplines, but when I began my search I was skeptical about finding a program that would prove suitable for child welfare training. However, as my research progressed, I came to understand that VR has several benefits that make it both suitable and effective for the field of child welfare training.

First, VR can create practice opportunities that might otherwise be hard to come by. Child welfare is a complex field, and many of the skills we expect workers to master are difficult to practice in a way that also keeps families safe. VR can fill some of this need. Second, I found through my research that the field of virtual reality had progressed further than I had thought. Immersion is stronger, the devices are lighter, and these will only continue to improve as the field advances. That said, VR training for child welfare training is still very new, and there are still barriers to overcome. Much of our work in child welfare is based directly around human interaction, which is difficult to replicate even with the remarkable advances in technology currently occurring.

My search for a VR program centered around three parameters: 1) how directly related to child welfare the program was, 2) the particular usefulness to our new training curriculum, and 3) cost/scalability. After a broad search of what was available, the options we explored coalesced around the topics of interviewing skills and safety and risk assessment.

Those centered around interviewing skills followed a similar model, though implemented in different ways. Each offered a conversation with a client, where the learner would choose from a set of scripted responses as the interview progressed. This can be thought of as a "decision tree" model, where each choice informs the next step of the conversation in a continuously branching scenario. The main draw was the repeatability of the experience, which would allow learners to discover the consequences of varying approaches. The level of immersion ranged from a web-browser based conversation with a client to a fully immersive headset, complete with full 360 degree environments and filmed actor responses.

A learner takes part in VR simulation at the Minnesota Child Welfare Training Academy.

The program centered around safety and risk assessment allowed learners to use VR to immerse themselves in home environments, where they could look for both risk and protective factors within the home, comparing their observations against those of a panel of experts.

In the end, we chose the environmental safety assessment program. We are fortunate to have several human simulations integrated into our training, and as far as some of the VR interviewing programs have come, they are still limited in terms of flexibility of responses and in customization. Because our human simulations already covered this area, we decided that the practice provided by the University of Utah's Virtual Home Simulation program would be the best fit for our curriculum and our learners. This decision also left us funds to purchase our own VR headsets, which can now be loaded with other programs in the future as appropriate.

It's a bit early in our implementation to draw any firm conclusions about the impact of virtual reality training on our learners, but I'd like to share a few observations:

- **Learners like it!** It's a much more interesting and engaging way to learn than simply reading or receiving a lecture, and any hands-on training our learners can receive is worth exploring.
- **Technical literacy varies.** The program we chose runs on the Meta Quest II headset, which is a commercial headset used mostly for entertainment and gaming. If your learners are video game aficionados, using the headset may be easy, even intuitive. If your learners are not as familiar, there is a learning curve to overcome.
- **Facilitation with a headset strapped over your learner's eyes is an interesting challenge.** The next generation of headsets, the Meta Quest III, has a "passthrough" mode, which allows you to see your surroundings even with the headset on. As the technology advances, so will its ease of use, keeping the focus on content.

Overall, it's exciting to learn about and implement technology that will improve training for our learners, and by extension, improve outcomes for families. With progress in VR and with AI on the horizon, who knows where the future will take us?

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Technology in Child Welfare: Balancing Innovation and Ethics
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Future Directions: Building an Ethical and Effective Framework

To maximize the benefits of technology while mitigating its risks, the field must adopt a collaborative and evidence-based approach. Policymakers should establish clear guidelines addressing data security, equity, and transparency, while researchers evaluate the effectiveness of new tools. Practitioners must actively participate in the design and implementation of technologies, advocating for solutions that align with core social work principles.

Conclusion

The integration of technology in social work represents a pivotal shift, offering unprecedented opportunities to improve outcomes for clients served by social workers. By thoughtfully balancing innovation with ethical safeguards, the profession can harness the power of technology without compromising its commitment to safety, human connection, equity, inclusion, and the general well-being of every individual and family served.

