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Senior
Managers'
Briefing



PSDP - Resources and Tools: Maximising the impact of practice supervisors and the staff they supervise in your organisation


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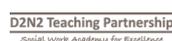
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This short briefing is written specifically for senior managers and strategic leads and provides summary information about:

- > The importance of senior leaders ensuring that practice supervisors are supported to excel so that, in turn, they can inspire the staff they supervise to provide an excellent service to children, young people and their families.
- > The need for senior leaders to foster the development of a culture of learning from practice throughout the whole organisation.
- > Developing evidence informed practice with children, young people and their families.

1. The importance of senior leaders ensuring that practice supervisors are supported to excel so that, in turn, they can inspire the staff they supervise to provide an excellent service to children, young people and their families.

Practice supervisors play a key role in ensuring that children and families receive an excellent service. It is essential that senior leaders understand practitioners are only able to offer an excellent service to families when they are provided with high-quality support, motivation and practice leadership from their practice supervisors. Working out how best to intervene in the lives of children and families is often complex and uncertain. Practice supervisors who work effectively in role are able to support practitioners to express their feelings about the challenges which they face in their work so that this supports their ability to build relationships with children and families.

If practice supervisors are emotionally-resilient, analytical and reflective themselves, and model this in their interactions with practitioners, practitioners can be supported and inspired to provide high-quality support and work with children and families.

Senior leaders should, therefore, ensure that the organisation supports practice supervisors to develop their skills and continue to learn by:

- > Providing high-quality, emotionally-literate supervision and professional support for practice supervisors to allow them to continue to provide emotional containment and support to their own teams.
- > Encouraging practice supervisors to network with peers both within the organisation and externally to share good practice, reflect on dilemmas, identify learning and provide support.
- > Regularly consulting with practice supervisors about what is working well and what could be improved in order to deliver an excellent service to children and families. If the organisation has a Principal Social Worker role, this person is well positioned to support this process and understand the significance of emerging patterns. It is important to pay attention to ensuring that all voices, including practitioners and supervisors with diverse backgrounds and experiences, are heard in this process.
- > Practitioners and practice supervisors should feel valued by the organisation through the development opportunities provided and by having their voices heard.

Feedback should be regularly sought from practice supervisors to understand whether the physical environment supports practitioners in the work they do. This includes ensuring that there is adequate office space for staff, and the identification of quiet spaces for report writing and confidential conversations.

Complaints such as parking or office space may well require a strategic response, rather than supervisors having to field these complaints (either organisational support to look at all the options, or a response to staff that clarifies what has been attempted and the reasons why it cannot be resolved).

A key factor for senior leaders here is ensuring that relationship-based practice is firmly located within the organisation as a whole, rather than being seen as something that practitioners engage in with children and families. To achieve this, the quality of the supervisory relationship from the practice supervisor through to middle management, from senior management through to the Director of Children's Services, has to be one of trust, security and transparency.

2. Developing a culture of learning from practice within the whole organisation

Senior leaders should encourage a culture of learning and feedback within the organisation. An important element of this learning culture is embedding a constant feedback loop focusing on practice and development. This begins with the practitioner consistently seeking feedback from families, to practice supervisors observing practice and providing constructive feedback. It is also important to create mechanisms for practice supervisors to share feedback and learning with their own managers who in turn ensure that key themes and learning are passed on to senior leaders.

Similarly, senior managers need to constantly review their learning with their own managers, looking at the knowledge and skills statements for practice supervisors and practice leaders, judging their performance against each component and developing a plan of learning to address gaps.

The knowledge that comes from this should sit alongside:

- > learning from audits
- > regularly inviting children and families to give feedback on the quality of social work they receive
- > Ofsted reviewing the quality of service provision and its impact on families and children's services
- > the service producing an action plan which is understood by all and forms the basis of service design that is regularly reviewed.

Again, the Principal Social Worker is well placed to support senior leaders in reviewing standards of practice within the organisation and harnessing learning from this.

It is important to create a culture in which this level of scrutiny is seen as leading and supporting good practice, rather than as being part of a 'blame-culture'. In order to do so, senior leaders should ensure that there are numerous opportunities for staff with diverse perspectives and experiences throughout the organisation to talk about practice dilemmas and learn from each other. Senior leaders need to scaffold learning and practice development by embedding reflective group supervision, team development sessions, and practice champions focusing on a range of practice issues.

Learning transfer principles must be hardwired into the organisation: practice change does not occur by training alone. Senior leaders need to understand that these activities are required, in addition to the traditional format of one-to-one supervision with a practice supervisor.

Practice supervisors play a key role here. Senior leaders should ensure that practice supervisors are able to develop skills in facilitating critically analytical and reflective discussions about practice in one-to-one and group supervision settings.

3. Developing evidence-informed social work practice in your organisation

Research-informed practice is an explicit attribute of outstanding practice identified by Ofsted (2014). To provide the most effective interventions for children and families, practitioners must be confident in assessment, analysis, planning and evaluation, and able to work collaboratively with children, young people and their families. Their work must be informed by observation, multiple-hypothesis generation, triangulation of information, and research evidence to support or challenge analysis and decision-making. In order to do so, research findings and knowledge summaries need to be easily accessible by staff.

Practice supervisors need to be supported by practice leaders across the organisation who can lead on the development of an evidence-informed practice culture. Senior leaders need to set an organisational expectation that evidence-informed practice should be explicit in all care planning for children and families.

To achieve this, senior managers need to ensure the establishment of a high-quality learning culture through:

- > Recruitment requirements for practice supervisors which ask applicants to demonstrate that they have an active, applied interest in research and evidence-informed work practice.
- > An explicit expectation that all practice supervisors and senior managers ensure their knowledge remains current (alongside support within the organisation to achieve this). For example, through development pathway progression, attending manager's briefings and accessing readily-available research. Ensuring open access, web-based research resources are available to all staff is essential.
- > Identification of a senior leader as a designated research / practice lead who supports the dissemination of practice development and research information within the organisation. Working Together (2018) sets out that this role should normally be undertaken by a Principal Child and Family Social Worker. This person should also be responsible for mapping out which staff have expertise in different areas of practice across the service.
- > Developing a range of methods for embedding evidence-informed practice throughout the organisation. For example, regular communication updates highlighting new research findings with linked resources, and developing a strategy which allows practice experts to disseminate their knowledge more widely within the organisation. The role practice supervisors can play in establishing an evidence-informed practice culture at team level should be recognised, and learning from this should be shared.

- > Having strong ties with local higher education institutions (HEI) which encourage collaborative partnership working and relationships to develop between academic staff and practitioners / managers within the organisation. Teaching partnerships and the Step up to Social Work programme provide additional opportunities to develop localised partnership working arrangements between employers and HEI. There is scope for innovation in this area given that the Social Work Taskforce (2009) highlighted the need for greater integration between practitioner and academic roles.

In busy practice contexts, practitioners and practice supervisors can rely too much on 'rule of thumb' or common sense decision-making, rather than engaging in evidence-informed practice. For this reason, evidence / research-informed practice needs to be fully supported by practice supervisors who are confident in accessing, using and leading on it.

References

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