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Knowledge Briefing

PSDP - Resources and Tools:

The role and functions of supervision

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Introduction

This knowledge briefing provides an overview of what is currently known about the role and functions of supervision. As an important part of social work practice, supervision is seen as a way of providing organisational support for social workers, as well as contributing to the achievement of best outcomes for the people who receive social work services across the life course (DfE, 2018a, 2018b; SCIE, 2013; Stanley, 2018). Some colleagues go as far as to note 'Never trust any [practitioner] who says "I don't need supervision,"' (a citation from a social worker who took part in a study by Beddoe et al., 2014, p118).

This knowledge briefing draws on a literature review undertaken as a part of the preparatory work for the Practice Supervisor Development Programme (PSDP). It provides information about supervision roles, functions and models, as well as qualities and skills required in a supervisory relationship. Reflective questions and key learning points are included throughout.

The role and functions of supervision in child and family social work

It is important to highlight at the outset that there is no single, agreed, way of defining the role or models of supervision. Adamson (2012) presents the different functions of supervision as a 'swingometer' (see graph 1), noting that they may at times be in competition with each other. Many practice supervisors are keenly aware of these tensions and highlight the challenges in providing supervision opportunities which cover all the elements identified by Adamson in sufficient depth. It is important to consider the impact of this given that the quality of supervision that practitioners experience is likely to have a direct bearing on the quality of their work with children and families.

Graph 1: Swingometer of supervision (from Adamson, 2012: 197)

The way in which the functions and roles of supervision are defined and practised within different organisations, as well as within the supervisory dyad (supervisor-supervisee relationship) can vary widely and impact on the experiences of practitioners and, therefore, on children and families, too.

This can be due to a variety of factors, notably:

A range of different models or theories which inform social workers' understanding of the supervisory process and relationships.

Tsui (2005), for example, identified 11 supervision models in social work, developed from different social science perspectives. See box 1 for an overview of the key theoretical perspectives noted in social work supervision research (adapted from Carpenter et al., 2013).

The socio-political and economic contexts in which both practice and supervision take place. Supervision is a contextually-informed activity. For example, managerial functions may dominate the current supervision experiences in child and family social work due to the impact of wider social, political and economic definitions, which shape frontline practice (Wilkins, 2017a).

Box 1: Key theoretical perspectives for understanding supervision

Social exchange theory
– if supervisees have a positive experience of supervision they are more likely to be motivated and view their role and work within the organization more favourably. There are, therefore, both risks and benefits implicit within the supervisory relationship depending on the quality of this (Carpenter et al. 2013).

Social capital theory
- emphasises the importance of a person's social networks and focuses on examining the nature, structure and resources which are present in these networks. Again the quality of the supervisory relationship is influential and is thought to contribute to developing social workers' resilience (Carpenter et al. 2013).

Social cognitive theory
– focuses on self-efficacy in performance of key tasks (Bandura 1988). If a person thinks that the task can be done and that they have skills to do it, they will persevere, even in the face of adversity.

A key point to note, however, is that a qualitative study, which explored the meaning of supervision within supervisory dyads in Aotearoa New Zealand, concluded that supervisors and supervisees have different expectations from the process (Pack, 2012). For supervisors, the key goal was to ensure safe practice with children and families. For supervisees, trust, support and a safe place to discuss problems were key priorities for supervision.

Reflective prompts:

Many participants on the PSDP have highlighted that it is helpful to think more deeply about the different ways in which they provide emotional containment to their teams. Some examples of small changes they have made, which have proved to be effective, are:

How do you describe the supervision you offer?	What is your explanation for your chosen approach?	How does the context and culture of the organisation you work in influence the supervision you offer?
Is this discussed during supervision?	Do you think this would be helpful?	Are you aware of / can you identify any tensions in the functions of supervision when you meet with your supervisees? What are they? What are your responses to them? How may you address these tensions in the future? What support do you need to do so?

The qualities / skills needed in a supervisory relationship

The ambiguity about what supervision is for is further exacerbated as there is a lack of an evidence base about what constitutes effective supervision practice (Carpenter et al., 2013; O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015). Despite this, there is broad agreement that the key qualities and skills a supervisor should have are flexibility and openness to staff needs, and an ability to manage tensions embedded both in different supervisory functions and the wider context (Beddoe et al., 2014; Ingram, 2015; Magnussen, 2018). Some studies suggest that supervision may play a role in staff retention (Chiller and Crisp, 2012; Clark et al., 2013).

