Simulation and Debriefing: Helping the Pediatric Nurse Thrive
Ann Marie O'Brien MSN, RN⁎, Mary Jo Pedicino MSN, RN
The Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia

Scenario

It is 10:00 p.m., you receive a call about an admission from the emergency department: a 6-year-old boy hit by a car while riding his bike 5 hours ago. The child had a mild concussion and a fractured femur. You are to prepare for his admission. This brief introduction begins your simulated learning experience.

Simulated scenarios are useful as teaching methods within academic and clinical settings. Today’s technology of high-fidelity simulation offers alternatives to the traditional clinical teaching approach of “see one, do one.” Simulation offers a safe setting for health care professionals to practice clinical and team-building skills without endangering patients (Ruldolph, 2008).

Simulated learning is “bridging the gap between experiencing an event and making sense of it” (Fanning & Gaba, 2007, p. 115). Some believe the most important feature of simulation is debriefing (Fanning & Gaba). Kolb’s (1984) work on experiential learning is fundamental to understanding the role of debriefing. His theory supports the model that reflection coupled with experience can capture a learning opportunity. The primary focus of this article is how to effectively debrief after a simulation-based learning experience.

Debriefing After Simulation

Debriefing following simulation reinforces participants’ behaviors and actions through reflective learning (Dreifuerst, 2009). Debriefing helps participants identify what went well and discuss ways to improve performance (Mighty, 2010). In a study of graduate nurses, Gordon and Buckley (2009) concluded that participants rated formal debriefing as the most useful part of simulation.

Facilitation

The facilitator’s role is crucial to a successful debriefing session. The facilitator must know his or her role and have a clear purpose of supporting the best possible learning experience. Formal education is necessary for anyone who is going to take part in this role (Dreifuerst, 2009; Mighty, 2010).

The facilitator should have an action plan prepared in advance. Additional factors that facilitators should consider before running the simulation include experience of the participants, complexity of the scenario, and their own assumptions and professional work practices. Ideally, the facilitator builds trust with participants by creating a learning environment. Effective facilitators display confidence, avoid criticism, and engage learners. This frame of reference and focus yields fewer anxious participants.

Creating an Environment of Trust

Clinicians are in an emotionally vulnerable position when engaging in simulation. Trained facilitators are aware of this and respect their willingness to participate. Creating an environment of trust is essential to successful learning (Fanning & Gaba, 2007). “Prebriefing” is a technique that facilitators use to set the emotional stage before a simulated experience (Rudolph, Simon, Rivard, Dufresne, & Raemer,
2007). Through prebriefing, facilitators create a thought-provoking environment that encourages participants to feel safe to share (Rudolph et al., 2007).

### Practical Tips for a Prebriefing Session

- **Share “Basic Assumptions”—**Begin by making a statement that all participants are intelligent, well trained, care about doing their best, and want to improve (Rudolph, Simon, Raemer, & Eppich, 2008).
- **Review Grounds Rules—**Set ground rules before the simulation. Specify that participants are expected to uphold confidentiality and behave in a respectable manner. In addition, it is important for participants to believe in the “basic assumption,” suspend disbelief of the simulated scenario, and utilize critical reflection (Rudolph et al., 2008).
- **Introduce the Simulation Scenario—**Discuss objectives, especially with novices and groups who have never worked together and clarify if groups should focus on specific skills.
- **Describe the Simulation Environment—**Provide participants with instructions for use of the mannequin and other materials provided.

### Stages of Debriefing

To conclude the simulated experience, the facilitator walks the participants through a well-planned debriefing exercise. The literature reflects various ways in which this can be performed (Dieckmann, Friis, Lippert, & Ostergaard, 2009; Rudolph et al., 2008; Weidig, 2010). Overall, the debriefing steps include:

- **Examine how the team members are feeling.** Ask participants, “How are you feeling now that the scenario is over?”
- **Discuss how team members worked together.** Crisis resource management methods can be used as a template to address issues related to teamwork, assessment skills, role responsibilities/clarity, communication, support, and management during the simulation scenario (Rudy, Polomano, Murray, Henry, & Marine, 2007). Examples of questions include the following: “How did the team work together?” “How did the team divide up roles?” or “What went well, and what did not go well?”
- **Explore the medical management.** Discuss the simulation scenario and how it was handled medically. Review the team leader’s thought process: “Walk us through your thoughts around the medical management of this patient.”
- **Summarize the session.** Ask participants to identify what worked well and what did not. The facilitator might say, “What are the two to three main take-home messages from the scenario that you will apply to your practice?” or “If we came back to repeat this simulation, what new learning points would you put into action?” At times, groups rerun the same simulation and correct the actions they discussed. Whichever the case, the facilitator needs to end by restating key learning points and acknowledging the group for a job well done.

### Summary

We have outlined tips you can follow that will lead to a successful simulation-debriefing session. Remember the facilitator must create a nonthreatening environment, foster nonjudgmental communication, and highlight “ah-ha” learning moments. Learning through simulation provides pediatric nurses with the opportunity to practice clinical skills in a safe environment. Debriefing bridges the gap between knowledge and practice, ultimately improving the quality of care and helping pediatric nurses thrive.

### References


