

research  
in practice

**NHS**  
The Tavistock  
and Portman  
NHS Foundation Trust

**US**  
UNIVERSITY  
OF SUSSEX

**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Senior  
Managers'  
Briefing



# PSDP - Resources and Tools: Emotions, relationships and resilience in child and family social work

  
Department  
for Education

Funded by the Department for Education

[www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk](http://www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk)



 University of  
BRISTOL



 SOUTH YORKSHIRE  
TEACHING PARTNERSHIP  
Leading the way for social work education

**D2N2 Teaching Partnership**  
Social Work Academy for Excellence

**UEA**  
University of East Angles

 UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

 Northumbria  
University  
NEWCASTLE

**This short briefing is written specifically for senior managers and strategic leads, and provides summary information about:**

- > The importance of practice supervisors building strong, supportive and purposeful relationships with supervisees.
- > The need to promote emotional resilience and self-care throughout the organisation.
- > Building an organisational culture that recognises and responds to the impact on practitioners of regularly working with children and families affected by trauma.

# 1. Helping practice supervisors develop strong and purposeful relationships with the staff they supervise

A key concept throughout the Practice Supervisor Development Programme is the centrality of relationships in supporting practice supervisors to support practitioners to have the most helpful relationships they can with children and families.

This means that the organisation should model a ‘high expectations, high support, high challenge’ relationship with its staff (Ofsted, 2012). Senior managers are key to promoting an expectation that all colleagues treat each other, and the families they serve, with respect, honesty, kindness and care whilst still challenging when needed. They should also ensure that commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion is embedded into practice at all levels of the organisation.

Practice supervisors need to spend time in developing effective relationships with their staff. This is needed so that trust can be built and space created for practitioners to explore anxieties and uncertainties, to process the emotional impact of the work, and for practitioners to reflect honestly about their practice.

In order to do this, practice supervisors should be skilled and confident in facilitating reflective supervision discussions which explore practitioners’ wellbeing and emotional resilience. Staff at all levels within the organisation should understand the role that high-quality supervision plays in supporting practitioners to provide a high-quality service to children and families.

An effective supervisory relationship is also necessary to promote continuous professional development and to challenge poor performance. From the start, roles and responsibilities and professional boundaries and limitations of the relationship have to be made explicit through a supervision agreement or ‘contract’.

**As a senior manager your responsibility is to ensure the organisation supports effective supervisory relationships by:**

- > leading by example - modelling such relationships yourself and expecting others in the organisation to follow suit
- > ensuring that supervision policy is explicit about roles and responsibilities from a relational perspective, including specific references to how diversity and difference will be explored and respected
- > ensuring the policy lays out the parameters of the supervisory relationship
- > ensuring that all practitioners and managers work to a supervision agreement that stipulates all of the above

## 2. The importance of promoting emotional resilience and self-care throughout the organisation

Developing high-quality relationships with children and families built on integrity, transparency and honesty means that practitioners must give something of themselves. If not handled sensitively, this can come at an emotional cost.

High-quality, reflective supervision helps practitioners to make sense of what is happening in the family, plan future support and process the emotional impact of their work.

Practice supervisors, therefore, play a key role in supporting practitioners' professional and personal resilience. This means that senior managers should pay attention to ensuring that high-quality, reflective supervision is embedded throughout the organisation. In particular, the impact on practice supervisors of supporting staff to deliver this complex work needs to be recognised, so that feelings of pressure and anxiety are contained.

Building an organisational culture in which practitioners, at all levels, know they can talk about 'mistakes' and learn from these, is essential. This will not happen if staff feel that they may receive an unsympathetic or blaming response from senior colleagues.

This also needs to be augmented by an accessible occupational health service, with counselling and other wellbeing resources available as needed for staff.

Practice supervisors play a key role here, in supporting staff to access these resources when required and exploring how these may meet the needs of staff from minority groups

Senior managers are key to supporting strong workforce practices that develop organisational responses to minimising work-related stress (such as those set up in the [LGA Standards for employers of social workers in England](#)). Senior managers also need to think about how they cope with the demands of work, and how they promote and model self-care and resilience.

