

Practice Notes

Supervision: The Key to Strengthening Practice in Child Welfare

Issue #22, Winter 2009

EDITORIAL COMMENTS

Supervisors play the pivotal role in assuring “Best Practices” for Child Welfare, at a time when “doing more with less” has moved the system into a crisis stage. At the same time, demands for *accountability* (as noted in SSIS*) and *effectiveness* (as measured in CFSR**) have sharpened the focus for Child Welfare practice. This is the context for this edition of *Practice Notes*.

Despite this difficult environment, it is reassuring to note that supervisors carry out their roles, as defined by Kadushin, with skill and commitment. The most striking finding from this review was the broad set of responsibilities assigned to the supervisor. Tasks ranged from mentoring, monitoring, introducing innovation, to translating the meaning of the most recent memo and mandate. Moreover, another assignment was most recently added to the list: speak truth to power by providing management with details on caseloads that expose the urgent needs of vulnerable children and families enmeshed in the Child Welfare system. In this way, supervisors are now asked to assume the role of change agent. In a critical essay

on supervision, this comment was noted: “Instead of merely managing change, supervisors must lead change. . .”—a tall order. We try to address the scope of this daunting challenge in the piece entitled, “Great Expectations.”

Perhaps the most challenging task for the supervisor is the management of time. Child Welfare, a highly regulated system, operates within a framework of “ticking clocks.” Meeting various deadlines for permanency, court appearances, and administrative tasks are the supervisor’s responsibility. We learned that personal styles have evolved to make this obligation manageable: emails, cell phones, faxes, and web searches all come into play.

The wide-ranging tasks of supervision are captured, somewhat, in our selection of issues for this edition of *Practice Notes*. A strong case can be made to support the several initiatives that are underway to strengthen supervision. We look forward to their recommendations.

*The Social Services Information System

**Children and Families Services Review

IN THIS EDITION

- Q & A: The Broad Landscape of Supervision—Commentary from the Field
- Documentation: The Supervisor is the Link to Accuracy
- Supervision and the Beginning Worker
- Hot Topics: Cultural Competency and Group Supervision
- Best Practices: Reflective Supervision and Supervisor as Change Agent
- The Difficult Exchange
- Ethical Considerations

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Common Tasks for the Supervisor

- Recruit and hire staff
- Manage workloads
- Communicate expectations
- Coach/mentor
- Monitor performance
- Motivate staff
- Authorize decisions
- Problem-solve
- Contribute to the growth and development of staff

And now an additional responsibility: assume the role of change agent; bring caseload experiences of your staff to the attention of management and executive staff and reach across the agency and into the community to construct teams for problem-solving.

Q & A

Q: Alfred Kadushin¹ describes three functions of a supervisor: administrative, educational, and supportive (1992). Do these functions still provide the framework for supervision?

- A:** Yes, these functions are absolutely basic. They may evolve at different times for varied situations. If more time and energy are spent in one area you start to feel it and notice an imbalance.
- Different workers need different things. The supervisor has to learn what the staff needs and how to support them.
 - Given the constraints of the agency and the Child Welfare system, it is important to identify priorities.
 - It is essential that staff knows supervision is there for them and everyone is on the same page and up to date on critical information.

Q: How do you know when your inexperienced staff is growing into the job?

- A:**
- Trust is huge. Supervisors feel responsible to coach and support areas of need in their supervisees: rework case plans to gain critical skills; ask staff, “Help me understand this?”
 - Case planning with workers to figure out issues and identifying places for improvement needs to happen.

Q: The Child Protection system is described as operating in an environment of anxiety “doing more with less”. What are the ways a supervisor keeps up the morale of frontline workers?

- A:** There is a sense that social services have always been doing more with less. Everyone is aware of the continual “crisis” state; our workers recognize limitations that they must work under. When there are case size pressures (this happens in phases), staff are encouraged to prioritize cases and look at critical situations one at a time.
- Working with more clients doesn’t let you take the extra steps child protection once might have been able to take.
 - It is the supervisor’s role to convey to staff “do the best with what you have,” and to share with management how crises are affecting front line staff.

