



PSDP—Resources and Tools: Practice observation



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Introduction

As a practice supervisor, it's important that you observe the social workers in your team working in practice with children and families. An expectation to do so is set out in the [Post-qualifying standard: knowledge and skills statement for child and family practice supervisors](#) (2018). Similarly, there is a requirement to observe social work students in training and in the first year post qualification, with two observations undertaken by practice assessors in the assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE). Some local authorities and trusts now include observations of practice as part of regular 'practice weeks' in which senior managers spend time connecting with frontline practice. However, many social workers still report that their work with children and families is rarely observed after they complete their ASYE.

In the busy and challenging contexts of child and family social work practice, it can be difficult for practice supervisors to make space in their diaries to observe staff. However, observations are an essential component of the practice supervisor role and there are many benefits in regularly observing staff working directly with children and families.

Observations enable you to get a real sense of the way in which a supervisee communicates with children and families, allows you to appraise the quality of their practice skills, and gives you the opportunity to provide specific feedback. The process of preparing for an observation and reflecting on this in discussion with your supervisee afterwards enables you to gain a clear

picture of both their strengths and areas for development, which can be a highly supportive and motivating process.

This learning tool presents a summary of research findings from a series of research studies using observations of social work practice in order to understand what communication skills are effective in practice in child and family social work (Whittaker et al, 2017; Forrester et al, 2019; Lynch et al, 2019). A suggested framework for observing practice based on these findings is presented, as is a feedback template you can use as a guide when practicing observation.

The tool 'Helping social workers prepare for practice observations', available from this section of the website, introduces key questions and areas to consider in supervision. We recommend you use both to inform and prepare for your practice observations.

What does research tell us about what high-quality social work looks like in practice with children and families?

Five key skills in child and family social work

Initial research by Whittaker et al (2017), in which they carried out over 100 observations of practice, suggest that five key areas of skill are needed for excellent practice in child and family social work. These are:

- > **purposefulness** – ‘set[ting] out and maintain[ing] a clear purpose for the session whilst maintaining flexibility in response to the client’s agenda’
- > **clarity about issues and concerns** – being ‘clear about the reasons for professional involvement and... able to engage in meaningful dialogue with the client about issues or concerns’
- > **child focus** – ensuring that ‘the child is meaningfully integrated into the discussion to enhance the parents’ understanding of the child’s needs’
- > **relational capacity** – building a positive working relationship with the family which provides high support and high challenge
- > **building the intrinsic motivation of parents to make changes** – working collaboratively with families to support their efforts and motivation to change.

Three core dimensions of effective practice in child and family social work

Whittaker et al (2017) argue that the core elements of child and family social work practice are an ability to be transparent about the focus of involvement, discussing concerns and assessing risk, and building the motivation of families to make desired changes in their lives. In particular, practitioners need to be empathic and build relationships while avoiding collusion and remaining focused on the needs of the child.

Later research by Forrester et al (2019) develops this further and suggests that it is helpful to think about the key components of effective child and family social work practice as clustered around three core dimensions:

1. **relationship building** – empathy, collaboration and autonomy: where ‘parental choice is recognised and increased’
2. **good authority** – clarity about concern, focus on the child, and purposefulness
3. **evocation** – building the intrinsic motivation of parents to make changes.

This study also found evidence of a relationship between outcomes for families and worker skills. Building relationships increased the engagement of families with children’s social care. However, demonstrating good authority and evocation were more likely to lead to positive outcomes. This was more marked when the worker visited the family over ten times.

The role of empathy in child and family social work

Lynch et al's research (2019) explores how social workers use empathy in practice with children and families. Results showed that fairly low levels of empathy were demonstrated by social workers in practice. Often this was characterised by 'closed fact finding questions' and what Lynch et al (2019, p143) describe as a 'tick box approach'.

However, higher levels of empathy could be seen when social workers use more reflective statements and open questions. In doing so, they allowed parents space in the conversation, encouraged the expression of emotions and demonstrated curiosity. Lynch et al (2019, p42) state:

'When practitioners communicated with a high level of curiosity, they conveyed their interest in the parent's experience. This resulted in the creation of opportunities for the parent to share their perspective, and a sense of the individual family and its unique situation was uncovered. Where there was an absence of curiosity, the sense of the individual family was missing from the interaction; the voice and views of the social worker dominated.'

Using these research findings to inform your practice observations

Based on these cumulative research findings, we have developed a simple sheet you can use to provide feedback from practice observations. It's useful to use the three core dimensions of practice identified by Forrester et al (2019) to guide your thinking.

Further questions are provided below for each dimension to highlight what each might look like when demonstrated with different levels of skill in practice.

