



# PSDP–Resources for Managers of Practice Supervisors: An evidence-informed approach to observing supervision

## Introduction

Observing supervision helps to develop greater understanding about the skills that practice supervisors need in order to facilitate emotionally literate, curious and reflective discussions with supervisees, which in turn promote purposeful, evidence-informed practice with children and families. Observations, therefore, provide a unique opportunity to give tailored and specific feedback that helps practice supervisors to develop confidence and skill in this area of their work. This learning tool has been developed to support managers of practice supervisors in this process.

There are three tools focusing on observations of supervision in this section of the website. We recommend that you read this one first before moving on to, 'Preparing to observe supervision and give feedback' and 'A template to guide you when observing supervision'.

Undertaking an observation of supervision requires the observer to be clear about the role and purpose of supervision, and to be able to identify the ways in which it might be improved. The first section of this tool, therefore, provides an opportunity for managers of practice supervisors to refresh their thinking about the role and purpose of supervision using as a guide the principles of the integrated model of supervision (also known as the 4 x 4 x 4 model) developed by Morrison (2005) and Wonnacott (2012, 2013 and 2014).

The second section of the tool presents a summary of the research findings of Dr David Wilkins who has published a number of research studies exploring the key elements of effective supervision in child and family social work. We have drawn extensively on these research findings in order to develop an evidence-informed template to guide feedback when observing supervision.

We conclude the tool by suggesting that you consider how you can balance using an evidence-informed approach to providing feedback about supervision alongside a narrative observational approach, which emphasises the importance of the relational aspects of supervision and the perspective of the supervisee.

## Section one: the integrated model of supervision

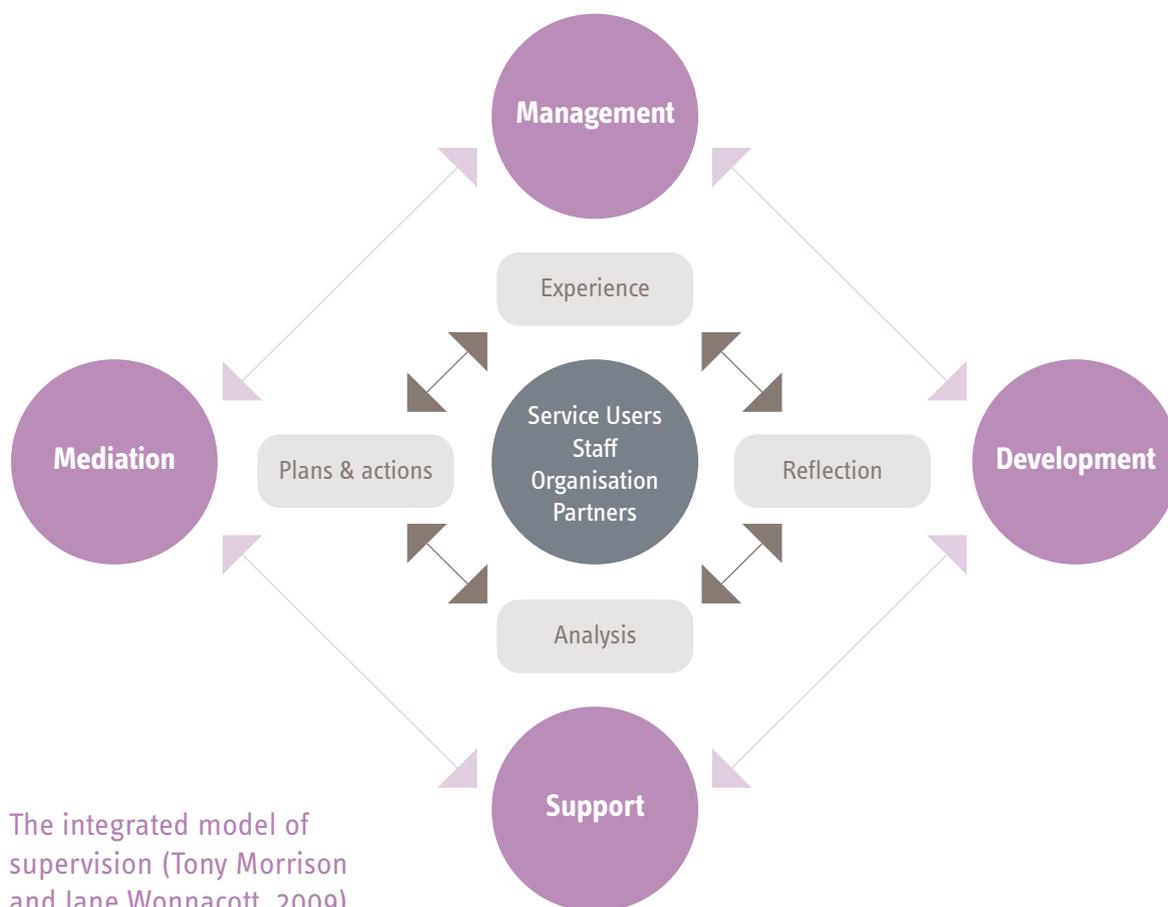
The integrated model of supervision (often referred to as the 4 x 4 x 4 model) brings together three distinct elements, each of which has four interdependent components:

