



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Containing difficult emotions in supervision

Introduction

One of the key functions of supervision is to support social workers to process the emotional responses that arise as a result of their work. Emotional responses can be triggered by many factors in practice. Building and sustaining relationships with children and families who may be in crisis and severe distress can be challenging, and social workers need space and time in supervision to reflect on this.

However, staff also need space to process and talk about their workload, organisational culture and working conditions, relationships with other staff and colleagues, and the challenges of working with other professionals to manage risk in a multi-disciplinary environment.

Staff may also find their experiences resonate strongly with those they work with and need skilled guidance to manage their unique responses, which could be informed by experiences of difference and diversity, while remaining attuned to the children, young people and families they work with.

In the first section of this learning tool, we provide a brief overview of containment to focus attention on the importance of responding attentively and explicitly to supervisees' emotional needs as a core part of supervision discussions. You are then asked to reflect on your own experiences and review what worked for you in managing strong emotions as a practitioner. In doing so, you will be prompted to consider what tools and strategies might be helpful to the people you supervise.

The second part of the learning tool will help you focus on how you prepare yourself for supervision so that you are able to attend to supervisees as they process their emotional states. We also ask you to consider what support *you* need to help you continue to contain others.

Throughout this learning tool, we will use the metaphor of an 'emotional first aid kit' in supervision. In doing so, we will encourage you to reflect on what you think should be in yours in order to help the staff you supervise process and talk about their emotional responses to practice.

The importance of providing emotionally containing supervision

If practitioners are not contained and supported by practice supervisors, they are likely to feel overwhelmed and this will impact on how they communicate with children and families. However, when social workers are well supervised they are able to reach out to and connect with children and families to build containing and connected relationships.

You might find it useful to read Ferguson's (2018) open access paper [*How social workers reflect in action and when and why they don't: the possibilities and limits to reflective practice in social work*](#), which helpfully illustrates how challenging practice situations can impact on how social workers think, feel and respond to families.

Providing an emotional first aid kit as practice supervisor



The image on the left represents a process of supervision where supervisees leave feeling restored, competent and functioning at their best. On the right, the worker's innermost thoughts and feelings are figuratively spilling out and at risk of being projected onto someone else, forgotten or left behind.

You might find it useful to keep this image in mind as you read the next section in which a social worker speaks directly about the powerful feelings she experienced as a result of her work.

Powerful feelings can be stirred for practitioners in child and family social work

Over the course of a year, Nicola O’Sullivan (2018) facilitated a monthly reflective practice group for seven child protection social workers, and studied the process of this work in systematic, qualitative detail for her doctoral research.

The idea of containment underpins her thinking. Here, one of her participants, Katy, is presenting:

‘...they refused access. They shouted abuse at us saying that they weren’t given this time. [The other little girl] asked her mother to stop or they would be taken away... *(Katy starts to cry)*... I don’t know where the emotion comes from because I didn’t feel like this when writing it... we agreed to leave after a period of trying to negotiate with the parents, the father shouted at us to ‘fuck off ye dumb cunts, god, sorry *(stuttering and voice hoarse)*... I wondered where [Stephanie and Jasmine] were. I felt helpless to do anything... I didn’t feel afraid or wasn’t aware of it. I felt powerful in the knowledge that their behaviour would assist me in getting an order. I felt their fear and the fear of [Brid]... I heard that baby P died on the 9th Centile *(pause, silence, Katy begins to cry)*... I wondered about the decision to let these parents care for a baby with such a high level of need, silence *(Katy leaves the room temporarily)*... I worry about the level of responsibility I am holding, I do feel supported on some level by the multi-disciplinary team... I am worrying that we are not taking enough time to consider decisions in our [team]. I am worried that the baby will die *(Katy becomes upset, there is a long silence in the room and she cries silently)*... and me being part of an investigation, I just worry about it, and maybe that’s just me thinking too much about myself.’ (p19 / 20)

With the provision of a reflective space it was possible for Katy to communicate her sense of herself as positioned between her anxiety about the care and protection of Jasmine and her anxiety about the protection of herself. She found it painful to remain in contact with Jasmine’s chronically neglected state and her own paranoid anxious state surrounding Jasmine’s potential death and her being scapegoated or worse.

