



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Helping social workers prepare for practice observations

Introduction

Practice observations can be used for appraisal and formal feedback on practice skills. However, practice supervisors may also visit families with a supervisee when the worker is facing a challenging situation, to help explain the organisation's position or to work alongside a supervisee in making assessments when there are complex issues to unpick. Whether you attend a visit for a formal observation or for co-work with a team member, all observations provide rich learning opportunities and are a useful focus for reflection and practice analysis in supervision.

A summary of key ideas from research that can inform your thinking about practice observations is presented at the start of this tool. And key issues and questions to consider in reflective discussion with your supervisee in order to help them prepare for and receive feedback from a practice observation are provided at the end.

There is another linked tool about practice observations, which you can access in this section of the website. The 'Practice observation' tool provides a framework (and template) for appraising observed practice, based on research studies exploring communication skills in child and family social work.

We recommend that both tools are used together to inform practice observations.

How do you evaluate the quality of practice in an observation?

The act of undertaking a practice observation prompts us to re-engage with two fundamental questions about the nature of social work practice:

1. What does excellent social work look like when demonstrated in practice with children and families?
2. On what basis do we make a judgement about whether a particular piece of work with a family is an example of excellent practice, practice that is good enough but could be improved, or practice which is damaging and dangerous?

In this context, it can be argued that practice observations require us to have a clear idea about what we want to see social workers do and say when we observe them.

Knowledge generated from research studies conducted by Forrester and colleagues can usefully inform our thinking here (Whittaker et al, 2017, Forrester et al, 2019). In recent years, a number of related research studies have used observations of practice to investigate whether or not there are key communication skills that are helpful when working directly with children and families (Whittaker et al, 2017). The results of these cumulative studies suggest that it may be useful to think about the key components of effective child and family social work practice as clustered around three core dimensions (Forrester et al, 2019):

1. **relationship building** - empathy, collaboration and autonomy: where 'parental choice is recognised and increased' (Forrester et al, 2019, p34)
2. **good authority** - clarity about concern, focus on the child, and purposefulness
3. **evocation** - building the intrinsic motivation of parents to make changes.

You can read more about using these three core dimensions of practice in the 'Practice observation' learning tool, available from this section of the website.

Planning for practice observations in supervision

Preparing to undertake a practice observation, therefore, presents you with a key opportunity to talk to your supervisees about the following questions in supervision:

What are the key components of effective child and family social work practice? What is the purpose of what we do?

What are the overall goals which you and your supervisee are trying to achieve with a particular child and family? What is the long term plan?

What are the specific goals and ways in which your supervisee will communicate with a child and family during a single practice encounter which is to be observed?

The important role supervision can play in guiding practice and helping social workers to reflect on the quality of their communication skills with families should not be underestimated.

Wilkins, Lynch and Antonopoulou (2018) explored whether they could find evidence of a link between supervision and the quality of practice skills demonstrated by social workers when working directly with families. They found that:

‘Where supervision was practice focused, there was a positive association with more skillful social work practice, particularly good authority (purposefulness, clarity about risk, and child focus)’ (p500).

This is a significant finding and highlights that there is a direct link between the quality of supervision you provide and the way in which a supervisee works with children and families.

The researchers use the term ‘practice focused supervision’, which is described as supervision that addresses the following questions:

1. **What** is the social worker going to do next?
2. **Why** is the social worker going to do these things?
3. **How** is the social worker going to do those things? (ibid)

These questions can also be used to structure supervision discussions that help social workers think about their work with a family when preparing for a practice observation.

In summary, one of the key benefits of observing practice is that it prompts us to move beyond what and why questions to focus on how the social worker is going to communicate with the family. Given that social workers often work independently with families, this is an important element of practice which can easily be overlooked.

The importance of taking a collaborative, reflective approach to observing practice

In all practice observations, the approach taken by the practice supervisor will significantly impact the potential learning it affords the supervisee.

When observing practice you have valuable insights to offer and, unless there is evidence of dangerous or damaging practice, these insights need to be considered alongside the views and reflections of the practitioner and feedback from the family.

If you take a collaborative approach, in which you work 'with' your supervisee to model critical reflection and learning from practice, they are more likely to be able to use this opportunity for professional development. There is also an opportunity here to acknowledge the power imbalance present in practice observation contexts, and to discuss the impact of this in supervision.

Reflective discussions are a key element of any observation process (Ruch, 2015). For this reason, it is important to ensure that you have space and time to discuss a practice observation with your supervisee before undertaking this and after it has occurred.

In order to be most helpful, reflective dialogue about observations should draw on evidence from three sources:

- > your feedback, views and comments as practice supervisor
- > your supervisee's reflection and learning from the observed practice encounter
- > feedback from the child and family about how they experienced their encounter with your supervisee in the practiced observation (Humphry in Ruch, 2015).

Research also suggests that, in order to make the most of learning arising from practice observations, you should consider:

How you deliver the key messages in your feedback - specific, constructive and developmental feedback is important.

Who gives feedback - this is most useful if the person being observed already has an established relationship with the observer. As practice supervisor, you are best placed to provide feedback on observations for the staff you supervise.

When feedback is provided - it's most effective when given shortly after the observation (Van Houten, 1980).

Using supervision as a forum to discuss practice skills and to prepare for an observation

Observations of practice provide rich opportunities for learning. This is not restricted solely to the observation itself. Engaging in a reflective discussion as part of the preparatory work for the observation can help review interventions to date, explore how the worker is experiencing work with the family and focus on the importance of working collaboratively to work towards jointly-agreed change goals. This discussion also allows you to engage in collaborative goal setting about the observation with your supervisee, and to gain a sense of what the practitioners would like feedback on.