> the four functions of supervision

> the four key stakeholders in supervision

> the four elements of the supervisory cycle

This approach encourages us to conceptualise supervision as a process that integrates three very different ways of understanding its purpose. It emphasises how the responsibilities of a supervisor engage the supervisee in a complex set of practical and cognitive activities, by bringing together ideas drawn from management theory, learning theory and outcomes-based approaches.



The integrated model of supervision (Tony Morrison and Jane Wonnacott, 2009)

The 'outer' layer of this diagram represents the four distinct functions of a supervisor's role and the objectives of supervision:

- > **management** - ensuring competent accountable practice and performance
- > **development** - supporting continuing professional development, promoting learning
- > **support** - providing a secure, restorative relationship
- > **mediation** - engaging the individual practitioner / team with the organisation and serving as a bridge between the world of direct practice and the world of senior management / politics.

Examining the dynamic between these four functions of supervision helps us to understand how they come together to underpin good social work practice.

The central box in this diagram articulates how supervision must address a range of requirements on behalf of different stakeholders. On the face of it, each encounter between supervisor and supervisee is about their relationship and communication with each other. However, the quality and outcomes of their conversation have a direct impact on the child, their parents, family and friendships, the organisation as a whole, and the network of different professional disciplines and agencies engaged with the child.

The 'middle' layer refers to ideas drawn from learning theory about the need for supervision to engage practitioners in a cycle of thinking from different perspectives and using different cognitive skills. The essential message here is that all professional decision-making relies on supervisors and practitioners engaging in critical reflection and bringing robust analytical skills into discussions.

The key message is that when supervision integrates these three distinct approaches, practitioners learn to:

- > recognise and value all four elements of supervision
- > understand how the primary goal of supervision is to achieve the best outcomes for the child
- > appreciate that it's their own responsibility to mobilise the full range of thinking skills and focus on each child's unique story before forming a plan of action.

## The four functions of supervision

The four key functions are all needed to give a balanced approach to the supervision process. You cannot perform one element effectively without the others; they rely on each other.

This does not mean they will all be given equal time and importance in every session but, over time, each should be visited, and none should dominate disproportionately.

Within the **management** function the supervisor should address:

- > overall management of the quality of the practitioner's work
- > overall management of workload and priorities
- > the provision of resources
- > the provision of a safe working environment
- > professional discussion of practitioners' performance against individual, service and organisational objectives, and national standards
- > the duty of the supervisor to ensure that the organisation's responsibilities to the worker under the Equality Act 2010 are met, including the provision of reasonable adjustments for social workers with disabilities.