The task for the observer is to consider how much skill is demonstrated for each of the three core dimensions. You may find it helpful to think about this using a Likert scale, which is presented in the box below.

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>1 Practice skills require improvement and are not of an acceptable standard</p> | <p>1. Relationship building - empathy, collaboration and autonomy: where ‘parental choice is recognised and increased’ (Forrester et al, 2019)</p> |
| <p>2 Acceptable use of practice skills with a large number of areas for improvement</p> | <p>Key questions to consider:</p> <p>Is there evidence of collaboration and joint agenda setting?</p> |
| <p>3 Good use of practice skills with areas for improvement</p> | <p>How does the social worker invite collaboration and encourage autonomy at the start of the interview and throughout?</p> |
| <p>4 Very good demonstration of practice skills</p> | <p>Is the worker able to show warmth and convey respect to the family?</p> |
| <p>5 Excellent demonstration of practice skills</p> | <p>Does the social worker share the airspace, engage the family in the discussion and actively listen to their responses?</p> <p>Does the social worker use open questions, reflections and summaries to check understanding and seek to learn more from the family’s perspective?</p> <p>Does the social worker acknowledge and explore the emotional responses of family members?</p> |

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|  1 Practice skills require improvement and are not of an acceptable standard | <p>1. Relationship building (continued) - empathy, collaboration and autonomy: where ‘parental choice is recognised and increased’ (Forrester et al, 2019)</p> |
|  2 Acceptable use of practice skills with a large number of areas for improvement | <p>Key questions to consider:</p> <p>Does the social worker acknowledge and explore the emotional responses of family members?</p> |
|  3 Good use of practice skills with areas for improvement | <p>Does the social worker adapt communication strategies to meet the specific needs of the children and different family members?</p> |
|  4 Very good demonstration of practice skills | <p>Is the social worker able to communicate to the family that they have choices about what they do whilst at the same time seeking to explore positive and negative consequences of decisions or behaviours?</p> |
|  5 Excellent demonstration of practice skills | <p>Is the social worker able to share with the family their experience of interacting with them, and invite dialogue about this?</p> |
|  6 Practice Tool: Practice observation | <p>Is the social worker able to manage statutory power appropriately in the interview in a way that takes account of difference, diversity and power?</p> |
| | <p>Does the social worker provide feedback to the family throughout the interview or at the end, sharing thinking, next steps and inviting the family to respond to these?</p> |
| | <p>Does the social worker seek to understand the family’s perspective and unique circumstances, for example, considering whether any of the social GGRRAAACCEEESSS might be helpful in learning more about family experience? The social 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).</p> |
| | <p>Does the social worker seek to learn more about any impact of social or economic inequality on the family?</p> |

1 Practice skills require improvement and are not of an acceptable standard

2. Good authority - clarity about concern, focus on the child, and purposefulness

Key questions to consider:

Is the social worker able to explain what they hope to achieve from the interaction with the family?

2 Acceptable use of practice skills with a large number of areas for improvement

Is there a clear structure to the interaction? Is this transparent to the family?

Is the social worker transparent about the issues they are worried about and do they explain why?

Does the social worker check out the families' understanding of the concerns raised and what needs to change?

3 Good use of practice skills with areas for improvement

How does the social worker negotiate access into and around the family home?

Is the social worker able to maintain a focus on the needs and lived experience of the child(ren) throughout the interaction?

4 Very good demonstration of practice skills

Is the social worker able to explore and understand what the child might be thinking and feeling with the family?

Does the social worker know the child well enough to talk knowledgeably about their wishes and feelings?

5 Excellent demonstration of practice skills

Can the social worker challenge the family about the impact of particular behaviours on the child?

Does the social worker explore what is going well for the family?

1 Practice skills require improvement and are not of an acceptable standard

2. Good authority (continued) - clarity about concern, focus on the child, and purposefulness

Key questions to consider:

2 Acceptable use of practice skills with a large number of areas for improvement

Does the social worker explain if they are more or less worried as a result of the interaction with the family?

3 Good use of practice skills with areas for improvement

Does the social worker summarise their thinking and response to the discussion at the end of the visit?

4 Very good demonstration of practice skills

Is the worker able to respond flexibly in the interaction if new information emerges that needs to take priority, or suggests that the interview needs to take a different course?

5 Excellent demonstration of practice skills

Can the family see how this interaction aligns with the overall plan of work for the family?

How does the social worker communicate verbally and non-verbally with children / young people if they are present?

How does the social worker use toys, drawing / craft activities or specialist tools when working with children in line with their specific and unique needs and levels of development?

1 Practice skills require improvement and are not of an acceptable standard

3. **Evocation** - building the intrinsic motivation of parents to make changes

Key questions to consider:

Does the social worker invite the family to share their views and ideas about what needs to change and build on these as a core part of the interaction?