Below Katy attempts to make sense of this;

‘...Thinking about how I felt about it made me think about the baby in the case, and how vulnerable they were. It really made me think about that baby, and the possibility of a baby dying and how serious the situation was... and I think it really made me move it on a bit more... how we feel, that does impact on the client and on ourselves and on the action that we take in a case... it’s just so essential to really think about how you felt when you were in a situation. Because it’s just very easy I find to go from one visit to the next and home and bed and come in the next morning and don’t think about it at all and just keep going. (p21)

Katie’s story strongly illustrates the range of powerful feelings and tensions that social workers can carry in response to their work, and how a reflective space can help practitioners to get in touch with these feelings, acknowledge their impact and ensure they do not affect a practitioner’s ability to connect with families going forward. Her words highlight the importance of providing emotional containment in supervision.

What is containment?

The concept of containment was first developed by Bion (1962) and refers to the process of being emotionally receptive to another person's troubled, perturbed, anxious, turbulent feelings and states of mind. Bion argued that all of us feel uncontained some of the time and, when we do, we need the help of another person (the container) to settle ourselves.

This process helps us to make the emotional material we are processing more 'digestible' and tolerable. The more settled an emotional state resulting from containment, the more possible it is to think more clearly about one's experience, name one's feelings, and locate which feelings come from where, and what belongs to whom.

This process is illustrated in figure 2, which shows how being contained in supervision can lead to a deepened capacity for tolerating and making sense of challenging feelings and behaviour in the work.

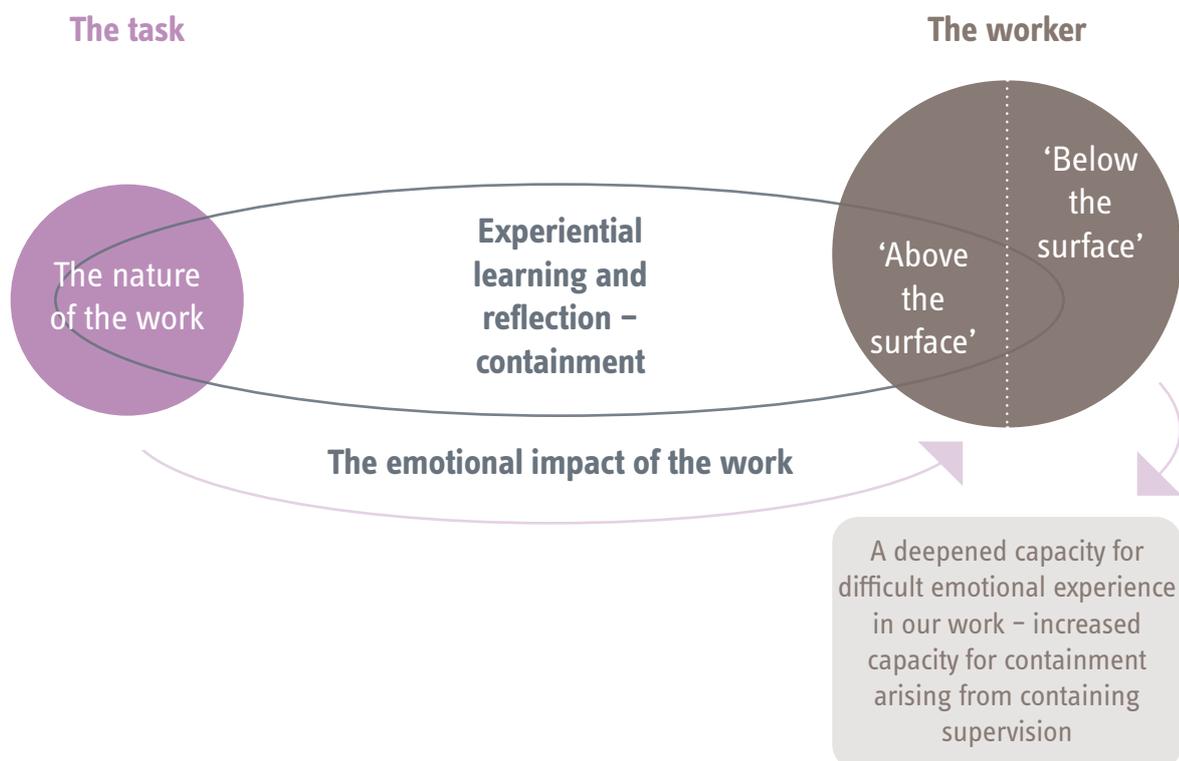


Figure 1: Learning, Development, Supervision... How it can be...