Existing research confirms that the key benefits of supervision reflect its key functions, namely: to provide opportunities for staff support, development and management (Kadushin, 1976). A wide range of studies conclude that the supervision process works best if it offers a space to:

- explore emotions
- develop knowledge and skills
- shape and / or improve social work practice decision-making.

Use of supervision and other management techniques to enable practitioners to explore emotions is particularly neglected and lacking in practice, yet highly relevant (Ingram, 2013; Turney and Ruch, 2018).

Finally, the evidence base highlights the importance of recognising that the supervision needs of practitioners are not static. A newly qualified staff member will need additional support and supervision (O'Donoghue and Tsui, 2015; Carpenter et al., 2013). Later in their career, social workers may find supervisory support less important. Some studies from the US, however, suggest that the frontline child welfare workers again had higher supervision needs after 12 or more years of practice (Kim et al., 2018; Collins-Caramago and Royse, 2010).

Reflective prompts:		
How do you find out what supervisory needs the staff you supervise have? How might you initiate these discussions? Is there anything else you can do?	Can you identify any examples of exploring practitioners' emotions in the supervision you offer? How might you improve your work in this area?	How much do you focus on developing practitioners' knowledge and skills in the supervision you offer? How might you improve your work in this area?
What additional supervisory support do you personally provide for your newly qualified staff?	Have you noticed any difference in staff supervision needs depending on their length of frontline experience? What are they? Do you adapt your style of supervision based on their needs? What helps and hinders you doing this?	Do you have space to reflect on some of the challenges you face in providing supervision with your own line manager? How might your own supervision help you develop your ideas and thinking about supervision further?

An overview of different models of supervision in child and family social work

A variety of supervision models can be identified in the literature. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the supervision models that are more frequently cited in the recent studies, as well as a couple of new and emerging ones. While models alone may not help improve supervisory practice, they may provide a framework which can assist supervisors to develop emerging ideas and incorporate these into the way they provide supervision. As you will see below, the models also 'interact' with each other. This means that implementation of and research on particular models may be informed by other dominant supervision models.

Table 1: Significant models used / identified in the recent international studies on supervision (2010-2018)

Supervision models	
Reflective supervision (Franklin, 2011) **Reflective learning model** (Rankine, 2017; Rankine et al., 2018; Wilkins, 2017a)	Builds on Schön's (1992) work ('reflection-in-action'), emphasising the analysis of relationships and models of collaboration. Fosters professional development. Focuses on exploration of thoughts and feelings and provides opportunities for practitioners to explore issues of diversity and power in relation to the practice of social work. *See further information in the main text of the briefing.*

Table 1 (continued): Significant models used / identified in the recent international studies on supervision (2010-2018)

Supervision models	
4x4x4 (integrated) model (Morrison, 2009, in Dugmore et al., 2018)	Acknowledges the political and social environment in which supervision operates, and the challenges this creates for supervisors, by focusing on different supervision stakeholders, functions and stages. *See further information in the main text of the briefing and in graph 2.*
Developmental model (Kim et al., 2018)	Considers the supervisees current stage of professional development. *See further information in the main text of the briefing.*
Clinical supervision (Carpenter et al., 2013, drawing on Bogo and McKnight, 2006; Renner et al., 2009)	Mainly offered in the USA, with a focus on both counselling and psychotherapy (within which it originated).
Interprofessional supervision (Beddoe and Howard, 2012; Davys, 2017; Sweifach, 2017)	A form of supervision offered to different professionals working within multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary teams. It has the potential to improve functioning in such teams, but may lack clear frameworks and guidance for the professionals involved (who are drawn from a variety of professional backgrounds).

Table 1 (continued): Significant models used / identified in the recent international studies on supervision (2010-2018)

Supervision models	
Emerging models: **Evidence informed model** (O'Donoghue et al., 2018)	Like the 4x4x4 model, it considers the dynamic relationship between the people involved in the supervisory relationship and the wider environment in which supervision takes place. The model was developed from an overarching review of research on supervision. *See further information in the main text of the briefing and graph 3.*
'Live' supervision (Davys and Beddoe, 2015; Birkholm Antczak et al., 2017; Dugmore et al., 2018)	'Live' supervision of the practitioner working in practice contexts initiated through through direct observation or recordings of practice.

