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PSDP—Resources and Tools: Using summaries to make decisions explicit in supervision


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Introduction

Effective supervision is ‘key to sound decision-making’ in child and family social work (Collins and Daly 2011 p5). The process of engaging in reflective discussion can encourage both social workers and practice supervisors to articulate their views and decide jointly what should happen next. Such decision-making needs to be recognisable and explicit to both social workers and practice supervisors, and to a child or young person reading their file.

Decisions can range from supporting a newly qualified worker to decide how best to engage a family in order to progress the work and build relationships, to determining social work recommendations about the course of formal action the local authority takes when risk is deemed to have increased (eg requesting a legal gateway discussion for advice about how to proceed).

Decisions can be life changing for children and families. It is, therefore, important to ensure that wider social factors that impact on day-to-day family life and parenting are explicitly considered as part of the decision-making process and not overlooked. Research shows that children and families from some marginalised social groups are often disadvantaged by, over-represented or invisible in child protection systems (Gupta and Featherstone 2016). Having clear decision-making processes in which these factors are discussed, analysed and recorded promotes a more equitable service and anti-oppressive practice.

Decisions and actions from each supervision session are usually recorded on a standardised template uploaded on to the electronic recording system. However, research suggests that, in practice, social workers can struggle to: ‘articulate the decision-making process’ (Collins and Daly 2011 p15), a theme often echoed by Ofsted. Inspectors often highlight how well practitioners speak about their work with children and families and are able to verbally outline in clear detail what work is being planned and why during inspection visits. However, inspectors often find it difficult to identify where decisions are recorded on a child’s file or when exactly a decision was made.

How to use this tool

This tool makes the case that practice supervisors need to explicitly draw attention to decision points arising from reflective supervision discussions and proposes that you use summaries as a deliberate technique to draw attention to the rationale and professional judgements that inform your decisions. We recommend using this tool alongside other frameworks for structuring reflective conversations in supervision (eg [Using the five anchor principles in supervision](#) and [Safe Uncertainty](#) tools).

Locating the point when a decision is made

One of the key tensions in social work supervision is finding time to discuss each of the children practitioners are working with over an agreed number of supervision cycles. Each supervision session is likely to include updates about ongoing work as well as require time to unpick complex practice issues. Research by Wilkins et al (2017) recorded a number of supervision sessions and analysed what they heard. They identified that supervision sessions tended to follow a similar structure:

Verbal deluge:	Identifying the problem:	Solutions:
At the start of each discussion about a child and family the social worker provides an extensive update about what has happened and work undertaken.	The discussion then moves quickly to identifying key problems.	Advice is provided about how to proceed. Next steps and direction for ongoing work are agreed.

Most of the audio recordings in the research study contained the sound of the supervisor typing throughout the discussion in order to keep the recording system up to date.

One hypothesis suggested by Wilkins and colleagues' findings is the need to disrupt the 'verbal deluge' by structuring feedback as a reflective summary of key points. This is particularly important when we are busy, or experience heightened emotions (because of stress, tiredness or overload) which make it harder to remember conversations in detail and identify the points at which decisions have been reached.

Using summaries to draw attention to decision-making in supervision

Regular staging points to summarise and review what has been discussed help to make the decision-making process explicit and transparent. Summaries, therefore, allow practice supervisors to:

- > pause and jointly reflect on key themes
- > review and highlight important points arising from the conversation as a whole as it draws to a conclusion or transition point
- > check understanding about what has been agreed, what decisions have been made and on what basis
- > review whether or not anything else needs to be considered or has been missed.

Summaries can also be helpful as a way of moving forward and unblocking a conversation which may have become overwhelmingly detailed, lost focus, or become stuck.

A structure for discussing each child and family might look like this:

1. Introductory discussion and update

From the social worker.

2. Reflective discussion

Jointly exploring and reflecting on key issues.

3. Clarifying what decisions have been made and the reasoning behind these

Using summaries to aid this process.

4. Agreeing tasks and actions

Reinforced in a summary.

None of this is rocket science but we know that it is all too easy to move straight to tasks and actions so having a structure which prompts you to resist this pressure can be useful. Remembering the importance of a pause to summarise provides the opportunity to review decisions that have been made and articulate the reasoning behind them.

