



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Three perspectives of supervision

Reflecting on what 'Annie', Yvette Stanley and Leanne Boylan have said

This tool asks you to explore your responses to what 'Annie', Yvette Stanley and Leanne Boylan have said. It is designed to build on these resources and help you to consider which areas you may wish to develop further in your supervision discussions, and more generally with your team.

Four key themes emerge from the perspectives of 'Annie', Yvette and Leanne. You are invited to use prompt questions to reflect on each of them, which are outlined as follows:

The golden thread
- from supervision to direct practice with children and families

Relationship

Trust and learning from mistakes

The role of emotional containment

A golden thread - from supervision to direct practice with children and families

Wilkins, Lynch and Antonopoulou (2018) observed supervision sessions and meetings with families to explore whether there were any links between effective supervision and social work practice skills with children and families.

Their findings report a 'golden thread' between certain elements of supervision, more skillful practice, and improved parental engagement.

This concept reflects themes from the three perspectives and resonates with Leanne who describes experiencing, 'the reach and potential the supervisory relationship has to offer' in her work with families.

Yvette talks about the importance of all levels of management having a 'clear line of sight' on practice, including the social worker and their direct link to the child.

Bernard and Goodyear (2009) discuss the psychodynamic concept of 'parallel processes', a phenomenon which is reflective of the interpersonal relationships of the supervisee and supervisor.

This idea contributes to relationship-based practice and helps to explain how the dynamics within one relationship can play out in another (Dryden and Thorne, 1991). This idea is reflected in the following statement by 'Annie':

'What is happening in your lounge is a reflection of what is happening in the organisation and what happens around this. If your supervisor is calm, is reflective, is quiet, is able to look at things in a balanced way... this will naturally filter down to the social worker and the way that they deal with the family.'

As a parent with social work involvement, 'Annie' describes good supervision as, 'the invisible hand guiding [the worker she's involved with]'.

A golden thread - from supervision to direct practice with children and families



Questions to consider:

Imagine a 'golden thread' running from your supervision sessions into the lounges of the families you work with. How strong is it, on a scale of 1-10 (10 being strongest)? What might you need to do to move towards a 10?

If you were to ask children and families about their 'line of sight' to you as a supervisor, what might they say? What might your supervisees say?

If the potential reach with your 'invisible hand' is strong, how did you achieve this? How could you make it even stronger? More joint visits with social workers? Observe more meetings with families?

Relationship

‘The relationship... is the boat in which we travel together towards agreed and desired destinations... The quality of the interaction, the trust and understanding... act as a vital thread... that opens up the possibility for defences to be lowered, for the truth to be faced, for doubts and fears to be worked through and change to be integrated and embraced’ (Trevithick, 2005).

Messages from research tell us that the supervision relationship and working alliance is an important factor in effective supervision for social workers.

This is also considered to be fundamental to good practice with families, which is reflected strongly in the three perspectives you have heard.

The questions linked to each perspective below prompt you to think about how to navigate these ‘waters’ and keep the ‘boat’ afloat in supervision.

‘Annie’ says:

‘A good supervisor knows their social worker inside out, just like a good social worker knows their family inside out... the supervisor and social worker always need to keep the power balance in mind and need to carry this power responsibly... the supervisor has an important role in helping the social worker walk that knife edge of treating families humanely and with respect and reminding them that they are not there to be friends.’

Relationship



Questions to consider:

On a scale of 1-10, 10 being extremely, how well do you know your supervisees? What could you do to move towards a 10?

What questions might you ask in supervision to get to know supervisees in more depth? For example, how are we similar and different (in terms of things like race, gender and sexual orientation) and what might this mean for our working relationship? What do we need to consider with regards to power dynamics? What facilitates supervisors 'knowing' their staff and what gets in the way? Might assumptions or unconscious bias play a part?

How do you demonstrate good boundaries with your supervisees? What might being too close the 'knife edge' look like? What might you notice if social workers are finding it difficult to navigate this with families?

For example, it could manifest as 'political' in some cases, where social workers see themselves as advocates for equality with the families they work with. Could this mean they are too close, over-identifying or demonstrating anti-oppressive practice? How can supervisors approach this topic sensitively and openly, without blame?

Leanne says:

'I know that when responsibility feels shared, and when there is a joint investment and a journey I can travel on with my supervisor, I feel safer in making changes, in thinking outside the box, in trying something different and in holding and containing more risk and pain. The supervisory relationship gives me strength.'

Relationship



Questions to consider:

Thinking about the individual partnership with your supervisees, how strong is the sense of shared responsibility? What would they say? What might this look like in supervision? Could you use a scale of 1-10 to assess this, 10 being the strongest? What could you do to move towards a 10?