A summary of the key elements of the four most commonly used models of supervision in children's service are outlined on the following pages:

The 4x4x4 model of supervision

This is a highly influential, integrated model of supervision (see graph 2), which includes the following elements:

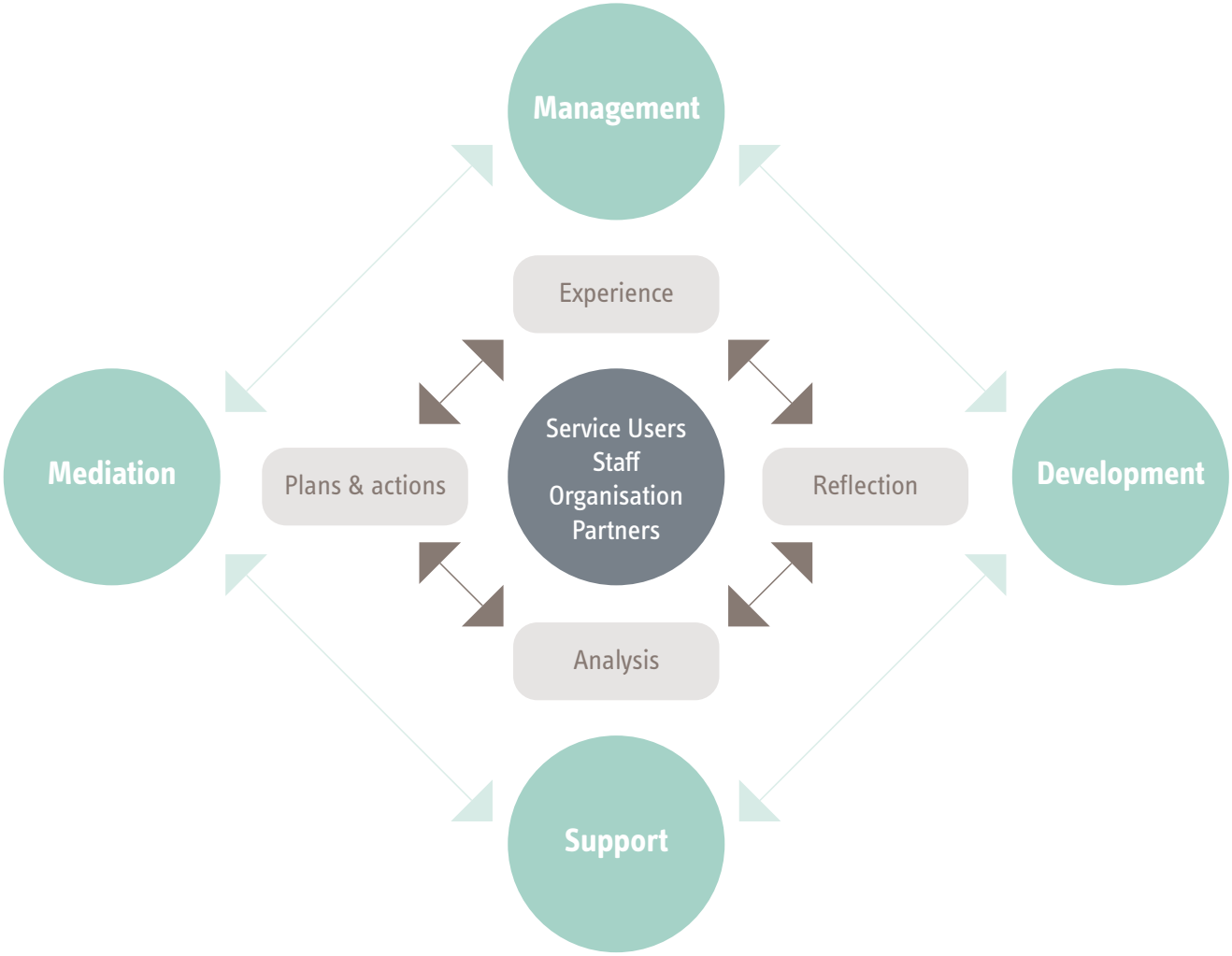
Four main stakeholders in supervision (practitioners, children and families, agency and other agencies).