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How Child Welfare Workers Reduce Racial Disparities in Algorithmic Decisions
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workers to follow these metrics for longer-term risk (Vaithianathan et al., 2017). However, in practice, this led workers to question whether the algorithm was misaligned with the responsibility that the agency had to screen referrals based on immediate safety concerns and shorter-term risk.

Conclusions

Our work complicates current narratives advocating for predictive algorithms in child welfare (Cheng et al., 2022). Algorithms risk adopting racial biases from the public systems data they use. Current measures of accuracy may be misleading, since they favor algorithms over workers. These findings present fundamental problems to the design and use of algorithms in child welfare.

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Algorithmic Harms in Child Welfare: The Burden of Unreliable Decision-Making and Constant Repair Work
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the very workforce that forms the backbone of the child welfare system.

Moreover, implementing algorithms in an organizational culture that prioritizes efficiency and standardization can inadvertently silence the nuanced expertise of frontline workers. Instead of harnessing technology as a supportive tool, agencies risk adopting algorithms that increasingly limit human discretionary work instead of finding ways to improve it. The end result may be a child welfare system that inadvertently perpetuates inequality, leaving families at the mercy of a tool that fails to comprehend the full reality of their circumstances. To read the full paper please visit https://dl.acm.org/doi/full/10.1145/3616473.

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Data Sharing and Interoperability in Child Welfare: A Path to Better Outcomes for Children, Youth, and Families
Continued from page 17

researchers, policymakers, and practitioners for over 20 years. Minn-LInK research projects are developed through a cross-system perspective, providing a better understanding of the experiences and outcomes of children and families served by multiple systems.

While many projects include a child welfare component, their cross-system focus expands the potential impact on policy and decision-making beyond the child welfare system. Research carried out through Minn-LInK has answered questions such as, "Do financial reforms for foster care, adoption, and kin guardianship payments lead to changes in permanency and academic outcomes for youth?" (Minn-LInK Brief #62; Edmonds et al., 2023), and "What is the housing status of families before, during, and after child welfare involvement?" (Minn-LInK Brief #66; Johnson et al., 2024). These examples are just a small representation of the power and importance of integrated data in shaping policy and practice.

Conclusion

Data sharing and interoperability have potential to transform child welfare by improving coordination, increasing efficiency, and ensuring that children and families receive the support they need. While challenges remain, the promise of better outcomes—safer children, stronger families, and more effective interventions—makes these practices an essential part of the future of child welfare. Even when these systems are not fully interoperable (i.e., real-time data integration), data integration efforts that are flexible and responsive to the needs of our communities can have a measurable and lasting positive impact. By embracing data sharing and interoperability, the child welfare space can create a more integrated, responsive system that serves the best interests of Minnesota's children, youth, and families.

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Supporting the Child Welfare Workforce Through AI-Assisted Evidence-Based Practice Implementation
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CaseAIM: Information and Communication Technology for Child Welfare Case Management Services
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2023), CMs noted that CaseAIM addressed efficiency gaps, particularly in documentation and client information access, contributing to better organization and decreased stress. Third, considering the utilization of technology in conjunction with other workload supports for CMs is important. CaseAIM enabled CMs to complete scheduled tasks, and the resulting service efficiency (e.g., available transportation, quick referrals) commonly improved worker-client relationships. With these advantages, CM's challenges highlight the importance of agencies developing protocols to address technical issues and using CM feedback to balance CaseAIM, incoming cases, and the goal of increased CM-parent quality interactions and communication. On a larger scale, successful implementation of ICT supports, such as CaseAIM, could inform system-level policy development. Statewide child welfare systems could benefit from universal ICT support that could link case files across jurisdictions, making information sharing more available and efficient.