Preparing the ground with your supervisee before you start

Before you start to use summaries in supervision we suggest that you tell your supervisee what you are going to do and why. If supervisees understand what you are trying to achieve and the role they can play by being prepared with their own summaries of what they feel the issues are, they are more likely to be able to engage with this fully and maximise the benefit.

No conversation happens in a vacuum and it is important to acknowledge with your supervisee that you hold more power in supervision discussions given your role as practice supervisor. This might prevent a supervisee from sharing a different point of view or disagreeing when making decisions in supervision. Similarly, it is important to acknowledge that aspects of your own personal and social identity, and that of your supervisee (for example gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality) may influence communication and the decision-making process in supervision (Burnham, 2013). Inviting dialogue about these issues is helpful in promoting engagement and collaboration in the decision-making process.

Ideas for using summaries in supervision

Using summaries is simple to do, you just have to get into the practice of using them. Over time you will develop a style and technique that works for you.

As you start to use them, seek feedback from your supervisees about whether they notice any benefits of doing so. Here are some tips for you to consider:

1. Use summaries regularly throughout your supervision sessions to get into the habit. You might want to think about the value of summaries as quick pause and recap points (which you can use at any point in the discussion) and longer formal summaries (at the end of a discussion about a child and family). As you do so pay attention to what changes or what you see happening in the discussion, and encourage your supervisee to do this also.
2. Make it clear when you are moving into the summary phase of a discussion so that supervisees understand that this is the point where the focus is on reviewing learning, themes and any decisions, and is distinct from the preceding discussion.
3. Begin by sharing your brief overview about what you have discussed or by inviting your supervisee to do so. You might find using prompt questions useful to help consider salient points from the discussion and to identify what you may have missed.
These might include:
 - a. What are the specific issues that the worker, child / family or others are worried about?
 - b. What are we concerned might happen if we don't 'do' something?
 - c. What are the options for taking action? What do we think about that?
 - d. Have we considered the strengths, resources and resilience of the child and family members and how we can support these? For example, strengths related to overcoming oppression and structural inequality, early childhood deprivation, living with disability or on a low income.
 - e. Have we discussed what the child and family members want to happen?
 - f. Is there anything that we may have missed thinking about? Have we considered wider social factors in our discussion? For example, race, culture, disability, experience of oppression within the community, poverty, unemployment or health disparity?

4. As you conclude your summary discussion it is useful to highlight what has been agreed by answering the following questions. If you can answer each question articulately and clearly in two or three sentences the decision-making process is clear and tangible, which in turn makes it easier to record the decision on a child's file. In fact, this may be the point at which some practice supervisors make a record:

- a.** What decision have we reached?
- b.** Why have we made this decision?
- c.** What are we going to do next in relation to this decision?

5. Clarity about the process of reaching a decision can support social workers to identify learning needs. You may want to conclude a summary discussion by asking additional questions which focus on supporting the practitioner's skill and knowledge development. For example:

- a.** How easy or challenging was it to make this decision? Why?
- b.** Were there any aspects of the decision-making process or discussion in supervision that you disagreed with or where you felt your professional opinion was not heard?
- c.** What have you learnt about yourself, your values and the way you practice as a social worker when reaching this decision?
- d.** How do you balance thinking about the impact of social and economic inequality on the lived experience of the child and family alongside your concerns about any potential risks, as well as those of other professionals?
- e.** Can you identify any research or professional literature that has influenced your professional judgement when making this decision?
- f.** If you had a magic wand, what would you do differently?

Using the content of summary discussions in supervision to inform the recording of decisions on a child's file

Engaging in this structured process of discussion in supervision has additional benefits. Social workers can be encouraged to draw on the analysis and reasoning made explicit during summary discussions in supervision to ensure that their written input on a child's file provides evidence of defensible decision-making and, in doing so, clearly articulates on the file the point at which a decision was reached and why.

Other ways you can use this tool

Agree with a colleague that you will both start using the summaries in supervision discussions. Discuss together what you learn and what changes you see as a result.

Share the ideas presented in this tool with your team at a meeting or away day to learn more about what supports them to provide evidence of defensible decision-making.



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.

References

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