### Within the **support** function the supervisor should:

- > support the practitioner both as a professional and as an individual person in their own right
- > support the practitioner's wellbeing at work
- > provide opportunities to reflect on how social GRRRAACCEEESSS (aspects of personal and social identity that include gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality - Burnham, 2013) relate to the supervisory relationship.

### Within the **development** function the supervisor should:

- > support the worker's career progression, recognising the need to take into account the cultural awareness and competence of the organisation
- > identify the practitioner's individual strengths
- > identify areas for development (both generally and in respect of specific assessment, planning and other practice issues) in which the practitioner can progress and carry out the job to the required standard
- > identify development opportunities
- > plan how development needs could be met
- > ensure the practitioner has received all mandatory and necessary training required to fulfil the job function
- > log training and development activities undertaken on the appropriate record keeping system used by the organisation
- > evaluate the impact of any development opportunities undertaken.

## Within the **mediation** function supervisors should:

- > help the practitioner to contribute to the development of the organisation
- > assist the practitioner to implement organisational policies and procedures, including issues of diversity and equality that arise either in the context of service provision or in employment practices
- > mediate in any conflicts between the practitioner and the council
- > act as a conduit for relevant information that needs to be shared between the practitioner and the organisation
- > deal sensitively but clearly with complaints about staff.

Supervisors can find it hard to pay equal attention to all four functions, especially where employing organisations impose specific procedural expectations. It is therefore not uncommon for the management function to dominate.

Sometimes, however, supervisors seek to compensate for this by emphasising the support function, which could lead to a lack of challenge and poor performance.

Some organisations have responded to this tension by separating the functions of supervision, with different supervisors being responsible for different aspects. For example, some social workers in their assessed and supported year have been accountable to their line manager for their practice but receive developmental support from a senior practitioner, as well as being assigned a personal mentor. Where a supervision system that splits roles and responsibilities is adopted, there is a risk of fragmentation and splitting, and careful

attention should be paid to the totality of the supervisory experience.

For this reason, in their latest iteration of the integrated model of supervision (a 16-piece model), Sturt and Rothwell (2019) have emphasised the importance of the foundational cornerstones of the model: policy, agreement, recording and review.

If supervisory practice happens in different places, the accountability for risk assessment and decision-making must be articulated clearly within supervision policy and agreements, reflected within the record and reviewed regularly.

## Reflective questions:

- > Within your organisation, how balanced are the different elements of supervision as outlined in the integrated model?
- > Does any one part of this model tend to get more attention than others?
- > Which aspects of the model do you think should be emphasised more in supervision within your organisation?
- > What parts of the integrated model might you be drawn to when observing supervision?
- > Which elements of supervision might you need to better focus on in order to give more effective feedback in the wake of observation?
- > How might you use the information in this section to help practice supervisors to prepare for a supervision observation and to review their work in a feedback discussion afterwards?
- > Are there opportunities for practice supervisors in your organisation to use the integrated model in supervision to review and reflect on their work and prompt discussion with peers or colleagues?

## Section two: what does research tell us about effective supervision in child and family social work?

In 2018, Wilkins and colleagues analysed data from a number of observations of simulated supervision in order to identify which aspects contributed to its effectiveness. The authors conclude that it's important to consider three core dimensions when evaluating the quality of supervision:

> clarity about risk or need

> child focus

> support for practice

Importantly, they also propose a framework for rating the levels of skill demonstrated in supervision for each of the three core dimensions, with 'descriptors for high, moderate and low-quality examples'. These statements are reflected in the table below, which has been reproduced with permission from their research study.

