PSDP–Resources for Managers of Practice Supervisors:
Preparing to observe supervision and give feedback
Introduction

Many organisations recommend as part of their supervision policy that practice supervisors are regularly observed undertaking supervision sessions. However, practice supervisors often report that this doesn’t always happen.

It is therefore important to regularly observe practice supervisors working in supervision, and to use observation as an opportunity to support them to further develop their skills in this aspect of their role.

This tool is one of three designed to enhance observations of supervision. It has been developed to be used in conjunction with, ‘An evidence-informed approach to observing supervision’, which sets out the knowledge underpinning observation and the core areas for you to focus on.

We have also provided the tool, ‘A template to guide you when observing supervision’, drawn from research studies exploring supervision in child and family social work (Wilkins et al, 2018).

In this tool, we focus on:

- areas to consider before undertaking an observation
- creating opportunities for sharing feedback collaboratively, and reflecting with a practice supervisor after an observation
- other sources of evidence that practice supervisors can draw on to learn more about the effectiveness of supervision.
Preparing to observe supervision in collaboration with the practice supervisor

Preparation is key when observing supervision. It is important to plan it well in advance and to ensure that you have adequate time to talk it through with a practice supervisor before it goes ahead.

A collaborative approach works best here. Power, purpose and judgement all need explicit discussion at the consent stage as each participant prepares for the observation.

We recommend that you use an observation of supervision as an opportunity to talk first with a practice supervisor about their own experiences. This should include:

- the acknowledgment and sharing of experiences of oppression
- the affirmation of a commitment to challenging harmful assumptions and stereotypes
- focusing on views about what works well and any areas for development.

Any observation will always feel somewhat artificial and can cause both the practice supervisor and the supervisee to feel anxious and in a ‘goldfish bowl’. To offset this, it is helpful to position the purpose of observation of supervision as a constructive and supportive developmental process (and to ensure that these principles are modelled throughout).

You should spend time talking with the practice supervisor about:

- any concerns they might have
- the practicalities of how the observation will be carried out
- how the giving of feedback will be managed.
It is important when preparing for an observation of supervision to provide clarity about the areas on which you will focus. We recommend you use the approach outlined in the tool, ‘A template to guide you when observing supervision’. This tool (and the template that supports it) provides more detail about the seven areas of focus for giving feedback:

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<th>&gt; clarity about risk or need</th>
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<td>&gt; child / family focus</td>
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<td>&gt; support for practice</td>
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<td>&gt; structure of the supervision session</td>
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<td>&gt; skills demonstrated by the practice supervisor</td>
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<td>&gt; functions of supervision</td>
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<td>&gt; supervisee's view.</td>
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Ensuring the views and experiences of the supervisee are a central part of the process

We recommend that the observer seeks the supervisee’s views as part of completing the observation and that the supervisee is offered the opportunity to feedback directly at the end of the session. It is therefore essential that you explore with the practice supervisor how they will explain the observation to the supervisee in advance and how they intend to give the supervisee a chance to ask questions and voice any concerns. It should be made clear in this discussion that the purpose of observation has nothing to do with the quality of the supervisee’s work.

Having explained the observation session to the supervisee, the practice supervisor should encourage them to give their own feedback in order to enhance the observation process.

The tool, ‘Reviewing your supervisory relationship with a supervisee’, provides a range of questions aligned with the Post-qualifying standard: knowledge and skills statement for child and family practice supervisors, which are helpful in seeking to learn more about a supervisee’s experience of line management supervision. This can be given to the supervisee prior to the observation to feed directly into the observation process.

If you are the line manager of the practice supervisor you’re observing, remember, too, that post-observation discussion is a great opportunity to learn more from them about their experience of supervision with you. You can use the same tool just described to do so.
Whether or not to record the observation session

Some organisations record observation sessions using a mobile phone or a dictaphone.