Q: Where do you find support?

- A:** Peer support is invaluable and networks are always needed.
- Peer support networks are used for relaying information, discussing personnel issues, upcoming/new projects; and providing mutual support
 - Bi-weekly meetings with department managers and executive staff provide opportunities to exchange information and ideas on programming and operations.

¹ Kadushin, A. (1992) *Supervision in Social Work*, Third Edition. New York: Columbia University Press.

Q: What are your suggestions to improve the role of the supervisor?

- A:**
- Teaching social workers how to be supervisors is an area that needs attention. There is a difference between being a good worker and being a manager; there are different roles and different positions.
 - There should be ongoing support. Core training is used initially but there should be more value placed in developing the supervisor's role and supporting continuing development.
 - Supervision feels the weight and often carries the sole responsibility for carrying out the mission of the agency. The executive and management of the agency should recognize this role.

Q: Do you have advice for beginning supervisors?

- A:**
- There is a huge learning curve for beginning supervisors; learning to listen and learn you are not going to be the expert (nor do you need to be) at once.
 - Learn the role of being a resource. You can never know it all; ask staff for their contributions; consult peers in other agencies or departments;
 - Follow through is important in expressing value for staff work and building trust.
 - Get to know your peers; build a peer network for support. These are the people you will go to for support
 - Learn how to keep an even keel: it is easy to be consumed by things coming at you from all sides. If you feel overwhelmed look to the priorities from managers and peers for support.
 - Use probation time of a worker as a trial for "fit". It is a difficult thing to dismiss a candidate for a staff position, but the department is better off to cut their losses than to endure an uncertain remediation and long run difficulties with staff.
 - Workers are hired because they are professionals and have good judgment. Supervision should look at ways they can support staff in this. Acknowledging the frontline worker as a professional is crucial. They must own it (their judgment) and use it.

Q: Is paperwork decreasing staff's time spent with families and children; in turn affecting the quality of the work in supporting safety, permanency and well-being?

- A:** Documentation is no longer a problem. With access to computers and the SSIS system paperwork is now routine. Workers with limited computer skills may find the documentation requirement a burden.

Q: How do you go about challenging the observations of staff?

- A:**
- Explore the pathway to the observations: work through the beginning of the case and subsequent conclusions: "Share your thinking with me on how you arrived at that..." If there is a difference of opinion, a supervisor can help the worker see different perspectives of an issue but they have to let workers "step up to the plate." Place the expectation on them to trust their judgment as long as they know they've done everything they could with astute best practices in mind.
 - Provide permission to challenge the supervisor's commentary on a case. Focus on the evidence needed in decision-making. Find opportunities to recognize good practice.

Q: How do you encourage staff to be careful and clear on documentation?

A: In issues of casework, reporting and reimbursement referrals are built in. Outcomes are based on different layers and levels of the public system and have to be understood as part of the process and functions of a caseworker. Billing and documentation is built in with training to tie all the required and necessary duties of the caseworker into their role.

Q: How do Supervisors encourage collaboration?

A: Identify the community agencies that may have a contract for services with your agency.

- Develop relationships with Public Health Nurses, Headstart, School Social Workers and other persons interacting with child protection.
- Keep informed on a regular basis on changes in the court system's requirements and the impact on practice.

Q: Since most agencies in the public sector operate in a top-down fashion, are there ways of creating a collegial environment?

A: At certain times during the day, the supervisor's door is always open. Walking around informally to chat with staff "on the floor" helps to build relationships and openness; peer exchanges are a norm. Seeing everyone as a resource is valuable in building support and a collaborative environment.

If you are in a position to hire, it is important to look for the right attitude. Skills can be taught, but addressing values and philosophy is significant in foreseeing a positive fit with the department.

The responses for this Q and A are adapted from comments by supervisors in the field. Please see the list in "Acknowledgements."

Documentation

THE SUPERVISOR IS THE LINK TO ACCURACY

The documentation style recommended for supervision in Child Welfare is SOAP, an acronym for Subjective, Objective, Assessment, and Plan. This documentation is widely used by the medical profession.

