



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Having reflective discussions in supervision

Introduction

Reflective discussions help increase practitioners' awareness about their interactions with, and responses to, children and families, peers and other professionals. They also provide an essential reflective space in which practitioners can recognise and acknowledge the personal effects of frequent exposure to trauma, hardship and loss. These discussions are all the more relevant if supervisees include details of similar experiences from their own lives.

While supervisors need to maintain clear boundaries within supervision, it's widely accepted by the profession that reflective discussions should help supervisees explore how they use power in their roles, ethical dilemmas, personal and professional challenges in practice, and how practitioners understand and communicate their values when working with children, young people and families.

This tool is designed to help you practise formulating and asking reflective questions to provide a framework for such discussions, which support personal and professional reflections in practice. The focus here is encouraging you to develop your skills in asking questions that probe the experience of the supervisee and, in doing so, helping them to think deeply, reflexively and reflectively about their practice.

This tool has two sections. In the first, the focus is on how the practice supervisor prepares for reflective discussions in supervision. A number of prompt, reflective questions are provided to help you prepare to facilitate this.

The second section builds on questions around the 'supervisory cycle', developed by Morrison (2005) and Morrison and Wonnacott (2010).

Again, prompt questions are provided to help you structure a discussion in which supervisees describe a practice experience, reflect on this both personally and professionally, before moving into critical reflection, analysis and action planning.

Section one: preparing for supervision

The importance of supervision agreements

Before you start, it's important to think about what expectations have been agreed with your supervisee about supervision. It is useful to ask yourself: are you and your supervisee clear about your expectations of each other? This might seem like a basic question. However, without clarity and transparency about expectations of each other, and agreement about the kind of discussions you will have in supervision, it is hard for practitioners to feel safe enough to explore personal feelings and responses to practice as part of a critically-reflective discussion.

The purpose of supervision is to improve services and build practitioners' skills in how they deliver those services. Trust has to build up between the supervisor and supervisee, based on how well they listen and respond to each other. Such trust may require quite a bit of conversation to clarify expectations about how supervision will be used before reflective discussion can take place.

When the responsibilities of both supervisee and supervisor, and the different ways in which supervision can support reflection and learning on practice are made clear, supervisees are more likely to engage in reflective discussions with you.

A supervision agreement helps clarify expectations of both the supervisee and supervisor's conduct and role, and identifies the different functions of supervision. If you do not already use these with your supervisees, you can read more about them in the learning tool 'Using supervision agreements', available from the 'Your journey to being a practice supervisor' section of the website.

Getting in the zone for supervision

Please read through the questions in this section and consider the relevance of the issues we explore for you. The ideas presented are certainly not new and cover basic issues around preparing for supervision. However, in busy work environments, it can be easy to fall into the habit of going into supervision discussions with minimal preparation. While it is not always possible given the different demands on your time as a practice supervisor, it is useful to be reminded of how important even a small amount of preparation and reflection can be.

How prepared are you for this supervision session?

Have you read previous supervision notes?	Have you got an up-to-date review of the supervisee's workload, and their competence in doing it?
What observations have you had of how the supervisee is since you last met formally? Are there any absences, personal or personnel issues you need to remind yourself of?	Have you got specific feedback about performance that you need to address?
How do you feel about giving feedback?	Have you and the supervisee prepared an agenda for today's meeting? Is this standard practice within your team?
What are your priorities for supervision today, are they agreed with your supervisee?	Is there anything you need to discuss with your supervisee that you want them to focus on or prepare for their next supervision session?

How prepared are you for this supervision session?

What feelings do you have in relation to this supervisee? Is there anything you notice about your response during supervision discussions or in your interaction with the supervisee that you need to pay attention to? What might this be telling you?

In thinking about this person and your role as their supervisor, is there anything related to power and authority that is affecting how you feel or respond to your supervisee? Does reflecting on any areas of similarity or difference using the social GRRRAACCEESS (aspects of personal and social identity which include gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality – Burnham, 2013) give insight into your feelings?

What would surprise you about this supervision?

Shifting up and down the gears

Practice supervisors often find the metaphor of shifting up and down the gears useful when thinking about preparing for supervision. If you have been working at a fast pace all morning, dealing with a multitude of queries, phone calls and meetings, you will have been working in fourth or fifth gear. While this gear is helpful for dealing with a high volume of work at speed, you need to find a way of mentally coming back 'down through the gears' to be at the slower pace of first for supervision. When working in first gear, you can attend to what is being said with your full attention and all of your senses.