Few things support specific feedback better than a verbatim account, which can help to identify what went well and why, and to support thinking constructively together about alternative approaches if areas of development are highlighted. However, if you choose to do this, you must be sure (and gain organisational approval) to:

- seek written consent from the practice supervisor and supervisee
- have a clear and transparent process about the purpose of the recording (where it will be stored, how it will be used and when it will be destroyed).

Recordings must be deleted as soon as they have served their intended purpose.
Giving feedback after an observation of supervision

In order to properly observe supervision, the observer will have:

- attended to issues of power and consent
- prepared effectively
- identified in discussion with the practice supervisor any potential areas to focus on.

Through this process, the observer will also have considered what can be inferred about the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee. The challenge now is to take this information and engage in a purposeful, collaborative discussion with the supervisor, to share feedback and identify learning and areas for development.

The rest of this tool considers how you can facilitate this feedback so that it becomes part of a practice supervisors’ continuing professional development.
Managing how you give feedback

You should ensure there is time for a short debrief after the observation itself. This allows both you and the practice supervisor to share initial learning and reflections. Consider including feedback from the supervisee as part of this, too. We also recommend that you write up the feedback template as quickly as possible after the observation – it’s so much quicker and easier to do with the experience fresh in your mind.

Once you’ve done this, schedule a longer meeting for you and the practice supervisor to discuss the feedback you recorded. Be sure to make this available to them beforehand so they have time to think about it ahead of the meeting. This works best during a line management supervision discussion, allowing you to work collaboratively and identify areas of strength, learning or development.

When giving feedback it is important to ensure that you focus both on what went well as well as any constructive feedback, based on specific examples from the supervision discussion you observed. After you have discussed the feedback with the practice supervisor, it is helpful to spend time reflecting on how the areas you have focused on might shape their thinking about supervision. The resulting discussion and process of seeking feedback should provide the practice supervisor with a clear sense of areas they would like to develop further in supervision, and an appreciation of what they do well.

We suggest that you make time to reflect specifically on the likely impact on children and families of this supervision session. In order to support this process, we recommend that you listen together to the podcast, ‘You can tell if social workers have had supervision’ by ‘Annie’, a parent with experience of child protection who talks about being able to immediately tell whether or not a social worker entering her house has been well supervised. (Please note: you must scroll down the page to find the podcast).

We also recommend that you spend some time talking about how issues of structural inequality and oppression are integrated into supervision discussions and ways in which this might be developed further in order to enhance the capability of the practice supervisor to explore diversity in supervision. It is helpful to ask the practice supervisor to use the reflective audit tool ‘Exploring diversity in supervision’ in order to consider how they can better explore these themes.
Developing supervision skills further: using other sources of evidence alongside observations

Having completed the observation and feedback discussion it is useful to consider how both the observer and the practice supervisor can continue to learn from other sources of information about the effectiveness and experience of supervision. Gathering information and ideas from others who are involved in the process of supervision allows you to compare data and think about any areas of difference or themes that appear throughout. In this section we highlight other tools from the website that can be used to do this.

It is helpful for practice supervisors to use an observation of supervision as a prompt to review their own work more generally using the Post-qualifying standard: knowledge and skills statement for child and family practice supervisors. The tool ‘Evaluating your learning needs using the knowledge and skills statements for practice supervisors’ focuses on this.

You may also, if you have line management responsibility for the practice supervisor, want to provide your own review and feedback about their work using a similar tool called, ‘Line manager’s evaluation–knowledge and skills statements for practice supervisors’.

Finally, it is useful to encourage the practice supervisor to get into the habit of putting time aside for planning and reflection on how to further develop their supervision skills. Using the tool ‘Seeking evidence of the impact and quality of supervision’ can prompt them to do this as it provides guidance on how to consolidate their learning and plan strategically.
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.

Other ways you can use this tool

Encourage practice supervisors to share their ideas and learning from observations of supervision within the organisation.
References