You may find the following guidance useful in helping you support your supervisees to prepare for an observation.

Preparing for the observation

Which family will you observe? Who has chosen this? If the social worker, why do they think it will be useful to observe their work with this family? Is it appropriate to observe this family? Does your supervisee have a specific practice dilemma or reason for choosing this family? Does this give you direction about particular areas of practice skill that your supervisee wants to get feedback about? If you have chosen the family it is important to explain your reasoning for this.

Has the family been approached to ask consent for an observation to take place? How will the supervisee explain the observation to family members? How will your role as observer be explained to the family? You might also find it useful to consider with your supervisee what the family would want the observation to achieve or pick up on if they were asked to share their views.

What is your role in the observation? You need to provide information about whether you will remain silent, whether or not you will take notes, and how your presence will be explained to the family, as well as when and how will you provide feedback. What will you do if the family try to draw you into the discussion? Or are you working jointly in the session? If so how will you do this?

Reviewing the progress of work with a family

Observations of practice provide you with an opportunity to review the plan of work with a family, and to consider progress against this.

You might find it useful to ask your supervisee:

What are they trying to achieve when working with this family? What is the overall goal and reason for involvement? How would they know that changes have been made? What steps are the family working towards in order to achieve the overall goal?

What progress has been made with the family? What are the obstacles to this? What is working well? What do they think needs to happen now?

How does the social worker experience working with the family? What are the frustrations? What is going well?

Planning the observation itself

What is the purpose of work with the family during the observation? What is the social worker planning to do and say? Why?

How does this fit into the plan of overall work?

What information does the family need to understand the purpose of this visit so they can work collaboratively with the social worker?

What communication or practice skills does the social worker expect to use in the observation? Why?

How will the social worker's communication with the family be informed by any practice frameworks the organisation uses?

Is there any aspect of work with the family during the observation that the social worker is anxious or confident about? Why?

Do any of the social GRRRAACCEEESSS impact on how the worker communicates with the family, or how family members interact with the worker? The social GRRRAACCEEESSS are a model which describe 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).

Does the supervisee have any specific learning, communication or support needs that need to be taken into account when undertaking the observation?

Talking about practice skills in child and family social work

If you are using the 'Practice observation' learning tool, which sets out a framework for commenting on practice observations, we recommend that you talk to your supervisee about the areas you are going to be focusing on during the observation (and why), namely:

1. relationship building - empathy, collaboration and autonomy: where 'parental choice is recognised and increased' (Forrester et al, 2019 p34)

2. good authority - clarity about concern, focus on the child, and purposefulness

3. evocation - building the intrinsic motivation of parents to make changes (Forrester et al, 2019).

It would be useful to talk through each of these to explore why they are essential practice skills and how they can be demonstrated in practice interactions.

One of the key benefits of doing this is avoiding considering practice from a:

- > longitudinal, timebound perspective (e.g. What has been achieved in the six months we have been working with this family?)
- > process perspective (e.g. Have we visited the children within timescales and carried out statutory visits?).

And focusing instead on direct work with the family.

In order to do this, you need to engage in a discussion with the supervisee about what they are planning to do or say with the family, and why. You might find the following questions useful:

How might the social worker communicate best with the family? Why?

What would it look like if the social worker was communicating at the 'top of their game' with this family?

How might the family respond to this?

After the observation

It is important to consider the following issues:

How will you get feedback from the family? Will you speak privately with them after your supervisee has completed their work? Or will you complete the first part of the interaction with the supervisee then invite feedback from the family in a whole-group discussion? While the latter needs to be handled sensitively and managed by you as practice supervisor, it does provide a valuable opportunity for the family to give feedback and talk about their experiences of child and family social work. This can ultimately lead to a useful and productive review of work with the family at the heart of the process.

How will you provide feedback as practice supervisor? It is important to provide an opportunity for your supervisee to debrief immediately after the observation, and to explore their immediate reactions about what went well and what could be improved. It is also essential that they have the opportunity for some immediate feedback from you as practice supervisor.

If you have taken written notes, it is advisable to book in time, if you can, after the observation to write them up for your supervisee to read. Doing this promptly means it can be a quick job rather than trying to remember details later, which is much harder and takes longer to do. Quickly giving feedback also makes observation a far more meaningful process – your supervisee can read and take it on board while the memory is still fresh for them, too.

Prior to the observation taking place, you should book in a follow-up supervision session so you can more fully explore any feedback you might have. You might want to ask your supervisee to reflect on it then come to the next supervision discussion prepared to discuss it further.

The process of observing practice and giving and receiving feedback can then form part of a wider process of learning, development and appraisal for your supervisee. It can also provide the opportunity to review how helpful your supervision sessions are in developing their practice skills further, and whether any other learning or training opportunities for peer observations might be helpful.

Other ways you can use this tool

Have a reflective discussion at a team meeting or group supervision in which you jointly plan a visit to a family in detail (or reflect on an interaction with a family that has already occurred), focusing on the three core dimensions of practice identified by Forrester et al. (2019), or the three questions linking supervision to practice suggested by Wilkins et al (2018).

Talk to peers about how the ideas presented in this tool can, or do, inform how you prepare and undertake practice observations.

Talk to your team about how using practice observations might help develop a shared understanding of what excellent social work practice looks like when demonstrated in practice with children and families.



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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