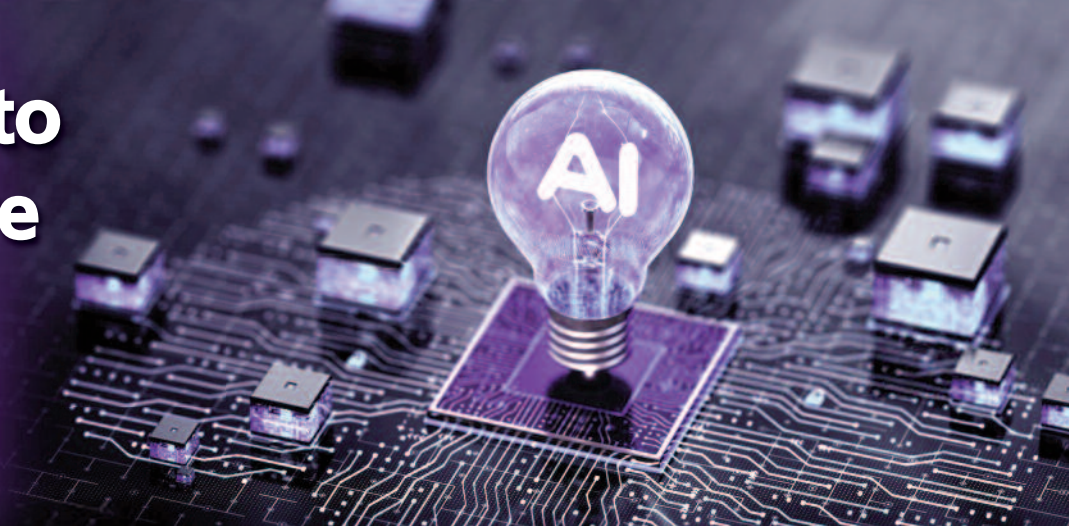


Bringing AI to Child Welfare Casework

By Jenny Cheng, Michael Tanana,
and Emily Smith Goering



Child welfare agencies manage an almost perfect storm of increasingly complex missions, growing service demands, and labor pressures.

Classroom-based training often leaves caseworkers feeling ill-prepared for the realities of fieldwork. Agencies can struggle to comply with growing requirements for fidelity monitoring and staff often experience anxiety about these evaluations, despite the potential benefits of feedback. High turnover can exacerbate these issues, as agencies must constantly onboard and train new staff. The confluence of challenges negatively impacts casework practice and the families who agencies serve. But it also presents an opportunity for innovation.

To lighten the load, some agencies have started to use AI to improve training and supervision workflows, automating repetitive tasks and providing rigorous evaluations across all interactions. Many new caseworkers view AI-driven role-playing as a “safe place” in which to learn and fail, with unbiased metrics that are aligned to standard best practices. This allows caseworkers to practice and refine skills in low-stakes environments, building confidence and competence that promotes improved service delivery. With AI scaling comprehensive evaluations, agencies can reduce compliance burdens and provide insights. Furthermore, supervisors can have more time to coach caseworkers in other important aspects of the work, like promoting family preservation and reunification, aligning with the core mission of keeping children safely at home while improving organizational effectiveness and morale.

Platforms like Lyssn serve as an important bridge, helping agencies and other customers in the health and human services sector efficiently train and monitor service quality at scale. Paul Lennader, a consultant who works across several child welfare jurisdiction, notes that, “As we worked with our clients to implement Motivational Interviewing, we were looking for a sustainable solution

for staff who are super busy and workforces with historically high turnover rates. Lyssn’s AI provided a usable training platform when team members were available, including during onboarding. Staff have been really excited about the way the training is delivered. They are motivated to use and follow through with the training.”

Apprehension toward the use of AI in child welfare often stems from misconceptions surrounding privacy, data security and usage, whether the system’s algorithms are third party-vetted, and concerns regarding “surveillance” supervising systems in potentially disruptive ways. Initially, the perceived high level of evaluation can feel intimidating, and many have raised good-faith feedback about recording what are often highly personal family interactions and obtaining consent—potentially straining the intimate caseworker-family dynamic. However, these misconceptions can be mitigated through transparent communication, clear data protection policies, closely examining third party vetting aligned to evidence based clinical metrics and emphasizing AI’s role in providing constructive, positive feedback rather than punitive oversight. As staff and agency leaders experience the benefits of appropriately used AI-driven tools, many have come to appreciate their value in improving their skills and service quality.