1. SOAP is a useful format for documentation because it covers the spectrum of the social worker's interaction with clients while maintaining a consistent case recording process from the initial interaction through future planning
2. Documentation is an invaluable tool for supervisors to use in assessing performance and providing guidance for improving practice.
3. Documentation identifies, prioritizes and tracks problems.

SOAP Definitions and Examples

Section	Definitions	Examples
Subjective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What the client tells you; what others tell you; a clinical conclusion to how the client experiences the world. • No conclusion should be documented, though one should be able to perceive the clients perceptions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Client's feelings, concerns, plans, goals, and thoughts • Intensity of problems and impact on relationships • Significant comments by family, case manager, therapists • Clients' orientation to time, place, and person
Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on facts; recording what was seen, heard, smelled, or measured, without judgment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Client's general appearance, affect, and behavior • Nature of the helping relationship • Demonstrated strengths and weaknesses • Test results, materials from other agencies etc. to be noted
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarize the clinical assessment; backing this up with subjective and objective analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clinical diagnosis and impressions (DSM, testing scores, etc.)
Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detail the next steps in your intervention; describe the action steps along with the prognosis and action plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action plan: Include interventions used, treatment progress, and direction. • Prognosis: Include the anticipated gains from the interventions.

Adaptation contributed by Tim Zuel, MSSW, LICSW.

Investigations Supervisor, Hennepin County Child Protection.

Susan Cameron, Imani turtle-song (Spring 2002). Learning to write case notes using SOAP Format. *Journal of Counseling & Development*.



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Supervision and the Beginning Worker

BEST PRACTICES IN ENGAGING THE CHILD

Reminders:

- Provide staff with expectations on how the caseload will be reviewed (frequency, group, individual); how you can be contacted for emergencies; review memos and emergency trends; refresh requirements for audio-taping
- Help your staff generate solutions to problems, rather than you, as the instructor, telling them what to do.
- Pair experienced workers with beginning and less experienced workers to provide, on an informal basis, opportunities for exchange and models of best practices.
- In reviewing case plans, be direct and clear on the mandates and what is negotiable.
- Focus some attention on the cultural/ethnic/social class factors that have to be considered in determining risk, and at the same time, acknowledge the necessity to assess the family's potential for parenting safely.
- Find the occasions when you can confirm their good judgment.

When the supervisor reminds the beginning worker that documentation of "billable" hours is essential and must be carefully recorded, the resistance may be framed as: "I came into this field to work with people . . . not to work as an accountant /keeping track of reimbursement..." It is important to point out that reimbursable activities can bring fiscal support for more staff and additional services, thus improving responses to families and children.

Reconstructing the Pathway to the Decision-Making Process

An important task for the supervisor is to question the validity of the decision-making process. Reconstructing causal sequences is frequently the place for a teachable moment. Munro reminds us of a theory that is well known among behavioral psychologists that, typically, most practitioners make judgments very early in complex situations; then assessments of subsequent events are organized to confirm the original judgment, despite evidence to the contrary. In these situations, in order to avoid an adversarial challenge, the supervisor is advised to explore the pathway to the worker's assessment and case planning decisions, using evidence to arrive at a difficult conclusion (Munro, 1996).

Adapted from:

Bibus, A. (1993). In pursuit of a missing link: The influence of supervision on social workers' practice with involuntary clients. *The clinical supervisor*. 11(3).

Munro, E. (1996). Avoidable and unavoidable errors in child protection work. *British journal of social work*. 26. 279-810.

Practice Notes, Issue #14, "The Exploratory Interview of a Maltreatment Report," July 2003.

An additional note:

- The quality of the relationship is vitally important in clinical supervision. Because they can gather little first-hand knowledge of the supervisee's work, the supervisor must rely on the supervisee to share what has occurred with the family. If the supervisee does not trust the supervisor, they are not likely to share information and little growth can occur.
- Clinical supervision involves the supervisor and supervisee coming together to reflect on the skills used and theory applied by the supervisee to client systems in order to facilitate change. Supervisors work closely with supervisees and assist them in exploring the dynamics of the case through listening, reframing, supporting, investigating thought processes, questioning approaches taken, and challenging biases and blocks of the supervisee.