Section one: reviewing your own experience of being contained

The table below asks you to think about the emotional responses that arose for you as a practitioner, and how you dealt with them.

You are asked to think specifically about a range of emotions to identify those you cope well with and those which you are aware you need greater support to manage. This is an opportunity to reflect on how others supported you to cope and feel contained.

We have identified a range of emotions in the table below as prompts to guide you. Have a look and see what it brings to mind. While it can be useful to think of strong emotions we have encountered in practice, it is also important to remember this is an opportunity to learn. So please use the questions below as much or as little as is helpful for you.

Scenario	Emotion identified	How did your supervisor support you?	What did colleagues do to support you?	What worked for you?	What would you offer as a supervisor?
.....	Fear (perhaps you encountered a threat to your life or physical / verbal abuse)	..... ..... ..... .....	..... ..... ..... .....	..... ..... ..... .....	..... ..... ..... .....
.....	Anger	....................	....................	....................	....................
.....	Sadness	....................	....................	....................	....................

Scenario	Emotion identified	How did your supervisor support you?	What did colleagues do to support you?	What worked for you?	What would you offer as a supervisor?
.....	Disgust	....................	....................	....................	....................
.....	Horror / shock	....................	....................	....................	....................
.....	Love	....................	....................	....................	....................
.....	Joy	....................	....................	....................	....................
.....	Ashamed	....................	....................	....................	....................
.....	(Blank for you to notice your own reactions)	..... ..... ..... .....	..... ..... ..... .....	..... ..... ..... .....	..... ..... ..... .....

Having thought about the questions in the table, please spend a few minutes reflecting on any areas of learning, patterns or connections which have struck you. Below are some questions that might be helpful as you do this:

What strategies for dealing with emotions have helped you?

What emotions are you good at recognising and working with?

Which emotional responses do you need to become more skilled at?

When thinking about how you provide emotional containment in supervision:

- > What do you need to start doing?
- > What do you need to stop doing?
- > What should you continue doing?

Having worked through these questions, what would be inside your own emotional first aid kit as a practice supervisor?



Section two: getting into the zone to offer containing supervision

In order to explore their emotional responses, supervisees need a calm, reflective space. This begs the questions:

What do you need to do to ensure you are in a position to provide containment?

How do you ensure supervisees feel safe enough to trust you and the organisation to express their views without being blamed or judged?

In this section of the learning tool, you will draw on your experiences of being supervised from part one and think about how you prepare yourself both for planned supervision and for the times when you may need to respond to staff who are distressed outside of supervision.

We recommend you think about strategies you can use for how you manage such times, especially the raw crisis points that occur unexpectedly. These are sometimes described by practice supervisors as the 'cup of tea moments', when someone is highly distressed and you need to gather your thoughts and emotions into a calm enough state to respond in a containing manner:

How do you prepare yourself to listen out for and respond to a supervisee's feelings during supervision?

How do ensure you are emotionally calm and appropriately reactive to your supervisee's emotional state?

What factors affect this? How do you prevent them undermining your supervision session?

Those 'cup of tea moments': how do you manage the 'out of the blue', emotionally-distressing events when supervisees need support?

What has worked well? Why? If it didn't why not?

Finally, it is important to ask yourself the question: if you are a container offering emotionally-containing supervision, then who is containing you? Containers need containing!

However skilled you are at 'returning' difficult emotional material to your supervisees in a helpful form, you can, at times, come to feel overstuffed with worry, anxiety, uncertainty and self-doubt. In order to continue to support your supervisees, you need to be contained. You need a non-judgmental space in which to think with someone about your experience and its professional meanings.

Toasland (2007) argues that in contemporary human service organisations, this can be a real problem because whilst we see the benefits of containment, we can attach less importance to looking after ourselves. Practice supervisors need containing support and spaces for themselves. Otherwise they will find it hard to be in the right state of mind to offer it to practitioners. Given the importance of being contained yourself, please have a look at the questions below:

How can your line manager, peers and others in your organisation contain you as a practice supervisor?

What conversations could you start to raise issues about containing you as a container?

Other ways you can use this tool

You could jointly devise a team 'emergency kit bag' which explores:

how the team support each other

how they'd like to develop this further

how the team experience your support, as well as any ideas about how things could be done differently.



We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

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Research in Practice is a programme of The Dartington Hall Trust which is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756 VAT No. 402196875

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