

What is the Virtual Social Work Trainer (VSWT)?

Social Work lacks a training method that provides the extensive practice necessary to reliably develop expertise. The VSWT system is designed to strengthen the skills of child welfare workers using technologies such as Virtual Reality. VSWT provides opportunities for extensive practice and measurement of skill acquisition. It is designed to incorporate the necessary conditions for learning, such as scaffolded exercises, and immediate feedback.

Currently, VSWT targets the skills of identifying potential risk and protective factors commonly observed during a home visit. Additional skills central to child welfare, such as Motivational Interviewing, are in development. Our goal is to create a library of skills practice modules that social work students and child welfare workers can use to practice to competence prior to working with families. Skills modules that focus, for example, on other aspects of engaging de-escalation, teaming, documentation, interviewing, court room etiquette, to name a few.

What is the Virtual Home Simulation (VHS)?

VHS is our first skills training package that is now available. The software provides users with the opportunity to practice identifying possible risk and protective factors/capacities that may be observed during a home visit. Workers are provided with immediate feedback on what the “best” assessment decisions are based on an expert consensus profile, given the specific scenario provided. Thus, possible participants not only include frontline child protection workers and permanency caseworkers, but also trainers, supervisors, coaches, mentors, and administration.

Participants will either use a virtual reality headset or standard PC while assessing child welfare concerns that have theoretically come to the attention of the public child welfare agency in your area. Participants may be able to complete these tasks at their own laptop or computer at a time or place convenient to them. Participants will conduct these home observations of the family living environments by moving about each home, one room at a time, observing and marking items they feel may be a possible risk to the safety of children or that may be an indication of the protective factors and capacities of the caregivers. Participants should indicate all items thought to be either risk or protective, considering the case circumstances, and document their reason for the assessment decision in the provided text box associated with each item. Participants meeting expert level criteria will also indicate the level of importance for each item assessed as it relates to the circumstances of each case.

Feedback is provided after each practice session to new or less skilled workers regarding their performance compared to experts in assessing the home environment. Performance over time is tracked so participants can know how they are progressing toward competence.

How can I use VHS in Teaching or Training?

VHS Learning Modes

Currently, there are two ways to interact with VHS that are built into the system.

Evaluation Mode is used for assessing performance gains.

Free-practice Mode is currently the default mode of practice. Participants can practice in multiple homes. Practice sessions can be structured flexibly. For example, participants could practice every day for 15 minutes or could complete one home at each session. Expert feedback is provided at the completion of each home assessment. Summary and item level performance scores are provided. These scores compare participant performance to those of experts.

A third way of interacting, *Coached Mode*, is in development (targeted for release in January 2021). This mode is our most highly structured method of practice. Designed for beginners, Coached Mode provides immediate feedback on every item in the home at the time the participant interacts with it, along with thought questions and prompts to help learn to assess for possible indicators of risk and protection efficiently and effectively in a home environment.

The following assignment description shows how VHS has been used in a university course using the computer-based version of the software.

Home visits provide social workers with the opportunity to assess a client’s environment. Throughout these assessments, we can use observation skills to assess environmental indicators of possible protective and risk factors. Home visits also provide us with the opportunity to learn more about our clients than conversations alone might provide.

For this assignment, each student will complete a virtually simulated assessment of the home environment. Each student will complete a pre and post-test of skills during our class time. Students complete this assessment by taking pictures of items in a client’s home and then rating the item as either a risk or protective factor. Then students provide a rationale for their classification choice. In between the pre-and post-test students will have two weeks to practice on two other homes. More details will be provided in class (i.e. how to download the software).

Please note that students will need to utilize their university provided email address as their unique login for the VHS software. Please make sure that you know your email address prior to attending class. When students log on for the first time, they will be asked to create a password. You need to utilize both your email address and created password every time you utilize this program. Please make sure to write down your password! Once students have completed the login information, there is a tutorial for how to engage with and complete this activity.

Students will receive full credit for this assignment once they complete both the pre and post assessment.



Additional Learning Ideas

In addition to the learning methods built into the VHS software, here are some additional ideas for using VHS in online or in-person learning settings that can extend the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that can be learned.

Realistic job preview VHS can be used to provide persons interested in Child Welfare a realistic preview of commonly encountered home environments. A presurvey that is embedded in the software currently asks about a participant's interest to work in the field of child welfare, then again as a post survey, providing insight into your cohort demography.

Desensitization and increasing self-awareness VHS can be used to help participants become acclimated to conducting home visits and increase their self-awareness of how certain environments impact them. The following are thought questions that could be used for this purpose:

*What was your personal experience when you walked into the home?
What about the home bothered you? What confused you?
How might your culture or bias impact how you viewed certain items in the home?
What about the home environment did you feel was commonplace?*

Learning to conduct individualized assessments After going through a home, VHS can contribute to learning how to conduct individual assessments. The following are thought questions that could be used for this purpose:

*How does the case file change your assessment of the home environment?
How does the identified concern change what you would consider to be an indicator of risk or protection?
How do the children's ages/gender change what you would consider to be an indicator of risk or protection?
What other case file concerns change how you view the home?*

Further comparing participant to expert performance VHS provides feedback on how participants' performance compares to that of experts. Participants can further examine their performance and identify areas for improvement by discussing their summary and item level data with instructor, trainer, or supervisor, etc.. The following are thought questions that could be used for this purpose:

*What patterns did you see in items that you marked differently than the experts?
Did you identify more indicators of risk or protection? Why?
How do you think the case file changed the way you viewed the home environment?*

Increasing the ability to identify indicators of protection VHS can be used to help participants practice identifying possible indicators of protection in order to increase their own awareness. For example, one possible teaching method is to have participants go through a home and tag as many protective factor items as possible in a limited amount of time (e.g. 10 minutes). Discussing what a participant or group of participants noticed, then repeating the exercise to increase the skill of identifying strengths that may be incorporated into service planning.

Identifying next steps for information gathering Participants may benefit from identifying how the environmental condition of a home might inform or change their data gathering process. The following are thought questions that could be used for this purpose:

*For the items which you were not sure how to classify, what further information would need to decide?
Who would you want to interview and what would you want to ask in order to make a decision?
How does your home assessment inform the questions you want to ask the caregivers?
How does your home assessment inform the questions you want to ask the children?
What have you learned about the people who live in the home after doing your environmental assessment?*

Identifying and prioritizing next steps Participants may benefit from identifying how the environmental condition of a home might inform or change the next action steps they take beyond the data gathering process. The following are thought questions that could be used for this purpose:

Given what you have observed in the home environment, what would be your next step? What is most important for you to focus on next?

Documentation Participants also practice the skill of documenting the entire activity of the home observation assessment and can practice incorporating specific aspects of documentation that may be required by your jurisdiction. For example, participants may be expected to document their overall assessment for how the child(ren) vulnerabilities may be mitigated by the protective factors/capacities given the specific threats to safety. Participants can practice discussing overall conclusion on what items of risk and protection warrant immediate attention, as well as what the next steps are in working with the specific family.