THE SUPERVISOR'S GUIDANCE IN HELPING THE CASEWORKER NAVIGATE ACROSS CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

- Encourage the worker to allow the parents to provide the narrative of their life: the immigration journey, their ethnic roots, social class, language of choice, household composition (use of genogram), and social and community supports.
- Encourage the worker to explore with parents their family values: how children should behave; the relationship of children to parents and grandparents.
- Construct an exchange with the worker on the role of culture in shaping family strategies for coping with uncertainty and challenge: understanding the cultural tradition in responding to a child's risk taking behavior.
- Explore with the worker the meaning of sparse verbal interactions: as a parent communication style; as a cultural response to a non-family member.
- Emphasize with the worker, the value of empathy: reinforce listening skills.
- Consider with the worker how the power inherent in child protection is interpreted by the parents: a threat to their safety as refugees? their employment? their loss of respect within the family circle?
- Consider involving a "cultural liaison or family advocate" from the ethnic community to share the content of the intervention; consider the uses and role of an interpreter.

Adapted from Connolly, M., Crichton-Hill, Y., & Ward, T. (2008). Families, culture & supervision. *Social Work Now*.

GROUP SUPERVISION: A METHOD FOR IMPROVING PRACTICE

- Creates a safe place for thinking and working through complex practice pathways.
- Supports an environment for shared learning.
- Provides participants with differing modes of how to conceptualize and evaluate.
- Provides a respectful environment that values and supports the thoughtful discussion of different points of view.

The Supervisor as Facilitator

- Assumes responsibility for the agenda, which could include work-related topics such as social worker safety, workload issues, and ways of reducing stress and tension.
- Encourages participation from the novice to the sophisticated worker.
- Reinforces a collegial environment.

Useful Suggestions

- Use the group to review a complex case, modeling non-defensive ways to give and receive feedback.
- Take an active role in exploring levels of anxiety of workers, and address these explorations, in a parallel framework: link distress with empathy for their clients' feelings of anxiety.
- Use group supervision for cases involving ethnic factors in assessment and case planning.

Adapted from Lohrbach, S. (2008). Group supervision in child protection practice, *Social Work Now*: August, 19-24; and Enyedy, K.C., Arcinue, F., Puri, N. N., Carter, J. W., Goodyear, R. K., & Getzeman, M.A. (2003). Hindering phenomena in group supervision: Implications for practice. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 34(3), 312-317.

REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION: CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF SHARED LEARNING

Provide time, in group discussions, individual supervision, workshops, to think critically about the complex work of child welfare. These discussions could be framed as a time to share responses around difficult cases; exchange insights on trends in caseloads; offer interpretations on tolerance for risk and predicting risk of future harm.

Time should be set aside to examine the circumstances of a tragic event when a child in an open case of abuse and neglect dies unexpectedly. Trace the sources of error; consider the system, the family and the community in order to enhance critical thinking that goes beyond assigning error to a front-line worker.

Set aside time to discuss the question of disproportion in the child welfare system. Encourage discussion on factors of risk; poverty; racial biases; family structure; loss of supportive networks.

Adapted from exchanges with supervisors in the field; and

Gerard Costa (2004). The experience from within: helping the child protective service caseworker. *Best Practice Next Practice*. National child welfare resource center for family-centered practice, Children's Bureau.

PRACTICE PROMPT

- Use the 23 items in the CFSR as the tool to review cases: "What are you doing well?" and "What is missing?"

Once a month:

- When the case plan involves families in multiple agencies, request from each agency a faxed copy of services received and progress notes; attach to clients record.

Adapted from comments from the field: Ann Stein, Supervisor, Hennepin County, HSPHD

The Supervisor as change agent: challenges spending patterns; advocates for a shift in priorities if necessary; puts forward options with a discussion on likely outcomes of various pathways; understands, fully, the work that is to be accomplished in assessment, engagement, and implementation and engages in a discussion with management on a cost/risks analysis.