As you come back down through the gears, it's useful to spend a few moments reflecting on whether there are any elements of your day so far that you risk bringing into supervision with you, which could stop you from being fully present. You might ask yourself:

How are you feeling about your own workload, irrespective of your supervisee?	What other feelings are you having to manage at the moment whether or not they're to do with work?
What other concerns are you bringing with you into this supervision? Are they relevant to the session?	Are there any pressing issues that you need to handover so you can free yourself up to pay full attention in supervision?

Other areas that might be useful to consider are factors which allow you to arrive on time with a clear focus on supervision. For example:

Does your diary allow enough time to give yourself a break before starting supervision?	Have you got a confidential space where you will not be interrupted?
How are you going to deflect people who have last-minute queries?	What techniques work for you in getting a clear focus on supervision, e.g. making a drink, going to the loo, taking a mindful walk, singing in the car on your way?
How do you conduct supervision to maximise the relational aspects of it?	How do you manage recording? Do you find yourself typing into the laptop as your supervisee is speaking? Is there any way you can work creatively around this to allow you both to focus more fully on the discussion in the moment?

Section two: facilitating a reflective discussion for your supervisee

The reflective cycle of supervision was developed by Morrison (2005) and has been further developed in the work of Wonnacott and colleagues at Intrac since that time. Have a look at figure 1 below, which outlines the different stages of the reflective cycle of supervision.

