

Poverty Simulation Activity Script

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Hello, Today we are going to embark on a decision making process. The purpose is to provide you with a perspective that many of our families in low-income and/or housing transition situations face on a daily basis.

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ADD INTRODUCTION

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This particular simulation was adapted from one created by Project Rise in Akron Public Schools.

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Before we get started, we want to make sure everyone has the supplies they need. You should have a bag of 3 hearts and 3 coins which will represent money. You should also have a reflection sheet. At certain points through this simulation we will ask you to reflect on your feelings in the moment.

As we go through the simulation, you might have opportunities to gain money or hearts, but you will also have to give money or hearts.

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As you look around the room, you will see various signs for locations where you may live.

We have the following locations for habitat:

- *Boyfriend's house*
- *Parent's house*
- *Friend's house*
- *Homeless Shelter*
- *Car*
- *Hotel*

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When you arrive there will be a “Collector” collecting your payment. Collectors, please wave hello! Please make sure to provide your payment.

Before we get started, does everyone have all of the items they need to do the simulation. As a reminder, you want a bag of 3 hearts and 3 money pieces as well as a reflection sheet.

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We will now begin the simulation.

As a reminder you will be making decisions as if you are our mother, Sara. Sara, please go ahead and start to share your story.

SARA: Hello, my name is Sara and I am a 29 year old mother of 3. I am currently living with my boyfriend who is the father of my two youngest children. I moved out of subsidized public housing and in with him after becoming pregnant with my second child. He was not permitted to live at the subsidized housing with us and we planned to get married after the baby was born. I then became pregnant with my third child a couple months after the second child was born and we never got married. That is also when things started to go downhill.

I quit my job as a bartender right before the second child was born. When the third child was born, my boyfriend started getting upset with me saying that I wasn't contributing to the bills. I am just too tired to work at night after taking care of the babies and then helping my first born, who is in kindergarten, with her homework and spending time with her before bed time. I couldn't get a day job because we wouldn't have child care for the two youngest. We have been arguing pretty frequently about everything but mostly money.

My parents live in town, but my dad is an alcoholic. When he drinks he often gets violent. When I was younger he would at times get violent with me and I don't want to expose my kids to that.

Last night my boyfriend came home and was extremely angry. He had been drinking and yelled at me about not doing the dishes. He was cussing and screaming so loud that he woke up the babies and my six year old was crying. He started throwing dishes, breaking them, talking about how he didn't have the money to raise 3 kids, not to mention me. I locked myself and the kids up in their bedroom falling asleep on the floor. When I got up in the morning, he was already gone to work.

I know I need to get out of my current living situation, but I am not sure what to do. I can stay, but I really need to contribute to the bills so my boyfriend will not get so upset. I have a little cash that I saved for expenses my daughter may have for school, but that is all I have.

I could go to my parents, but I just don't know what the situation will be for me or my kids. Some days are good and some are bad.

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CHOICE #1:

Do you...

Choose to stay at the boyfriend's house? If you do, please stay seated at your table and give one chip to the Collector to represent the money you need to give to your boyfriend.

Choose to go to your parent's house? If you do, please stand up and give one heart to the collector to represent the fear, stress, and anxiety you will have going to your parent's house.

Allow participants to make their choice and have collectors collect the payments.

To those of you at the boyfriend's house. This is what has happened as a result of your difficult choice.

SARA: I gave the last of my savings to my boyfriend to help pay the bills. He was in a good mood for about two weeks. Then one night he came home late cussing again. He began screaming at me, calling me lazy and telling me I needed to get a job. I tried to explain how tired I was that if he could get home earlier and take care of the kids for a bit before I would work the night shift, I would be able to get a job. He then shared that he was behind in bills and if I didn't get my lazy self to work, we wouldn't be living at the apartment. I called the bar I used to work at previously to see if I could get my job back the next day. I was hired back but only part-time. I was able to work quite a few shifts, but I kept sleeping through the alarm. My daughter has missed school or was late one or two days every week since I started working as I am the only one who will get up and take her to school. My daughter's teacher keeps calling and leaving messages about her not coming to school. I just don't have the energy to call her back and get yelled at by another person.

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To those of you who went to your parent's house. This is what happened as a result of your difficult choice.

SARA: I am feeling so happy about making the decision to go back home. I was able to get my job back at the bar, but it is only part-time. My mom is able to help with the kids and on the nights I work, my mom is able to drop my daughter off at school the next morning so I can sleep in. My father has only had one bad night drinking. He came home and hit my mom. I was working that night and found my dad passed out on the couch and my mom with a bruised face asleep in the bedroom with the kids. I thought the kids didn't wake up, but I got a call from her teacher sharing that she wanted to check-in as my daughter told her that "grandpa hit grandma". She also had started acting up in class. I told the teacher she must be thinking of a movie we watched. I don't want the school to call DCF to the house, especially when things are looking up for me. I talked to my daughter about how to behave in school, but she got a referral the next week for yelling a cuss word at another student.