Thinking about your relationship with your own manager, how strong is the sense of shared responsibility and how safe do you feel? What would others notice about this? How might you start a conversation with them about your experience? For example, 'I would like to be more creative and courageous with my supervision practice and case decisions, and wondered how we might work on this together in our supervision, so that I can model this to my supervisees.'

Yvette says it's important that practice supervisors are adaptive in their approach in order to build relationships with social workers:

'Supervision is absolutely critically important to good practice in social care... we all benefit from that collegiate discussion about cases... so that we take, together, a better informed decision.'

Relationship



Questions to consider:

Think about a relationship with a supervisee that you find challenging. What could you do to make it more productive and congenial? Are there ways to explore any issues around the power dynamic?

How confident are you that your team feel able to have useful discussions across their peer and multi-agency networks? Would it help to use a scale of 1-10, 10 being very confident? What needs to happen to move towards a 10?

Are there community resources or organisations (culturally-specific services, LGBTQ+ research, disability activist groups, experts by experience groups and so on) that I haven't explored which might add a new perspective to inform my decision-making?

Think about a child and family where you may feel 'stuck' or find it difficult to manage risk. Who might be a peer within a multi-agency group that you could have a helpful discussion with? How might their perspective add to or inform your decision-making?

Trust and learning from mistakes

Both Yvette and 'Annie' talk about the supervision environment being a platform to help social workers explore when things have gone wrong or where a mistake has been made. They also say that supervision should give the social worker the opportunity to consider how to communicate this with the family honestly and openly.

'Annie' suggests that doing this is more likely to create a relationship of trust and therefore more likely to encourage the family to be open to thinking about what they need to change. This is echoed by Yvette, who discusses the importance of relationships being formed with families that are founded on trust and the ability to challenge and communicate when things go wrong.

Trust and learning from mistakes



Questions to consider:

How does your organisational and team culture respond to mistakes? What role do you play in this? What could you do differently to make this more transparent?

How do you model honesty, openness and transparency to your team? What will the team notice when this is happening? How would you know when this is more challenging?

What might social workers need from you in supervision to enable them to tell you when they have made a mistake? What would they tell you?

If you asked your local children and families how they would grade the level of trust in their social worker, on a scale of 1-10 (10 being a high level of trust), what would they say? What conversations could you have with your team to help them explore building trust with families?

The role of emotional containment

The knowledge and skills statement (7) (DfE, 2018) requires practice supervisors to, 'recognise how different relationships evoke different emotional responses, which impact upon the effectiveness of social work practice and provide responsive, high quality individual supervision' as a means of containment.

Leanne says:

'When I do have an off day, Jad [supervisor] sees right through it... she nurtures me. She won't let me withdraw and hide, she instead encourages me to identify my barriers and face any difficulties head on... sometimes, when I hear the stories that the women share in the group, I feel shocked, sad and also angry for them. I feel I have grown through this process of feeling their pain because rather than at times feel overwhelmed by it, I have learned to talk about it, understand it and then respond to it.'

The role of emotional containment



Questions to consider:

Can you recall a time in your own supervision or practice where you felt 'contained' by someone else? What did this look like? How did it feel? How confident are you in your ability to be the container for someone else? What help might you need to learn this skill?

Think about your individual supervisees. If you notice that they are having an off day, like Jad notices in Leanne, what would you see? How might you have a conversation with this worker?

'Annie' reflects:

'You can tell when a social worker has had supervision as they are more reflective... when a social worker comes to supervision, the supervisor should be able to notice small things. Do they look stressed... are they struggling with sleeping, eating, taking enough breaks? They need to create an environment [for the supervisee] where they can be the best that they can be for families.'



Questions to consider:

What might the environment that 'Annie' describes look like? What might the challenges be to you providing this for your team? What steps do you need to take to achieve this environment? Who might be able to help you with this?

If you were to ask children and families what they might notice about their social worker, which indicates that they are having good supervision, what might they say?

Yvette talks about the importance of creating an environment to make social workers feel safe and supported. She discusses the importance of supervision focusing on social workers' wellbeing:

'A health check... a line of sight on practitioners, how they are feeling, how they are coping with some of the things they need to consider as they practice.'



Questions to consider:

Think about your supervisees individually. How good is your line of sight on their wellbeing? Consider using a scale of 1-10 to assess this, 10 being very good. What might need to happen for you to move towards a 10? What advice would the individual supervisee give you about this?

What are the biggest areas of stress within your team? How does the team address this jointly? What role do you play in this?

Who has a line of sight on you? Who are your allies within your network? Who is the container for you? What do these relationships look like when they function at their best? Are there things you need to consider to improve them?

Other ways you can use this tool

Share the videos of 'Annie' and Yvette Stanley with your team and invite them to draw out the key themes they see reflected in the narratives of these women.

Use some of the questions about 'relationship', 'trust' and 'containment' with individuals, to explore these aspects of supervision.

Adapt the three perspectives and prompt questions for use at a team away day.



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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