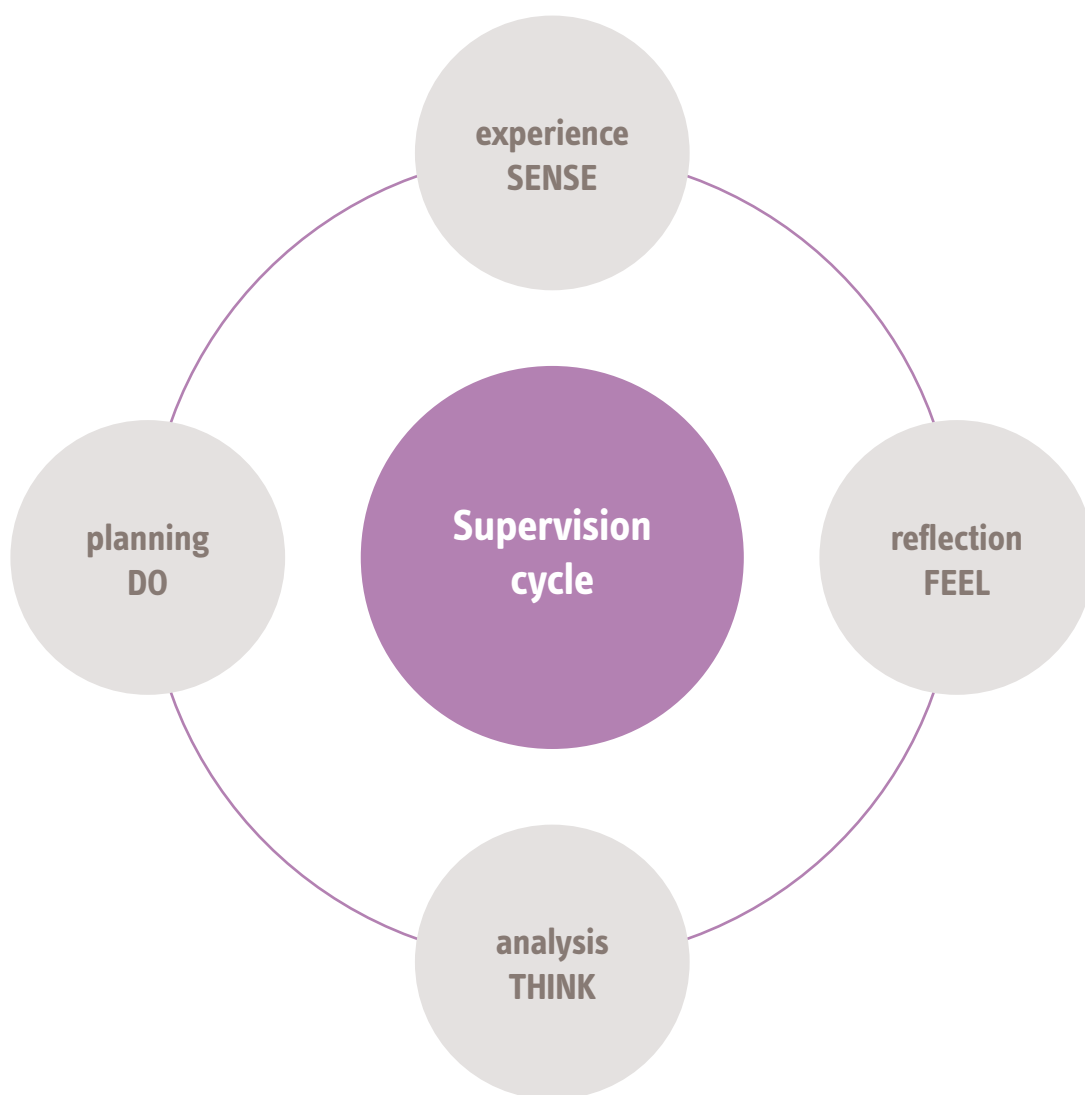


Figure 1: the reflective supervision cycle (Morrison 2005)

Reflective cycle: stage one experience (and sense)

The reflective cycle is a good framework for thinking about asking questions. It is easiest to start with the agreed piece of practice that you and the supervisee have put on the agenda.

It's good practice to start by asking and looking for strengths, particularly if you notice signs of low confidence in this practitioner's behaviour:

What has been going well for this child since we last spoke?	What successes are important to note?	What have you done that has had the greatest impact in making a positive difference for this family?
Tell me more about what has happened.	What have you observed on your home visits?	Where else have you seen the child / family?
What has happened with other agencies?	Who has been most supportive of the plan?	What other things do I need to know?
What are you most worried about?		

In the diagram above, the word 'sense' is included as a reminder that this is an opportunity to probe the sensory experience the supervisee had in their work. Questions that focus on this include:

What did you smell?	What did you see or hear?
Which words best describe the environment this child is living in?	How did you feel when you were in the home or with the child?

Reflective cycle: stage two reflection (and feel)

The next phase focuses on reflection, paying attention to the impact the work is having on the supervisee. The questions below can help gain insight into their experience:

How are you feeling about this work?	How do you feel about the child?	How do you feel about the parent / carer?	How do you think the child feels about their situation?
How are you feeling about the dynamics in the multi-agency network?	Tell me more about this feeling? Have you had this experience before?	What has helped you manage you manage strong feelings about work in the past?	Who else is picking up how the child feels?
What happens to you when you feel like you do?	What impact are the organisational expectations having on you?	Who is judging how well this is going?	What is inhibiting you?
Are there any areas of similarity or difference in the social GRRAAACCEEESSS that influence the way you think about or respond to this child and family? Or the way they respond to you?			
Whose feelings are having the greatest impact on you? Do you know why that is?	How do you feel as you approach the front door? Tell me more.	What are you avoiding doing?	Who is most affected by this situation and how do you know?
What surprises you about how you are feeling?	What would another professional say about how you are working?	How do you know whether you are doing a great job?	How are you using your emotional intelligence in this piece of work?

Further points to consider:

Sometimes the follow-on question is informed by the phrasing of the previous answer, for example:

'I feel sick approaching the house.'

'That's interesting, what is it that makes you feel sick?' / 'Tell me more about feeling sick.'

When asking questions, it's easy to fall into the trap of beginning with an open approach then ending with a closed one. This is best avoided as it shuts down reflection and discussion:

'Tell me more about why you feel sick... is it because of the smell or the atmosphere?'

Sometimes we can ask questions reflecting our own train of thought, rather than facilitating supervisees to explore theirs. It takes a great deal of vigilance to be aware of doing that.

For example, sticking with the hypothetical question above, if the 'sickness' in the supervisor's thinking relates to neglect, the practice supervisor might ask questions about the home conditions:

Tell me about the kitchen, did you look in the cupboards?

Whereas for the supervisee, the 'sickness' might stem from a fear of violence that makes them feel unsafe on the home visit, which could, due to the supervisor's perspective, remain unacknowledged (Ferguson 2011).