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As all of you are working, you each get 2 chips to represent the money from your job.

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CHOICE #2:

You must now make your second difficult decision.

Do you...

Continue to stay at your boyfriend's house? If you do, you must give 2 chips to the Collector to represent the money you are giving to him for bills. If you are at the parent's house you can go to boyfriend's house, but you must give the two chips as well. You must also give up a heart to represent the anxiety of the teacher calling you repeatedly about attendance.

OR

Do you go to your parent's house, or stay at the parent's house if you are already there? If you go or stay at the parent's house, then you must provide two hearts to represent the stress it is putting on your mom and the stress on you as you worry about your daughter reacting to things happening at home and at school.

OR

You can go to a friend's house who just had her roommate move out. You would have to live with the kids in the same room, but your friend is like a sister to you and she is willing to let you just pay less than normal rent for the room. If you go to the friend's house, you will get one heart which represents the anxiety it has taken off of you, but you must give her two chips.

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MAKE YOUR CHOICE

If you are at the boyfriend's house, this is the consequence of your difficult decision.

SARA: My boyfriend has been better now that I am working and not yelling as much. I decided to call the teacher back and made an appointment to meet with her and someone involved with school attendance after school. I called into work for the appointment and then they said they cancelled it when I showed up to the school. We scheduled a second meeting, but my boss was mad as I called in again. At least they helped and scheduled a bus to pick my daughter up for school each day. If I can get her up, I won't have to drive her.

Yesterday there was a loud knock on the door. We were served with an eviction notice for not paying our rent. Apparently my boyfriend had not paid rent for the last two months. This is despite the money I have been giving him. We only have one week to pay or we have to leave the apartment. We got in a huge fight when he came home last night and he packed a bag and left saying it was my fault we were in this situation. I called my boss to let him know I had to work out some things and wouldn't be able to come in. He let me know that I was fired as he needed someone more reliable. I am just not sure what to do now.

If you are at your parent's house, this is the consequence of your difficult decision.

SARA: My daughter is struggling at school. Since the night of my dad hitting my mom, she has been in two fights. Last night my dad came home drunk again. He started hitting the walls putting a hole in one. My mom and I grabbed the kids and went into the bedroom hoping that he would not come in. While the two of us were consoling the babies, my oldest daughter left the bedroom without us seeing and I heard her yelling at my dad to stop being so angry. I walked into the hallway to see him pushing her to the ground. I screamed at my dad to stop and he slapped me so hard I hit the wall. I got up and grabbed my daughter. My mom came out and started arguing with my dad. I was able to get back into the bedroom with the other kids and put a chair against the door, but I could hear my dad hitting my mom. My mom stayed out of sight of the kids for a few days after that. I was too afraid to leave the kids at night with my dad possibly coming home drunk again. I ended up having to quit my job again.

On top of all this, my daughter told her teacher about the night my dad threw her to the ground. The teacher called DCF on me and a case worker came to the house this morning. She stated that if I didn't leave the house, she would have to remove the kids.

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If you are at your friend's house, this is the consequence of your difficult decision.

SARA: The living situation at my friend's is good, but not ideal. I am having a hard time working as my friend does not want to have to help with the kids, so she will only agree to watch them if they are asleep. I have tried to get them to sleep early but it doesn't always happen and I am frequently late for work. My boss is also only scheduling me for one shift a week now since I am so unreliable.

My friend also mentioned that the landlord is coming by to visit next week, so I have to pack everything up and leave for a few nights so that he doesn't know we are there. If he does, he will kick everyone out.

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Choice # 3:

You now have to make your next choice.

If you are at the boyfriend's house, you must leave. You can choose any one of the other living options.

If you are at the parent's house you must leave. You can choose to move in with the friend, go to a domestic violence shelter, or live in your car.

If you are at the friend's house you must go to the car or hotel for the next round to represent the time that you had to leave quickly with all of your stuff.

The cost for the each living situation is as follows:

- Parent's House: Heart
 - Friend's House (if not there previously): Heart and a Chip
 - Car: Give a Heart
 - Hotel: Two chips
 - Shelter: Nothing
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With this last decision, this is how Sarah is feeling:

She is really struggling to support her three girls and she feels like every decision she makes is the wrong one. On top of that her daughter is struggling in school as well. Outside of having a break of caring for two kids as opposed to three during the day, she really doesn't want to send her oldest daughter to school as she is afraid that they will call DCF again. She is doing the best she can, but she doesn't know who to turn to.

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Take a moment to reflect on how you are feeling right now. On your reflection sheet, answer the questions listed for reflection one.

Reflection 1 Questions:

As you are standing in Sara's shoes, what is frustrating you most?

Did you feel forced in any of your decision making?

