

Learning to investigate and avert child abuse

A new child advocacy studies program at Winona State University teaches students how to deal with suspected child abuse situations

TWO CASEWORKERS STEPPED INTO THE LIVING ROOM OF a home strewn with empty beer bottles, open pill containers, discarded food boxes and a dirty diaper. They soon discovered that Janice, the young out-of-work mother, was drunk. And her children were due home from school shortly.

This could have been a real-life situation but it wasn't. The caseworkers – students in Winona State University's child advocacy studies program – were learning how to investigate suspected child abuse and neglect. Lending an uncomfortable air of reality was the fully furnished but unkempt and hazard-prone mock residence, nicknamed by students as "garbage house."

Though students study theory and research relating to child abuse, the program immerses them in realistic settings to simulate home visits, forensic interviews and trials, said Angela Scott Dixon,

who had been a professional forensic interviewer before joining the faculty.

The mock residence is part of the university's state-of-the-art National Child Protection Training Center, which also has five courtrooms and four interview rooms. All the rooms are equipped with video cameras that record student interactions for later analysis by faculty and classmates. University theater arts students and community actors portray abused children, perpetrators and their families.

Through carefully developed scenarios, students learn interview protocols as well as diversity issues and cultural practices that can be mistaken for maltreatment. Chemical dependency and domestic violence also are explored.

As a result, students gain a deep-seated understanding of the intricacies involved in child abuse prevention and investigation.



Students Karina Kujawa, left, and Nathan Amos, right, investigate alleged child neglect. Angel Hoskin, who works at the National Child Protection Training Center, plays the troubled mother answering the door.



The "caseworkers" begin their assessment in the living room, noting open prescription bottles, a dirty diaper and discarded food containers.

“It’s like learning to ride a bicycle,” Dixon said. “You can read a book about it. But the best way to teach you to ride a bike is to have the experience of riding.”

Winona State’s program, which leads to a child advocacy certificate or minor, is the first of its kind in the country, Dixon said. Begun in 2005, the program attracts students who intend to become law enforcement officers, teachers, social workers and health care professionals.

The broad student mix reflects the real-world interactions of law enforcement, health care and social work in child abuse cases and plays directly into a core intention of the program – to create well-trained and cohesive interdisciplinary child advocacy teams. “Ultimately, we are out to produce students who know how to work with other disciplines and conduct thorough, lawful and respectful investigations,” Dixon said.

Karina Kujawa, a sociology major who plans to graduate in December 2010, said the multidisciplinary approach brings a lot to an investigation. “Someone who wants to be a doctor will see the medical things,” she said. “The law enforcement person will look for the legal aspects. It helps the process move much quicker.” Class discussions also are enriched by the students’ varying perspectives. “You learn early on to take in other people’s views,” she said.

Another student, Jessica Harren, said she likes learning by role playing. A law enforcement major who intends to become a police officer, Harren said she now understands the critical fine points of interview procedures. “Angie and the other professors are really good about making things clear,” she said. “It’s great to have people teaching us who actually have been in the field.”

Continued on Page 30

Preventing child abuse is goal of national training center at Winona State University

An estimated 1 million children in the United States are confirmed as victims of child abuse and neglect each year. In Minnesota, 5,400 children were abused and neglected in 2008, according to the Minnesota Department of Human Services. Seventeen of those children died from maltreatment.

But many child maltreatment cases are overlooked because professionals have not been trained properly in prevention and investigation, according to Victor Vieth, a former prosecutor, child abuse expert and director of the National Child Protection Training Center.

Established in 2003, the federally funded center aims to significantly reduce, if not end, child abuse within three generations. To help meet that goal, the center’s staff is working to establish Winona State University’s child advocacy curriculum at 100 colleges and universities within the next five years. The center also trains professionals. Since its inception, more than 40,000 frontline professionals from all 50 states and 17 countries have been trained by the center.

As Vieth put it, “We simply must produce, beginning in college, an army of frontline workers well equipped to organize all the players in their local communities for the betterment of children.”

To learn more about the National Child Protection Training Center, visit www.ncptc.org.



Assistant Professor Angela Scott Dixon, left, asks students in a training session about what the condition of the kitchen reflects.



Dixon talks with the students about the complexities of conducting investigations.

Continued from Page 29

No standard curriculum existed for training child advocacy workers until Winona State's program was begun. So far, eight students have graduated with minors. Another 62 have declared minors in child advocacy. And 40 or so have completed the three-course certificate program, which equips them to identify, investigate and respond to early stages of abuse.

The program also prepares students for internships. Stepping Stones, a children's advocacy center in La Crosse, Wis., routinely has one or two interns from Winona State's program. "They are a huge help," said Leslie Smith, a family advocacy worker. "If a professional on our staff isn't available to conduct a client interview, an intern who knows what's happening can assist." In addition, Smith said, her staff attends training every year at Winona State's center.

In going through the litter-filled two-bedroom mock residence, many students first must confront how their judgments about accused abusers or squalid conditions can unfairly color their conclusions. "It's easy to condemn someone suspected of child abuse," Dixon noted. "Often, students go through these scenarios and come back saying, 'That's not what I thought a mom on welfare would be like. That's not what I thought dealing with someone in a domestic violence situation would be like.'"

Students also must learn to develop a rapport with victims and alleged perpetrators. Sometimes it takes practice. During a recent training session, the two students who encountered Janice, the tipsy, out-of-work mother, almost immediately turned their backs on her.

"Watch your body language," Dixon advised. "How would you like it if someone came into your home and immediately turned their back to you?" The students immediately grasped her point.

In the "Janice" scenario, students had to identify the family's immediate needs, namely ensuring the children's safety when their mother was drunk and properly storing the pills and hazardous cleaning materials carelessly scattered around the house. But there was also a problem that was not so obvious. "Look around the kitchen," Dixon said. "Janice has a big, big problem today that we need to get fixed. What is it?" Aside from noticing a dead mouse in a cupboard and the rancid refrigerator odor, one student realized that almost all the food was unfit for consumption based on the expiration dates. "That's right," Dixon said. "This kitchen could fool you because there's a little bit of food here but not enough for this family's dinner tonight."

Viewing the array of empty vodka bottles, newspapers and empty food containers on the kitchen table, Dixon also challenged her students to find the mother's strengths. One student spotted the answer: the newspaper's help wanted section and open bills showed the struggling mother was trying to deal with her financial quandary.

Dixon smiled. Her students were learning what they needed to know. "This is why I believe Winona State has something special here," she said later. "With this program, we can make a real difference. We stand a chance of significantly reducing child abuse not only in southeastern Minnesota but throughout the United States." ■

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ANGELA SCOTT DIXON,
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR



Tom Hill, an information technology staff member at Winona State University, designed the technology for managing 19 video cameras in the training center.



Students in Dixon's forensic interview course watch a classmate interview an actor posing as a child who may have been abused. Later, the students critique their classmate's interview.