For example, senior managers should not work excessive hours when it can be avoided, avoid sending emails after hours, and ensure staff leave the office on time when they can. Just as practitioners need to take care of themselves in order to be able to effectively support families, senior managers need to nurture their own resilience if they are to support practice supervisors and practitioners.

In doing so, senior managers and other colleagues, such as workforce development leads, have a key role to play in ensuring there is an organisational culture where stigma around self-care and wellbeing is challenged and family friendly and other safe working practices are encouraged

One sign of a healthy, stable workforce is where staff are encouraged to think about their own self-care and wellbeing and can get the right support when they need it. This requires senior managers to recognise and reward such behaviours, rather than inadvertently reward 'heroic' behaviours.

In order to do so, organisations need to adopt evidence-based strategies that foster wellbeing and resilience as part of their wellbeing offer. These might include reflective practice, supervision, peer coaching, mindfulness, and experiential learning (Grant and Kinman, 2014).

These approaches help with problem-solving, effective communication, establishing social relationships and asking for help, self-regulation, and the development of coping strategies.

## Senior managers should consider:

- > **Establishing workload monitoring systems** that allow for immediate identification at a senior level of where the hotspots are, in order to facilitate focused recruitment and shifting of resources where required. Excessive workloads are a highly-significant contributory factor to practitioner's feelings of stress.
- > **Reducing the stigma of stress and mental ill-health.** Managers throughout the organisation should promote an organisational culture that enables help-seeking. In part, this can be supported by having open discussions with practitioners and practice supervisors about how they experience the pressures of work and the impact of stress, and seeking to learn how best to respond at individual, team and organisational levels.
- > **Improving support networks.** Support from managers and colleagues can play a part in mitigating work-related stress, even when job demands are high. A working environment that is respectful, optimistic and harmonious can promote team and individual resilience.

A range of techniques and practices can enable this. For example, group supervision and practice development events, action learning sets, team development days and celebration events.

Some local authorities have also developed resilience toolkits, which help practice supervisors to talk about resilience with staff both individually in supervision and with teams as a whole, in order to provide clarity about how staff check in with and identify signs of stress in each other, and how they respond to this.

### 3. Responding to the impact of trauma

Senior managers' have a key role in creating an organisation culture that is relational and that responds to trauma.

The following principles are useful to consider and are based on the work of Dr Karen Treisman. All colleagues at all levels should aim to:

- > Have a shared understanding of, and language around, trauma, and acknowledge the potential for practitioners and practice supervisors to experience secondary / vicarious trauma.
- > Include trauma-informed principles in learning and development activity.
- > Ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities for each layer of management, i.e. the parameters of decision-making, responsibilities regarding performance management / improvement, balanced against individual case management, as well as space to have reflective discussions.
- > Promote a culture of checking in through formal, reflective spaces like individual and group supervision and informally by team members e.g. after home visits.
- > Design space so that confidential conversations can be held and create areas for practitioners to 'decompress' after a difficult experience.
- > Recognise when practitioners might be showing signs of trauma that require more specialist input, and ensure that this input is easily accessible from one place.

Systems that prioritise staff wellbeing, like access to counselling services and health resources, should be established and clearly signposted.

Dr Karen Treisman has produced a series of resources on 'Adversity, culturally, trauma-informed, infused and responsive organisations and systems', which are available from her [organisation's website](#).

## References


Grant L and Kinman G (2014) *Developing Resilience for Social Work Practice*. London: Macmillan.

Health and Safety Executive (2018) *Work-related Stress, Depression or Anxiety Statistics in Great Britain 2018*. London: Health and Safety Executive. Available online: [www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress.pdf)

Ofsted (2012) High expectations, high support, high challenge- Protecting children more effectively through better support for front-line social work practice, Crown Copyright.

---

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

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

[www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk](http://www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk)

**Author:** Nicola McGeown  
Principal Social Worker  
East Sussex County Council

**Editors:** Alison Domakin  
Practice and Engagement Lead  
Practice Supervisor Development  
Programme

Dr Marion Russell  
Head of Service, Practice Development  
and Standards  
Cornwall Council

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

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