Four functions of supervision:

- management (ensuring that practice and performance is of a high standard)
- development (supporting ongoing development of practitioner skill and knowledge)
- support (a secure and reflective relationship)
- mediation (helping to connect practitioners experiences of practice, organisational life and the wider political or structural system within which social work is provided).

Four stages of the Kolb's learning cycle (experience, reflection, analysis and plan / action – see graph 2).

Graph 2: 4x4x4 Model (Morrison, 2005)



Most importantly, the model is based on the principle that supervision has a positive impact on the people who use social care services. In the 4x4x4 model, the organisation plays a major role in ensuring supervision is effective.

There is an expectation that organisations should regularly review the process and experience of supervision to ensure those functions are being satisfactorily met from the perspective of all stakeholders (Morrison, 2005; see also Morrison and Wonnacott, 2010).

You can read more detailed information about the 4x4x4 model of supervision, and consider how you can use this model more effectively as a practice supervisor, in the 'How organisational culture influences supervision' and 'Questions around the supervisor cycle' learning tools in this section of the website.

The reflective model of supervision

Reflective supervision emphasises the analysis of relationships and models of collaboration in practice. The intention being that this process enables practitioners to explore their thoughts and feelings, not just in supervision but also in practice (Franklin, 2011). It is frequently referred to as a way to provide 'scaffolding' (Wonnacott, 2013) or 'space' (Earle et al., 2017) for practitioners to regularly and safely explore their emotions.

The supervisor is seen as a facilitator, rather than an expert, for both practitioner support and their further learning (Ruch, 2013, in Earle et al., 2017). Each session is driven by practitioners' own experiences (Earle et al., 2017), rather than any other team or organisational priorities.

However, the professional literature notes that a focus on exploring thoughts and feelings in supervision must also take account of how a: 'supervisee's cultural orientation, values and social position' can impact on communication between a supervisor and supervisee (Lusk, Terrazasb and Salcidoc, 2014, p464). An argument further developed by Hair (2015, p352) who highlights:

> 'As supervisors provide protected spaces for conversations, social workers can have opportunities to increase their awareness of and critical reflection about relational power dynamics, and how power intersects with economic standing and socially created cultural identifiers such as race and gender.'

The importance of providing space for reflection in supervision is widely accepted within social work practice. However, in social work practice in England, the reflective model tends to be used in conjunction with other forms of supervision. As noted earlier, different supervision models interact, draw on and learn from one another. For example, participants from 19 local authorities who took part in an action research project on supervision concluded that the way in which Morrison's (2005) 4x4x4 model refers to the Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle - consisting of experience, reflection, analysis and action planning - provides the most helpful conceptual foundation for reflective supervision (Earle et al., 2017). Some organisations address the need to provide space for reflection by alternating case management supervision discussions alongside practitioner led reflective one-to-one supervision sessions.

Development model of supervision

Much like reflective supervision, the development model emphasises the practitioner's stage of professional development and their associated learning and support needs. In essence, this model considers the stage of the practitioner's practice development and the varying challenges which are associated with different levels of experience, knowledge and skills (Kim et al., 2018). The focus then is on the supervisor offering different kinds of supervisory experiences, which are informed by the individual support and development needs of each practitioner (Everett et al., 2011).

