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Senior
Managers'
Briefing



PSDP - Resources and Tools: Talking about practice in supervision


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

- > the need to ensure that all staff working directly with children and families, or supporting those who do throughout the organisation, receive regular, high-quality, reflective supervision
- > ways in which senior leaders can embed and quality assure the effectiveness of supervision within an organisation.

1. The need to ensure that all staff throughout the organisation receive regular high quality reflective supervision

‘Supervision does not take place in isolation and is likely to work best where senior managers recognise the connections between organisational goals, service delivery, service user outcomes and the quality of supervision... unless an organisation moves beyond seeing reflective style supervision as solely the province of those supervising frontline staff... it is unlikely that effective supervision will be sustained over time.’

(Wonnacott, 2014)

Research suggests that the focus of supervision in children’s social care is often on performance management and compliance with timescales (Wilkins, Forrester and Grant, 2017).

Whilst these areas are critically important in ensuring statutory duties are met, there is a case for an increased emphasis on reflection, critical thinking, and emotional support for all managers, including senior managers.

Senior leaders need to ensure that all staff in the organisation have access to regular and high quality-supervision. This is particularly important for practice supervisors given that supervising social workers is a major element of their role.

Practice supervisors attending the Practice Supervisor Development Programme frequently say they don’t have regular, reflective supervision discussions with their own line managers. This requires the attention of organisational leaders, given that Wonnacott (2018) and Morrison (2010) highlight the emotional impact of the work on practice supervisors, and the challenges of providing reflective supervision.

Mirroring effective practice with families, practice supervisors need to engage with their supervisee to help build professional self-knowledge and emotional resilience. This might include exploring what activates feelings of sadness, fear, disgust, anger and distress for social workers, and how these feelings can be managed.

Staying alert to relational dynamics is, therefore, key to effective practice supervision. If practice supervisors do not have opportunities to critically reflect on their supervision practice in their own line management supervision, there is a risk that a process of distancing and depersonalisation can occur between supervisors and families, and the practitioners they supervise.

This can have an impact on the quality of supervision and on the practice supervisor’s capacity to provide thoughtful reflections on the families’ needs and the practitioner’s dynamic with the family.

2. Ways in which senior leaders can embed and quality assure the effectiveness of supervision within an organisation

As a senior manager, your responsibility is to ensure the organisation supports effective supervisory relationships by modelling such relationships yourself in the staff you supervise and by having the expectation that this is replicated throughout the organisation.

It is vital to ensure that systems are in place to make supervision regular, consistent and of a high quality, as well as being underpinned by a commitment to social justice, equality and inclusion.

This can be achieved through:

- > Maintaining an updated supervision policy which is explicit about roles and responsibilities. This should also clearly articulate the organisation's supervision model, methods of recording, supervision agreement requirements and standards to be met, and draws on current research evidence. In addition, the policy must reflect expectations on frequency and duration of supervision for staff throughout the service. It must also recognise the different roles and responsibilities of staff members within the organisation.
- > Ensuring that there is congruence between the aims and vision of the supervision policy and the reality of organisational working. For example, if the policy states the importance of reflective supervision, which considers the emotional impact of the work in a safe space, but the reality is that supervision is being carried out in open plan offices, then practitioners and supervisors will experience the policy as disingenuous.
- > Undertaking supervision audit and observation (at all levels) and using this information, in partnership with practitioners and supervisors, to ensure sustained progress and improvement.
- > Ensuring an approach to supervision at all levels of children's services, so that expectations and standards are modelled systemically.
- > Ensuring that practice supervisors' and other managers' supervision provides opportunities for discussion about families and emotional support, as well as reflection on a supervisor's own development and their role as a supervisor of social workers.
- > Ensuring that recruitment is informed by the capability required to deliver the supervision standards set out in the supervision policy.
- > The embedding of a rolling programme of leadership and supervision training based on the supervision model and local authority supervision policy.

Wonnacott's (2018) report '[Supervision – Practice Essentials](#)' provides a useful summary for organisations to consider in building effective supervision practice.

In keeping with the notion of whole-organisation approaches to supervision, senior managers should reflect on the quality and effectiveness of the line management support they provide and receive.

The following questions are intended to be used as a reflective tool:

- > Is it planned and protected time?
- > Is it a safe and containing space?
- > Do your supervisees leave feeling better than when they arrived? Do you?
- > Do your supervisees always leave supervision with more work to do? Is this purposeful? How is it when you leave your own one-to-ones with your manager?
- > Do you know your supervisees' background, their vulnerabilities and potential areas that may activate an increased stress response?
- > Do you know that about yourself? Does your manager know these things about you?
- > Do you feel comfortable talking about these areas and confident enough to do something about them?
- > Do you provide positive feedback with examples in each supervision? Do you receive these from your manager?
- > Do you discuss professional development on an ongoing basis?
- > Do you ensure there is a focus on improvements for children and young people in each session, relating all content to this including audit and performance data?


References

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