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Telehealth: Opportunities, Limitations, and Ethical Considerations in Supporting Families
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Telehealth offers an opportunity to engage parents in discussions about race, privilege, and cultural identity in a way that feels less intimidating than traditional in-person settings. For example, I integrate principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) into sessions, helping parents recognize their own biases and understand the unique challenges their children may face. These conversations are not always easy, but they are essential for fostering a supportive and nurturing environment where the child feels seen, valued, and understood. The goal is for the parents to strive to take themselves out of the equation as a precipitating factor.

At the same time, telehealth raises questions about what may be missed on a virtual platform. Subtle dynamics, such as microaggressions or unspoken tensions, can be harder to observe through a screen. Therapists must remain focused and reflective, ensuring they are attuned to the nuances of family interactions while also addressing the limitations of telehealth.

Broader Implications of Telehealth

Telehealth has expanded access to therapy while challenging therapists to adapt their practices in innovative ways. For adoptive families, it offers a bridge to support and guidance that might otherwise be unavailable. At the same time, it requires therapists to remain mindful of its limitations and ethical implications, particularly when supporting marginalized, vulnerable and exceptional populations.

As telehealth continues to evolve, it is essential to approach it with both curiosity and caution. How can we ensure that telehealth remains inclusive and accessible for all families? How do we balance its strengths with its limitations to create meaningful therapeutic experiences? These questions remind us that telehealth is not a one-size-fits-all solution but a tool that must be used thoughtfully, intentionally and continually reexamined.

Conclusion: A Call to Reflection

Telehealth has transformed the way families access mental health care, offering both opportunities and challenges. Its flexibility and accessibility make it a powerful tool for supporting families, particularly those navigating the complexities of trauma and transracial adoption. At the same time, it demands ongoing reflection and adaptation to ensure it meets the needs of diverse families.

As therapists, we must embrace telehealth with intention, using it to manufacture connection, understanding, and growth while remaining mindful of the limitations. By prioritizing trauma-informed care and ethical practices, we can create inclusive spaces where families feel supported and empowered to thrive—one virtual session at a time.

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About *CW360°*

Child Welfare 360° (*CW360°*) is an annual publication that provides communities, child welfare professionals, and other human service professionals comprehensive information on the latest research, policies, and practices in a key area affecting child well-being today. The publication uses a multidisciplinary approach for its robust examination of an important issue in child welfare practice and invites articles from key stakeholders, including families, caregivers, service providers, a broad array of child welfare professionals (including educators, legal professionals, medical professionals and others), and researchers. Social issues are not one dimensional and cannot be addressed from a single vantage point. We hope that reading *CW360°* enhances the delivery of child welfare services across the country while working toward safety, permanency, and well-being for all children and families being served.

Resources

This list of resources is compiled with input from CW360° authors and editors as well as CASCW staff.

Governmental Organizations & Resources

- *Administration for Children and Families* https://www.acf.hhs.gov
- *Children's Bureau* https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb
- *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services* https://www.hhs.gov

National Organizations, Programs, & Resources

- *Annie E. Casey Foundation* https://www.aecf.org
- *Binti* https://binti.com/
- *California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse For Child Welfare* https://www.cebc4cw.org/
- *Child Welfare League of America* https://www.cwla.org
- *Child Welfare Information Gateway* https://www.childwelfare.gov
- *Connect Our Kids* https://connectourkids.org/
- *Human Rights Campaign Foundation* https://www.hrc.org/
- *iFoster* https://www.ifoster.org/
- *The Imprint* https://imprintnews.org
- *Lyssn* https://www.lyssn.io
- *National Center for State Courts* https://www.ncsc.org
- *National Child Welfare Workforce Institute* https://www.ncwwi.org
- *National Indian Child Welfare Association* https://www.nicwa.org
- *Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development* https://www.qic-wd.org
- *Search Institute* https://searchinstitute.org

Policy and Advocacy Organizations

- *Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy (AISP)* https://aisp.upenn.edu
- *Center for Democracy & Technology (CDT)* https://cdt.org