-Adapted from comments of field supervisors

THE SUPERVISOR AS CHANGE AGENT

- Organize a monthly group consultation with supervisor as chair, and grasp this opportunity to discuss/review: policy; changes in priorities; data from CFSR reviews; complex cases; and emerging trends; consider implications for practice.
- Arrange opportunities to meet with other supervisors for problem-solving and networking.
- Advise managers that they should consult with you, the supervisor, on policy or program changes before sending these changes to the executive level. The supervisor needs time to gather information on implications for practice. Remind manager/executive staff that supervisors need time to develop checklists, priorities, and documentation for reimbursement purposes that reflect new directions or other changes.
- Arrange exchanges with managers/executive staff on their agendas that might influence practice.
- Encourage on-going professional development for your staff: provide travel expenses for workshops; support tuition for classes in learning another culture/language; develop career ladders.
- Record service needed but not available and bring this to the attention of management and executives.

WHEN THE WORKER IS “NOT A GOOD FIT” FOR THE CHALLENGING WORK IN CHILD WELFARE

A Cautionary Note: Under no condition can the behavior of the worker be allowed to compromise the nature of child protection work. “Do no harm” is a basic rule. The safety and well-being of the family and child must not be compromised by a lack of professional skill.

Warning Signs Observed in the Probation Period

- Attempts, persistently, to escape from the professional role and “just be a friend.” Has an exaggerated need for client acceptance.
- Inability to maintain equilibrium in the face of crises.
- Consistently conceptualizes the family unit and the social context of the family as profoundly discouraging; resists a strengths-based approach.

Danger Signals

- Sporadic personal problems with other staff characterized by outbursts of anger and recrimination.
- Strongly resists making referrals to substance abuse/mental health counseling by using their experiences from family and friends as evidence of “failure” for such referrals.
- Unexplained absences.
- Signs of significant depression and anxiety.
- Incidents of professional misconduct: discussion of cases with identifying names outside of the office; violations of confidentiality by revealing personal information to other agencies without client consent.

Responses

- Have a frank discussion concerning the worker’s life situation and how it is affecting work.
- Explore alternative positions in social work.
- Consider having the option of taking a leave, if life crises appear to be of short duration.

Termination

- When termination appears to be the only appropriate response, consult the human resources personnel in your agency. Be mindful that the process is fair and observes due process guidelines.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN SUPERVISION

Ethics—“The discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation.”

—*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*

Several tools, such as assessment guides and decision-making instruments, have been designed not only to improve practice, but also to provide a monitoring function for accountability. Missing from these check-off lists, however, are the clues to the judgments and interpretations of causal sequences. Further, an interpretation of the *quality* of the services provided, with little attention to the obligation to report poor services and shoddy referrals are missing from these check-off lists. These items lead us into a consideration of ethics.

The responsibility of the supervisor in performance reviews is always to be aware of the *quality* of work under the ethical imperative: “Do no harm.” At the same time, however, the supervisor has the responsibility to protect the staff against unreasonable challenges by clients.

An Additional Note:

Two principles underlie malpractice actions and parallel how a regulatory body such as the Board of Social Work might analyze a situation regarding negligence in supervision:

Vicarious Liability

The supervisor in child protection is assumed to direct and review the work of a staff member. If an error in judgment harms the family or child, the supervisor may be held responsible, simply because they are the supervisor (the legal theory of “*respondeat superior*”—let the master respond to the failure of the subordinate).

Negligence

Specific errors and omissions of the supervisor such as inattention to substandard work, failure to properly instruct staff, giving inadequate directions, etc. (“What would a reasonable and prudent supervisor have done in the same or similar situation?”)

The Minnesota Coalition of Licensed Social Workers has recently been organized to address issues on supervision requirements that will take effect in 2011 (<http://www.socialwork.state.mn.us>). Among the issues to be reviewed are ethical standards of practice for supervision as stated in Minnesota Statutes, Section 148D. 100, subdivision 5 (2).

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