2 Acceptable use of practice skills with a large number of areas for improvement

Does the social worker communicate to the parents that change is possible and a belief that change can be achieved?

3 Good use of practice skills with areas for improvement

Is the social worker able to direct attention to aspects of the family's life where they did make changes and learn more about how they managed to achieve and maintain them?

Is the social worker able to give feedback to the family about changes they have made and areas of strength and resilience from their or others' perspective that the family might not be able to see?

4 Very good demonstration of practice skills

Is the social worker able to remind the family about previous successes and areas of strength / resilience they have demonstrated in order to encourage them?

Is the social worker able to avoid a 'righting reflex' with families and 'roll with resistance' in order to help them identify solutions to problems and consider their own motivation to do so, rather than being told what to do?

(These terms originate from Motivational Interviewing (MI), where the focus is on supporting a parent to get in touch with their own motivation to make changes. The 'righting reflex' can be seen when a worker makes the case for change without drawing on the ideas or motivations of family members, or exploring what holds them back from making changes. This is often experienced by family members as 'being told what to do'. 'Rolling with resistance' is a term commonly used in MI in which the worker is encouraged to avoid arguing for change and to focus instead on listening to the family member and seeking to understand the other person's perspective more fully through the conversation. You can read more about these concepts [here](#).)

5 Excellent demonstration of practice skills

| | |
|---|--|
|  1 Practice skills require improvement and are not of an acceptable standard | 3. Evocation (continued) - building the intrinsic motivation of parents to make changes |
| 2 Acceptable use of practice skills with a large number of areas for improvement | <p>Key questions to consider:</p> <p>When parents have identified their own behavioural goals, how effectively does the worker elicit their intrinsic motivation to change?</p> |
| 3 Good use of practice skills with areas for improvement | <p>We suggest you focus on these three broad areas of practice skill when observing the social workers in your team. A feedback template is provided for you to use on the next page. This is designed to observe social workers working with adult family members, or young people who are able to give informed consent.</p> |
| 4 Very good demonstration of practice skills | |
| 5 Excellent demonstration of practice skills | |



A reminder of the importance of context in child and family social work practice

Whittaker et al (2017) highlight the need to take into account the context of a particular practice interview or visit when undertaking observation. The way in which social workers communicate with families is, therefore, dependent on a number of contextual factors. In other words, what happens during a particular observation or visit will be influenced by what happened at the previous encounter with the social worker, anything the family might have experienced in the interim that might shape the kind of conversations they engage in, and the degree to which all of this is framed by the nature of on-going social work involvement.

For this reason, Whittaker et al (2016) suggest that it may be possible that some practice skills, such as purposefulness, might be required throughout all interactions with families. Others, however, for example child focus, might only be evidenced in parts of the interview.

In other words, being able to make an accurate interpretation of the context within which the practice encounter takes place is likely to provide the best framework for understanding the quality of practice.

It is therefore important to remember that the key person who makes sense of a practice observation is you! Practice observations require you as the observer to use your judgement to make sense of the overall context of practice and the skills required. As observer and practice supervisor, you have the skills and knowledge to do this.

A last point about the importance of observing practice

Attending a visit alongside a social worker allows you to get in touch with how they practice in situ, and also to understand the challenges and opportunities they face in working with a particular family.

Such knowledge will enhance supervision discussions, provide the opportunity to give feedback to the supervisee and acknowledge any areas of outstanding practice. However, it is also important to consider observations from a quality assurance perspective.

Forrester highlighted that a ‘very wide variation between social workers styles and skills’ were demonstrated in practice in his original research in this area (2008 p34).

He concluded that: ‘we need to be able to ask uncomfortable questions about every day practice’ (*ibid*). In 1987, Pithouse famously referred to social work practice as an ‘invisible trade’. This is often still the case today, which is why it’s important that everyday practice interactions move out of the ‘shadows’ to gain the attention they deserve.

Other ways you can use this tool

Use the information outlined in this tool to guide discussion or to ask questions that encourage your supervisees to reflect on how they communicate with families in individual supervision. You can also use it to inform group discussions about practice with your team as a whole.

Reflect on practice skills in child and family social work within a team or away day to identify areas of strength or for development, and to consider how you can share learning across the team.

Talk with peers in your organisation about how to embed practice observations further and share ideas from this tool.

Use the ideas presented here as part of an organisational audit on practice.



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.

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

tel 01803 867692
email ask@rip.org.uk
 @researchIP #PSDP

www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk

Author: Alison Domakin,
Practice and Engagement Lead,
Practice Supervisor Development
Programme

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