Additional Reading, Resources, and Tools

AI & Technology in Practice

- *The Atlantic, The Coming Humanist Renaissance* https://z.umn.edu/Atlantic
- *New York Times, 'The Godfather of AI' Leaves Google and Warns of Danger Ahead* https://z.umn.edu/NYtimesAI

Technology and Family Support

- *Annie E. Casey Foundation* https://www.aecf.org
- *Search Institute Developmental Relationships* https://searchinstitute.org/developmental-relationships
- *US Dept of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General, Protecting Children in Foster Care From Identity Theft* https://perma.cc/8K64-3E6F
- *Ampersand Families* https://ampersandfamilies.org
  - » *MYVoice (Minnesota Youth Voice)* https://www.myvoicemn.org

Guidelines and Additional Tools

- *Center for Democracy & Technology, Fostering Responsible Tech Use: Balancing Benefits and Risks Among Public Child Welfare Agencies* https://z.umn.edu/ResponsibleTechUse
- *Chapin Hall, Guidelines for the Use of AI Tools at Chapin Hall* https://z.umn.edu/AIGuidelines
- *Unicef, Policy guidance on AI for children* https://z.umn.edu/UnicefPolicyguidanceAI
- *U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Trustworthy AI (TAI) Playbook* https://z.umn.edu/HHSAIplaybook
- *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, AI Plan for State and Local Governments* https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public-benefits-and-ai.pdf

Linking Data

- *Children's Bureau, Technical Bulletin #8, Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) Data Exchange Standards* https://z.umn.edu/cbccwis
- *Minn-LInK Brief #62, Adoption, Financial Incentives, and Child Achievement* https://z.umn.edu/MinnLInK62
- *Minn-LInk Brief #66, Housing (In)Stability in Child Welfare* https://z.umn.edu/MinnLInK66
- *Minnesota P-20 Statewide Longitudinal Education Data System* https://z.umn.edu/MNEducationdata
- *Minnesota Linking Information for Kids (Minn-LInK)* https://cascw.umn.edu/research/minn-link

Foster Care Advocacy and Insights

- *iFoster, 2024 Voice of the Foster Care Community Report* https://voiceoffostercare.org
- *iFoster, 2023 Lived Experience Guide to Fixing Foster Care* https://z.umn.edu/2023LivedExperienceGuide

Technology Supports for the Child Welfare Workforce

- *Kentucky Child Welfare Workforce Wellness Initiative* https://www.wku.edu/childwelfare/wellness.php
- *The AI Social Worker* https://www.theaisocialworker.com/
- *ChatGPT* https://openai.com/chatgpt
- *Social Work Magic* https://www.socialworkmagic.com
- *Bastion GPT* https://bastiongpt.com
- *Berries AI* https://www.berries.icu

Agency Discussion Guide for The Evolving Role of Technology in Child Welfare

This Agency Discussion Guide is designed to help facilitate thoughtful discussions during supervision and team meetings about the information presented in *CW*360°. In this issue, we explored the multifaceted and evolving role of technology in child welfare. As we consider these emerging technologies, it is so important to consider their impact on the child welfare workforce.

Self-Reflection Questions:

1. Take a moment to reflect on times when you've had to adapt to new technologies or software in your life and work (internet, smartphone, social media, etc.). What was difficult about these transitions? What was exciting? What lessons did you take from these experiences in adapting to earlier technologies that you think can be useful as your group begins discussing the use of AI in the workplace?
2. Individuals have different levels of familiarity with AI. Share your perspective with the group on your familiarity with AI technology, and what personal values you feel are important for you to remember as you consider your professional relationship with this evolving technology.
3. In your experience, how has the widespread and greater use of technology among youth, children and families affected your work, either positively or negatively?
4. How has your own use of technology affected your work, either positively or negatively? Do you view the greater adoption of technology in today's world as a net positive or negative for your life and your work? Share examples if possible.
5. In their article on Generative AI, Melanie Sage and Todd Sage advise professionals to "Maintain professional judgment and seek supervision when unsure" of whether or not to use AI in their work. What are some of the situations that you personally would seek supervision for if and when you chose to use AI?