Table one: The three core dimensions of good supervision to emerge from our action research project (Wilkins et al, 2018)

Low		High
1	2	3
<b>Clarity about risk and need</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Limited or no mention of risks or needs</li> <li>&gt; No attempt to prioritize risks or needs</li> <li>&gt; Not linked to child/young person</li> <li>&gt; Lack of curiosity, use of labels</li> <li>&gt; Harm not discussed or discussed only generically</li> <li>&gt; Not clear what needs to change</li> <li>&gt; Risks/needs seen as static</li> <li>&gt; No consideration of other perspectives, either professionals or family</li> <li>&gt; Vague aims and goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Some references to risks or needs in relation to child/young person</li> <li>&gt; Harm at least mentioned</li> <li>&gt; What needs to happen/change is discussed mainly in terms of process</li> <li>&gt; Some evidence of curiosity</li> <li>&gt; Limited attempts to prioritise but may not be clear on what basis</li> <li>&gt; One view of risks/needs dominates</li> <li>&gt; Some attempt to individualise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Related to child/young person, individually</li> <li>&gt; Past and future harm discussed</li> <li>&gt; Practice-led discussion about change</li> <li>&gt; Extensive curiosity</li> <li>&gt; Severity and change over time explicitly considered</li> <li>&gt; Clarity about the bottom line and what needs to change</li> <li>&gt; Risks/needs prioritised</li> <li>&gt; Other views of risks/needs considered</li> </ul>

Low		High
1	2	3
<b>Child focus</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Child/young person absent from the discussion</li> <li>&gt; Child/young person's behavior not discussed</li> <li>&gt; Adult needs dominate</li> <li>&gt; Child/young person's experiences not considered</li> <li>&gt; Child/young person's views not mentioned</li> <li>&gt; Lack of knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Child/young person mentioned</li> <li>&gt; Child/young person's behavior mentioned</li> <li>&gt; Adult needs more important</li> <li>&gt; Child/young person's experiences not considered</li> <li>&gt; Some curiosity</li> <li>&gt; Child/young person's views mentioned</li> <li>&gt; Some knowledge of daily life of the child/young person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Behavior discussed and analyzed</li> <li>&gt; Child/young person's needs central</li> <li>&gt; Child/young person's experiences discussed extensively</li> <li>&gt; Individualized discussion</li> <li>&gt; Curiosity about the child/young person</li> <li>&gt; Child/young person's views important</li> <li>&gt; Daily life of the child/young person known and understood</li> </ul>

Low		High
1	2	3
<b>Support for practice</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Focus is on process and management oversight</li> <li>&gt; Deficit-based, in relation to the worker and the family</li> <li>&gt; Lack of evaluation, limited curiosity about why things have been done/not been done, no attempt to learn from previous interventions</li> <li>&gt; Advocates confrontation</li> <li>&gt; Undermines confidence of the worker</li> <li>&gt; Focus is on supervisor/ agency needs</li> <li>&gt; No help for worker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Process is the priority, but practice is mentioned</li> <li>&gt; Some strengths-based discussion, either about the worker or the family</li> <li>&gt; No clear advocacy</li> <li>&gt; Does not undermine confidence but does nothing to build it either</li> <li>&gt; Some focus on the worker, but this is not the priority</li> <li>&gt; Supervisor offers practical help</li> <li>&gt; Some evidence of learning and evaluation but mostly case update information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Practice is the priority/ focus is on the worker and family</li> <li>&gt; Clear advocacy for a strengths-based approach</li> <li>&gt; Evaluative and open to learning from the past</li> <li>&gt; Builds confidence, looking for ways to affirm the worker</li> <li>&gt; Practical and critical support, combining practical help with developing worker skills</li> <li>&gt; It matters whether supervision is helping the worker and the worker helping the family</li> </ul>

The full research paper by Wilkins et al (2018) which is available open access [here](#).

## Reflective questions:

- > What do you think about the three core dimensions of effective supervision identified by Wilkins and colleagues?
- > How might the core dimensions of supervision be helpful to you as a lens through which to observe?
- > Do you think anything is missing? What else might you want to include?
- > How might rating levels of skill be helpful in providing targeted and specific feedback to practice supervisors after a supervision observation?
- > How might you use the information in this section to help practice supervisors prepare for a supervision observation and review their work in a feedback discussion afterwards?