It’s important to clarify that unsecure public AI tools should never be used for confidential family cases. In September 2024, for example, a caseworker compromised the privacy of a child at risk by entering their details into ChatGPT; this, in turn, led to stricter AI regulations (Taylor, 2024). In contrast, HIPAA-compliant AI tools with specialized training can be safely used in sensitive settings.

Organizations like HSITAG (<https://hsitag.org/>) and GovTech’s CPSAI (<https://www.govtech.com/cpsai>) are convening respected experts to establish ethical guidelines and bias reduction for AI use in the public sector, particularly in health and human services and

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child welfare—an effort that Lyssn strongly supports and in which we plan to participate.

As AI technology continues to evolve, its potential to positively impact child welfare practices and policies also grows. It can offer new opportunities to address longstanding challenges in the field and work toward benefitting families and children. ■



Lyssn's research and platform were developed over a 16-plus-year period and include data from 26,500 expert-analyzed, anonymized conversations aligned to gold standard metrics. Lyssn has been evaluated in more than 60 peer reviewed publications. For more, see <https://www.lyssn.io/>

Jenny Cheng, MSW, is the Vice President of Growth at Lyssn, a leading SaaS provider specializing in AI-driven solutions that enhance training and transform practice in child welfare and social service programs. With over a decade of experience in evidence-based program implementation, Jenny brings a unique blend of research expertise, strategic growth leadership, and deep sector knowledge to her role. Before joining Lyssn, Jenny was a Senior Research Analyst at the University of Utah's College of Social Work, where she focused on implementation science and program evaluation for child welfare and juvenile justice initiatives. Her work provided critical insights into scaling effective practices, bridging the gap between research, policy, and real-world application. Ms. Cheng received her Master of Social Work from the University of Utah.

Michael Tanana, PhD, is a data scientist, machine learning researcher and software engineer. He has spent the last 15 years

developing tools and creating platforms to help behavioral health providers improve in their performance and outcomes. His current work includes machine learning methods for natural language processing and outcome evaluation, statistical methods for behavioral sciences as well as interactive data visualization for program improvement and feedback. His recent projects involve the use of deep learning techniques to perform tasks that normally require highly trained psychologists and the implementation of these models in production grade programming frameworks. Dr. Tanana has been awarded multiple NIH and NSF grants and has published in the fields of psychology, epidemiology, criminal justice and child welfare. Dr. Tanana received his BA from Dartmouth College in 2004, his Masters in Statistics for Educational Psychology from the University of Utah in 2010 and his PhD in Educational Psychology in 2017.

Emily Smith Goering, PhD, is a Child Welfare Implementation Success Manager at Lyssn, a technology company using AI to support and improve practice in child welfare and behavioral health. Prior to this, she worked for KI&E, a research firm focused on rigorous applied research methods to evaluate implementation and effectiveness of programs in a variety of child welfare contexts. She has spent the last 15 years in child welfare in a variety of roles, including as a researcher, implementation specialist, QA and training specialist and a direct practice social worker. She has extensive experience helping child welfare systems implement solutions that improve support for the child welfare workforce. Emily has her MSW from the University of Texas at Austin and her PhD from the University of Maryland, where she studied organizational culture and climate of child welfare systems and how those organizational factors impact outcomes for children and families. On a personal note, she is a kinship parent and former foster parent.

Reference

Taylor, J. (2024, September 26). AI ban ordered after child protection worker used ChatGPT in Victorian court case. The Guardian. <https://amp.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/sep/26/victoria-child-protection-chat-gpt-ban-ovic-report-ntwnfb>

Exceptional Children

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I need you to help me stay out of situations that affect me that way. If you can figure out why I melt down, you can prevent it. Look for signs—because they are always there—and know that I may not be able to tell you in words what's wrong.

Love Me Without “If”

When I hear things like, “If you would just ___” and “Why can't you ___?”, I feel your disappointment in me. And it makes me wonder: Did *you* do every last thing that your parents and teachers expected of you? I bet you didn't, and I bet you wouldn't like being reminded of it all the time. I didn't choose to have autism. Remember

that it's happening to me, not you. I think a lot about growing up, things I want to be, things I want to do. It scares me that without your help, I may never do those things. I need you to be my rock, my defender, my guide. Can you love me for who I am, without any “if” or “but”? Then we'll see, together, how far I can go! ■

Ellen Notbohm's work touches millions in more than twenty-five languages. She is author of the nonfiction classic *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew* and three other books on autism, the acclaimed novel *The River* by Starlight, and numerous short fiction and nonfiction pieces appearing in literary journals, magazine, and anthologies. Her books and short prose have won more than 40 awards worldwide. Learn more at ellennotbohm.com.