Discussion on Practice Implementation:

1. How would your agency implement simulation-based training tools such as virtual reality to enhance workforce skills, while ensuring the use of these technologies does not undermine the human connection central to social work practice? What strategies would you use to address potential ethical challenges, such as privacy concerns and the risk of reinforcing biases?
2. In her article on Financial Wellness for LGBTQ+ Young Adults, Nia Clark discusses the importance of financial education for transition-aged youth. What do you envision as challenges and opportunities if you and/or your agency were to implement the WorthIt app into your practice with youth of this age?
3. In the article, "The Impact of AI Technology on the Social Work Profession," Marina Badillo-Diaz writes, "Social work agencies and organizations should develop comprehensive AI guidelines for their staff to ensure the ethical and effective use of AI in practice." What personal and professional values would you want your agency to remember as it develops new policies for AI use?
4. In "Technology as a Bridge to Preserving and Strengthening Relationships," Jenna Jacobs argues, "Technology is not the answer!" What does she mean by this statement, and what concrete steps should agencies and workers take to avoid using technology to perpetuate harm inadvertently?
5. Were there any specific apps, technologies, or forms of software that you learned about from this issue of *CW*360° that you would like your agency to explore implementing? Explain.
6. Maddy Dwyer, author of the article "Fostering Responsible Tech Use," makes several suggestions on how agencies can responsibly implement technology in their practices. Which stood out to you as the most important or relevant for your agency? Were there any additional recommendations you would add for your agency specifically? Explain.

PACC
PERMANENCY AND ADOPTION COMPETENCY CERTIFICATE

Enhancing Permanency and Adoption Competency Through Multidisciplinary Collaboration

The Permanency and Adoption Competency Certificate (PACC) is a cohort model designed to increase the number of qualified permanency and adoption professionals working across an array of settings including: public and Tribal child welfare, mental health, education and healthcare.

QUESTIONS?

Contact the Program Coordinator at info@paccminnesota.com

Funding for PACC is made available through the Department of Children, Youth, and Families through grant #252014.

The Phoenix Learning Xchange (PLX) is an interactive, multidisciplinary, non-credit certificate program. PLX aims to broaden the knowledge of the development, challenges, positive engagement and well-being of youth and adolescents involved in child welfare and other systems. Program completion provides learners with knowledge, skills, practice opportunities and a supportive multidisciplinary community in which to learn and collaborate.

QUESTIONS?

Contact the Program Coordinator at info@plx.com

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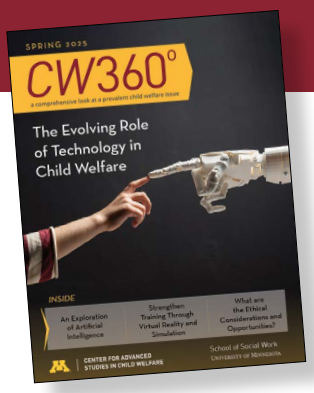

Download this and previous issues of *CW*360° at http://z.umn.edu/cw360

In This Issue of *CW*360°

- An exploration of the evolving opportunities and challenges presented by technology and AI in child welfare
- Delve into the dynamic and transformative role of technology in advancing child welfare practices
- Effective strategies and best practices for leveraging technology to enhance child safety and foster family stability
- Actionable tips for promoting workforce wellness through the strategic use of technology
- Valuable insights into AI's impact on decision-making, administrative efficiency, and professional development within child welfare
- Explore the role of simulation-based practices in enhancing training programs to improve service delivery and outcomes
- An overview of the critical importance of establishing clear, responsible guidelines for AI use, addressing ethical considerations, data privacy, and equity
- Essential resources and comprehensive guides for integrating technology and AI into child welfare systems

***CW*360°**
a comprehensive look at a prevalent child welfare issue

The Evolving Role of Technology in Child Welfare, Spring 2025

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