## Conclusion: using both evidence-informed and narrative observational approaches when observing supervision

Social work education has used observation techniques variously: to teach child development, to develop reflective practitioners and to assess student social workers in practice (Le Riche and Tanner 1998). In developing the ideas of observing supervision in this tool, we have used both scientific and narrative frameworks, identifying in advance what is being looked for and assessing it against criteria.

Using evidence-informed frameworks for observing supervision offers many advantages and allows the observer to provide focused, consistent and specific feedback developed from current research evidence. A scientific observational approach directs the observer to look for specific aspects or elements of supervision and the work of Wilkins et al (2018) is a significant development in challenging the children's social care sector to think about how we can identify what excellent, good enough or poor practice looks like when observing supervision.

However, supervision is essentially relational and based on providing space for supervisees to explore the interactions they have had with children and families, as this quote from Ferguson (2011) demonstrates:

'the social work manager... would provide containment for the worker... They would enable the worker to explore what they did, their feelings *and express that which they are not fully aware of.*' (Ferguson 2011, p214 – emphasis added).

This means that an evidence-informed approach needs to be balanced alongside a narrative observational approach that emphasises the importance of the relational aspects of supervision and the perspective of the supervisee. Sometimes these aspects are less tangible (but of equal validity) and may only be drawn out during the reflective discussion and the process of giving post-observation feedback.

A narrative observational approach recognises that the observer becomes part of the situation and is therefore interacting subtly with the observation, so any meaning is acquired through reflection and discussion with all participants. Acknowledged within this model is the presumption of no absolute truth: who the observer is affects what the observer sees, just as whom they observe, as well as the context and the interactions that precede the experience, affect the processing of information. It is this weaving together of many threads that leads Le Riche (1998) to place it within a narrative theoretical framework.

Thus, whilst we can direct the observer to provide feedback about a certain aspect of supervision, the sense the observer makes about what they see and hear in supervision will always be informed by their own experiences and viewed through the lens of their own values, ethics and personal / professional circumstances. This means that what the observer sees is partly dependent on how they have prepared for and thought about their role, what their preconceptions may be, and where power is located and used in relation to observer, supervisor, supervisee and those who are being discussed.

Both approaches are needed when undertaking an observation. We recommend that you consider how to balance these when observing supervision.

### Reflective questions:

- > Are you drawn more to using an evidence-informed approach or a narrative observational approach? Why might this be?
- > How might it feel to step out of your comfort zone and challenge yourself to observe supervision in a different way, using the ideas presented in this tool?
- > Can you identify ways in which you might combine both approaches when observing supervision? What might be the benefits of doing so?

Regardless of the approach you apply when observing supervision, the key thing here is that you do at least use one. Too often in busy and challenging social care environments, we can overlook this most important of developmental opportunities. Observing practice supervisors is essential and a key mechanism in helping you to develop a culture of reflective practice within your organisation, provided by highly skilled staff.

Finally, before you begin the process of observing a practice supervisor, we recommend that you spend a little time thinking about your own expectations and experiences of supervision as these will inevitably influence your reaction to what you see and hear. Any observation of supervision will be subjective to some extent and dependent on the way in which the observer makes sense of what is observed.

You may, therefore, as an observer, find it useful to look at the tool '[Your supervision history](#)', which allows you to explore your own experiences of supervision throughout your working life and how these have shaped your views about what effective supervision looks like.

## Other ways you can use this tool:

To reflect on the core dimensions of supervision 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 organisation.

To talk with peers in your organisation about how to further embed good supervision observation practice.

As part of an organisational audit on supervision.



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

Ferguson H (2011) *Child Protection Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

LeRiche P and Tanner K (ed) (1998) *Observation and its Application to Social Work*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

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Wilkins D, Khan M, Stabler L et al (2018) *Evaluating the Quality of Social Work Supervision in UK Children's Services: Comparing Self-Report and Independent Observations*. Springer US: Clinical Social Work. Available online: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10615-018-0680-7>

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