As the discussion progresses, think about what emotional reactions you have been aware of from this supervisee in relation to this child. For example, have you noticed their return from home visits? Are there any words you have heard them use that give you an idea of how they are feeling, a reminder that could bring awareness to their feelings?:

'I heard you saying last week that Billy's mum was "doing your head in", tell me more about why you felt like this?'

Questions like this can provide an opportunity to reflect back your observations:

'Your reactions to Billy's mum seem uncharacteristic of you, what is that about?'

Reflective cycle: stage three analysis (and think)

Finding out the reasoning and testing out which knowledge base, research or theoretical approach is being used by the supervisee helps the supervisor to frame questions that further develop the supervisee's thinking and evaluation of their evidence.

It is also an important stage for the supervisor in gauging the supervisee's knowledge, confidence and capability:

Why do you think the child (and family members) are behaving in this way?	How worried are you?	What strengths can you identify in the family system and in the child's experiences?	Which theories are you using in this work?
Which research evidence has informed your thinking?	What other views are there about what is happening in this family?	Who is best placed to help with this dilemma? Why?	What community resources have you used?
What are the organisation's expectations and timescales?	What have you learnt so far?	Whose viewpoint is missing?	What don't you know?
What information do you have about how this family operates under pressure?	What helps this family function to their best abilities?	Tell me what you expect to happen next, why do you think that?	What sense do you make of how you are feeling and what is happening to this child / family?
Which child are you most worried about? Why?	Who else is worried about this family? Why are they worried?	If there is a difference of opinion, what is it about and how do you resolve it?	Tell me how you have reached your conclusions?

How do you explain the parent's behaviour?	What might work with this family and why do you think that?		Tell me why you've opted for the legal framework you're using?
What do you think will happen if we do nothing?	If you had a magical wand, what would you do to improve things for this family? How might each family member answer this question?		

This phase of the reflective cycle provides an opportunity to test out hypotheses, question whether the research evidence has been supported by the observations in practice, and be assured about the quality of critical thinking the supervisee is capable of. None of these aspirations will be met by directive questioning.

Reflective cycle: stage four action planning

Using the accumulated reflections on their experiences, their emotional reactions, theoretical understanding, and the information they have gathered about the family, supervisees are ready to move onto thinking about what should happen next. Reflective questioning ideally leads them to think about how they work with the child or family to develop and carry out a plan together:

Based on our discussions, what do you think should happen next?	What does the child / family need?	What do you think the risks are?	How will you manage them?
What support do you need?	How will you know what a successful outcome is?	How will the child tell you if things are improving?	What are the priorities?
What can you do to empower this child / family in this process?	Explain to me why you are thinking of recommending this intervention / service, what do you think can be achieved and how?	What is a realistic timetable for change?	What are the legal frameworks in place?
What variables are you aware of?	What could happen and what would you do?	What crises can you anticipate and who needs to know what the plan is?	When do we need to review this plan?

Lastly, it's helpful at the end of the supervision session to take a couple of minutes to ask your supervisee if they had any 'lightbulb' moments during the discussion. You can do so by asking for feedback about any questions your supervisee found particularly useful in helping them to reflect on their experiences and develop new insights.

Final comments

As you start to use this model of reflection in supervision, you might find it useful to note the impact it has on your supervisee.

It's particularly useful to reflect at a later date on what changes in your supervision discussions as a result of these questions:

Has using open questions made a difference to the way you think about or prepare for supervision?

Are there any differences in the kinds of discussions you have in supervision?

Have you had any feedback from supervisees? If not, might it be useful to ask for some?

Having worked through this tool, you may find it useful to look at 'Using the five anchor assessment principles in supervision' in the 'Talking about practice in supervision' section of this website. It provides an alternative way of framing supervision discussions for critical reflection and analysis.

We recommend that you look at 'Questions around the supervision cycle', too, also available in the 'Talking about practice in supervision' section of this website.

Other ways you can use this tool

Use the stages of reflection to structure group supervision discussions.

Ask supervisees to prepare in advance for discussion about work with a child or family by reflecting on each stage outlined in this tool.



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.

References


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Practice Supervisor Development Programme
The Granary Dartington Hall
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692
email ask@rip.org.uk
 [@researchIP](https://twitter.com/researchIP) #PSDP

www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk

Author: In-Trac Training and
Consultancy

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Registered Office:
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall,
Totnes TQ9 6EL