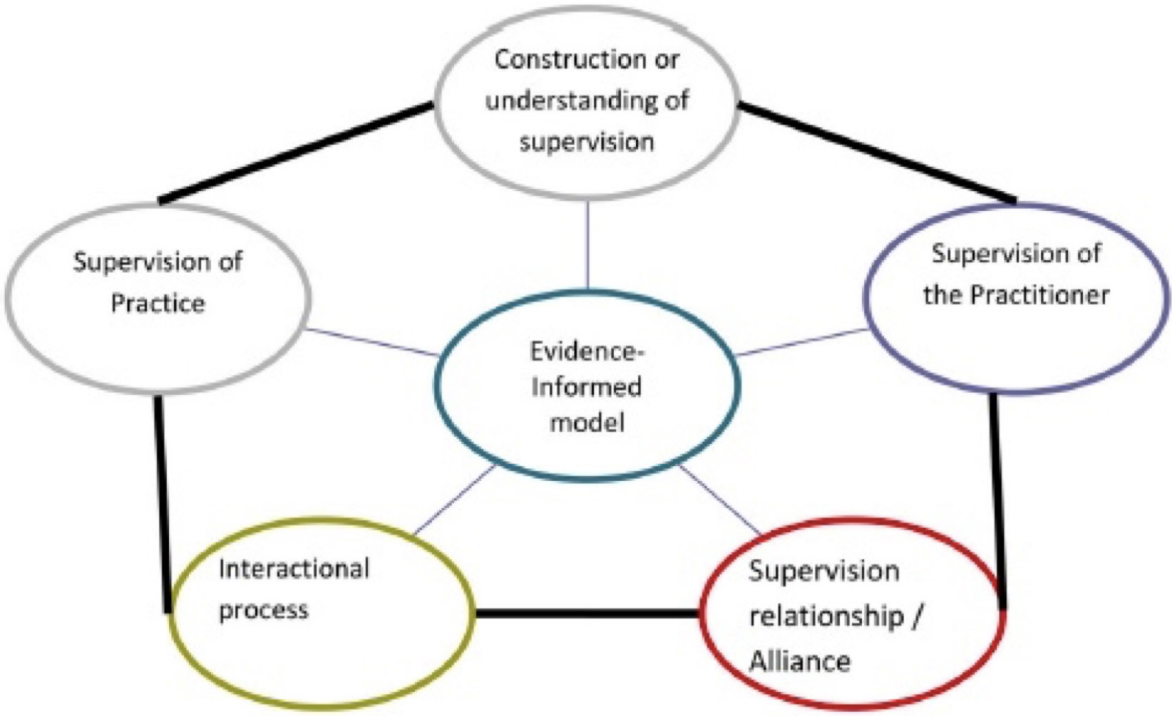
Care needs to be taken that this is a transparent process. Supervisors need to work collaboratively with practitioners and ensure that there is sufficient opportunity to ensure that aspects of sameness and difference are reflected on in supervision, and do not influence practice supervisors' judgements about supervisees.

As noted earlier, while newly qualified social workers may need more support and guidance, a more experienced practitioner is likely to have different supervision and support needs. It may be useful to consider the parallels between the nine levels within the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF), and what each level of capability may demand in terms of supervisory support, development and administration.

Evidence-based model of supervision

O'Donoghue et al. (2018) conducted an extensive review of research on supervision, which led them to develop a new way of conceptualising it, which they called the 'evidence-based model'. This model (see graph 3) is based on a review of prior research, which led O'Donoghue and colleagues to identify that there should be a dynamic relationship between five core aspects of supervision in order for it to be effective.

See box 2 for a summary of each of the five aspects of this model.



Graph 3: Evidence-informed model of supervision (O'Donoghue et al., 2018)

Box 2: 5 aspects of the evidence based supervision model (O'Donoghue et al., 2018)

Construction / understanding of supervision

Supervision includes support, educative and administrative functions and should address each of them. However, supervisees prefer to focus on 'education support and practice rather than administrative matters' (p350). How these functions are addressed is contextual, as supervision is socially and personally constructed. But there are differences in how supervision is organised in different countries and settings. The most common form of supervision is one-to-one discussions.

O'Donoghue et al conclude that there needs to be a 'shared understanding of the social, cultural and organisational context within which supervision is immersed and how supervision is construed within [a] particular setting' (p350).

Supervision of the practitioner

If supervisors help practitioners with practice issues, professional development and provide emotional support they: 'are more likely to be satisfied and productive in their work, committed to the organisation, and be well psychologically.' (p350).

Supervision relationship / alliance

The supervisory relationship has to be 'characterised by trust, support, honesty and openness, the ability to collaboratively navigate power relations, as well as respect for social and cultural differences... For supervisees, the supervision relationship needs to be a secure base in which they could feel safe and participate fully.' (p351).

Interactional process

As an interactional process supervision: 'mirrors the social work helping process' (p351) – the nature of the interaction between supervisor and supervisee needs to be adapted in response to on the type of supervision, the diverse needs of those involved (for example, their cultural and ethnic background) and the dynamics of the process. The purpose is to engage the supervisee in: 'an interactive reflective problem solving process' (p351). Using the social GGRRAAACCEEESSS can be helpful here. The GGRRAAACCEEESSS 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).

