

**Title:** Investigating the Relationship between Child Welfare Professionals' Well-Being and Application of Casework Skills in Practice

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### **Background:**

Previous research has identified that child welfare professionals are at an increased risk of developing secondary traumatic stress (STS) and burnout as a result of their work (Baugerud et al., 2018; Bride et al., 2007; Sprang et al., 2011). Some studies have identified that poor worker well-being is associated with increased turnover (Shier et al., 2012; Wilke et al., 2018).

However, little is known about how child welfare professionals' well-being may impact the casework skills they apply in working with children and families. This study explores the relationship between child welfare professionals' well-being and casework skills. Specifically, the research questions were: (1) Does worker well-being predict engagement skills? (2) Does worker well-being predict assessment skills? (3) Does worker well-being predict fostering relative/kinship connections for children in foster care?

### **Methods:**

The study design was cross-sectional, using data collected via a statewide, online survey of child welfare professionals in one Midwestern state (N=324). The survey comprised 68 items, including the Professional Quality of Life (ProQol) Scale (CVT, 2019), which measured STS, burnout, and compassion satisfaction with a Likert-type scale. Engagement, assessment, and fostering relative/kinship connections were measured via responses to 15 survey items. Following bivariate analyses, multiple linear regression analyses with multiply imputed data tested the relationship between each of the well-being subscales (STS, burnout and compassion satisfaction) and each of the casework skills (engagement, assessment, and fostering kinship connections). All models controlled for demographic variables.

### **Results:**

Participants were employed in public and private agencies as frontline workers (67%), supervisors (29%) and in other roles (4%). The majority of participants had been working in child welfare for less than 6 years (63%). Linear regression indicated that higher STS predicted significantly decreased application of casework skills including engagement ( $F(6,294)=3.679$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $R^2=.070$ ), assessment ( $F(6,294)=4.311$ ,  $p<.05$ ,  $R^2=.081$ ), and fostering of relative/kinship connections ( $F(6,294)=7.209$ ,  $p<.011$ ,  $R^2=.128$ ). Additionally, linear regression showed that higher burnout was associated with decreased application of case work skills including engagement ( $F(6,294)=8.155$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $R^2=.143$ ), assessment ( $F(6,294)=10.235$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $R^2=.173$ ), and fostering of kinship connections ( $F(6,294)=11.103$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $R^2=.185$ ). However, higher compassion satisfaction was associated with significantly increased application of case work skills including engagement ( $F(6,294)=15.067$ ,  $p<.0001$ ,  $R^2=.235$ ), assessment ( $F(6,294)=15.147$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $R^2=.236$ ), and fostering kinship connections ( $F(6,294)=12.486$ ,  $p<.0001$ ,  $R^2=.203$ ).

### **Implications:**

These findings highlight the influence that the well-being of child welfare professionals may have on their practice and addresses a present gap in the literature by building evidence that suggests STS and burnout may negatively impact child welfare professionals' casework skills.

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Additionally, this study suggests compassion satisfaction may have a positive influence on child welfare professionals' casework skills. While being limited by a cross-sectional design, this study suggests that by mitigating workers' stress and bolstering workers' compassion satisfaction, we may expect to see improved outcomes for both frontline workers and, ultimately, the families they serve. These findings underscore the need for further research to specifically identify the mechanisms by which child welfare professionals' well-being may be improved, thus facilitating better child and family outcomes through authentic engagement, individualized assessment and by fostering stronger relative/kinship connections.