Now that you have thought about the questions, take a moment to share your thoughts with one or two people around you.

Collectors listen and ask people to highlight specific points. Facilitator, call on various people to share responses.

Let's go ahead and come back and see what the consequences of your last difficult decision were.

If you are at the friend's house.

SARA Friend's House: A neighbor started complaining about the noise of the kids. The landlord called and my friend had to admit that I was staying with her. The landlord told my friend that as she has more than two tenants in the apartment, he is going to raise the rent by \$300 or she could get another single tenant to replace the one that left and keep the same rent. She knew I couldn't make the payments, so she asked us to leave.

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If you are in the car.

SARA Car: It is so hot out, I have to run the air conditioning most of the time we are in the car. It is requiring extra gas money that I don't have. I decided to sell my cell phone to a pawn shop to make some extra money. The school wrote a note in my daughter's agenda asking for a new phone number as they needed to be able to reach me. As they already had called DCF on us prior, I didn't want to tell them I was living in the car. On the positive side, I called a local helpline and they said as I am living back on the streets again, if I can secure a job, they may be able to assist with some additional housing. I have an appointment to meet with a case manager next week who will help with employment and filing the paperwork. I am just so tired as it is and not sure how to get day care for the kids. I just don't know what to do. They said the housing supports can take anywhere from 3-6 months to get. To top it off, the car now won't start. We have to sleep with the windows down and I just keep hoping nobody bothers us at night now that I can't move the car. I just don't know what to do.

If you are at the parent's house.

SARA Parent's House: My mom is extremely depressed and has started to detach from all of us. I am not sure how to help her and it is causing me to be even more stressed. I talk to her about talking to someone or even getting a job and getting out of the house away from my dad, but she says she is too old for that. The kids are at an age where they are constantly needing attention and I don't know how to help everyone. One night I was so frustrated, I just left the kids at the house with my mom and dad and took off on a drive. I really needed to get away and didn't tell them where I was going. When I finally came back my dad had packed my stuff and told me I had to leave the house...he said if my mom wasn't going to take care of the kids he certainly wasn't. That he had already raised kids.

If you are in the shelter.

SARA Shelter: The shelter has been extremely kind to us. I am just struggling to get my daughter to school each day. The shelter has tried to arrange transportation for us, but they said they are short on bus drivers. It has been 3 weeks and I have not been able to get her to school as my car won't start. I also can't get a job as I am not allowed to leave my girls unattended at the shelter. However, we are safe, we have food, and I know the girls will not be taken from me.

If you are in the hotel.

SARA Hotel: I thought the hotel would be a good option, but it is taking all my money. I received food from the school, but I don't have a kitchen, so I can't make any of it in the hotel microwave. So we are hungry too. I got a night job with consistent hours again so that I could pay for the hotel. The neighbor said she would keep an eye on the kids for us. However, one night I came home and the door was open with the kids crying in the bed. I went next door and the neighbor said someone came around breaking into the rooms. She said she was afraid to come out of the room and apologized but she had to take care of her family first. As I looked in the drawer where I kept the cash I saved, it was all gone.

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CHOICE # 4:

You now have to make your next choice.

If you are at the parent's house, you must leave. You can choose any one of the other living options.

If you are at the friend's house, you must leave. You can choose any one of the other living options.

The cost for the each living situation is as follows:

- Car: Heart
 - Shelter: Nothing
 - Hotel: Two chips
-

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Let's now hear what the final outcome is of your last difficult decision.

SARA FINAL: It has been 8 months since we moved out of my boyfriend's house. He has not communicated with us at all and I doubt I will ever see child support. My daughter has missed 30% of the days at school I am told. Even when the absences could be excused, the school won't excuse them. They now want to retain her for a year and say she has extreme behavior issues. They say that she is failing interventions and they may want to test her for a learning disability. I just don't know what else to do. I agree to it, but worry about the consequences of all of this and how much our situation this year plays into it.

I am hoping to get a job, but daycare is at least \$800/month/kid, so I am not sure what the right option is. Next year my middle child will be able to attend Pre-K, so maybe I just hold out until then and continue moving around. I have not updated the school with my new address because I am afraid that they will make me change schools and that is just another issue for me to handle.

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REFLECTION 2:

Take a moment to brainstorm with your table all of the barriers this mother is facing. Put a check mark by the barriers that may be created by the school system.

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BACK OF PAGE:

What can we do as a school system to support families in housing crisis?

How can we build relationships among our front line staff to lead with empathy when working with families in crisis?

FACILITATOR FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS:

How could we reframe our perspective?

Who do we need to reach out to before we involve the SW?

How can we build or create relationships with front line school staff to empathize with families in crisis?

Collectors listen and ask people to highlight specific points. Facilitator, call on various people to share responses.

FINAL CHARGE:

As a social worker, you face situations like this frequently. Write down one thing you're going to do: How do you create change within your schools to support students in these situations?