Supervision of practice

This highlights: 'the importance of a professional practice culture within organisations and how the supervision of practice can be enhanced by drawing on the best available evidence' (p352). If the supervision session focuses on the issues faced by children and families, it is more likely to result in practice which secures better outcomes for them. Questions supervisors may wish to explore are:

- What are the best outcomes for the children and families in this situation?
- What research and other knowledge have you considered in relation to the circumstances of your practice with children and families?
- How does it inform your understanding of the situation?
- How might it inform and assist your interventions?
- How will you evaluate and monitor progress toward the best outcomes for children and their families?

Like the 4x4x4 model (Morrison 2005), the evidence-based model described above can be used by supervisors as a tool to:

clarify roles, responsibilities and accountabilities	attend to the professional development and emotional needs of their supervisees	effectively engage with the interactional and relational processes involved in supervision while seeking to improve the supervisee's frontline practice.

Reflective prompts:		
Which model(s) do you find helpful and why?	Looking at the different functions outlined in both the evidence-informed model and the 4x4x4 model – which aspects of the supervisory practice do you think you do well and which do you need to be more mindful of and improve?	Would it be useful to use the models of supervision covered in this section as a prompt for discussion with the staff you supervise to talk about how any of the functions of supervision can be improved – from your perspective and that of your supervisee?

The challenges of providing reflective supervision in child and family social work and how these can be overcome

One of the key challenges noted in research studies, and also raised as a concern by many practitioners, is a tendency for the managerial function of supervision to take precedence over other functions (Wilkins, 2017a). This is exacerbated by complex recording requirements for both practice and supervision (Wilkins, 2017b).

Wilkin's (2017b) research examination of 244 supervisory records in child and family social work suggests that 'analysis' and 'child's wishes and feelings' are the phrases most absent from supervisory records. The action lists tend to focus on what needs to happen, not how or why.

Wilkins noted a pattern within supervision sessions in which practitioners provide an extensive update that leads to key problems or issues being identified. At the conclusion of this discussion, the practice supervisor provides advice and direction about how to progress work with a child or family. As a result, Wilkins concluded that practice supervisors can take on the role of 'problem solvers' in practice, while practitioners provide a narrative update on their cases. His work also highlights how common it is for practice supervisors to type and take notes throughout supervision discussions.

In the pressurised work contexts in which practitioners operate, it is easy to see why this might happen. Given that there can be an implicit pressure to focus on case management in supervision it is helpful to restate the importance of:

Working collaboratively with supervisees to establish how a more reflective model of supervision can be achieved and what would need to change as a result.

Reflecting on one's own actions in supervisions and noting any tendency to 'jump to' problem solving as opposed to facilitating practitioners' own reflection. In particular, reflecting on issues of differential power and underlying assumptions related to diversity as highlighted by the social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (Burnham, 2013).

Considering what can be achieved in group and individual supervision and the benefits of each. Within your team, can one type of supervision work better for some functions more than others?

Reflecting on any steps that can be taken to address more systemic issues which shape supervisory practice in an organisation and discussing this with peers or line managers.

You may find it helpful to read the learning tool 'A 3D model of forms of support', available from this section of the website. In it, Wilkins makes the case that we may have too great an expectation about what can be achieved in one-to-one supervision. He argues that it may be more helpful to consider a number of different ways in which opportunities can be created to critically reflect on practice within the organisation.

Conclusion

While there is no firm research evidence on what works in supervisory practice, available research findings suggest that practice supervisors should consider five key issues to improve their practice:

1. Supervision is expected to fulfil a range of roles and functions. Balancing these roles is tricky and supervisors should have access to their own reflective line management supervision to provide a supportive arena to reflect on these challenges.

2. Social work practitioners and practice supervisors may have different expectations of the supervision process. It is, therefore, important to set out the key elements and functions of supervision transparently with supervisees, and to regularly review the experience of supervision from the perspective of both parties.

3. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to supervision. Each practitioner may have different expectations and requirements. These are also likely to change over time, as social workers gain further experience. As with point two, this highlights the need to regularly ask for feedback about a supervisee's experience of supervision alongside sharing your own views.

4. There are different models of supervision that have been developed to help supervisors and supervisees consolidate these different functions and expectations. There is growing interest in group models of reflective supervision and it is important for organisations and practice supervisors to learn about these new developments.

5. Supervision works best for practitioners if it allows them to explore their emotions, develop knowledge and skills, as well as shape and / or improve social work practice decision-making. This requires practice supervisors to be able to skillfully address issues of differential power which may impact on the relationship between supervisor and supervisee.

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