

Topic 7

Leadership and Supervision: Reflective practice, case management and tracking

Key Messages

- Reflective practice is key to effective social work – good quality supervision provides a safe and reliable space for practitioners to reflect critically on their cases in order to ensure robust analysis and sound judgement and decision making.
- Effective supervision encourages analysis and critical thinking by providing opportunities for reflection, challenge, the testing of ideas and by empowering the supervisee to exercise their own judgement. It requires an organisational culture that values analysis, critical thinking and an inquisitive approach to social work.
- Working with vulnerable children and families is likely to have an emotional impact on social workers which affects how they think and behave – supervision is important in providing emotional and practical support, particularly after traumatic experiences.
- Good supervision and support is key to retaining foster carers – if foster carers are under strain and inadequately supported, children are likely to receive less sensitive parenting and placements are more likely to break down.

What is supervision?

Supervision is an integral element of social work practice (Social Work Taskforce, 2009). Good-quality supervision provides a safe and reliable space for practitioners to reflect critically on their cases in order to ensure robust analysis, judgement and decision making. The provision of high-quality supervision requires an organisational culture that values and encourages analysis, critical thinking and an inquisitive approach to social work (Munro, 2011).

The primary functions of supervision are:

- administrative case management
- reflecting on and learning from practice
- personal support
- mediation (the supervisor acts as a ‘bridge’ between the individual staff member and the organisation)
- professional development. (Carpenter et al, 2012)

The ultimate purpose of supervision is improvement in the quality of practice in order to improve outcomes for children and young people (Children’s Workforce Development Council, 2009). The quality of the relationship between supervisor and practitioner is critical to the process of effective supervision, as is the supervisor’s knowledge, awareness and insight of the worker, their practice and their development needs.

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Information on [The Supervision Framework](#) (Social Work Reform Board) can be found here

Why is good social work supervision important?

Supervision is a crucial element in supporting the quality and implementation of assessment and decision-making processes as information gathered during assessments is often ambiguous (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2009). Supervision can help to ensure that the child's needs, both current and future, are thoroughly assessed and that an appropriate and stable placement is identified and supported. Without timely and decisive planning there is a risk that children will 'drift' in care, experience frequent placement moves and that instability will exacerbate the attachment difficulties (Brown and Ward, 2013; Hannon et al, 2010). (For further information, see Briefing 6 on 'The impact of and avoidance of delay in decision making' and Briefing 14 'Placement stability and permanence')

Working with vulnerable children and families is likely to have an emotional impact on social workers; this emotional dimension may affect how social workers reason and act (Howe, 2008; Munro, 2011). Supervision is important in providing emotional and practical support, particularly after traumatic experiences (Munro, 2011). Social workers who are provided with support in stressful situations are less likely to suffer burnout and more likely to remain working in the organisation. This is important for children and families in terms of the continuity of their social worker (Carpenter et al, 2012).

Social workers value supervisors who:

- are available
 - have knowledge about professional tasks and skills
 - can guide them through organisational processes
 - can relate theory to practice
 - provide a safe and supportive environment
 - teach skills and encourage professional growth
 - observe practice and provide feedback and praise
 - provide specific ideas about intervention
 - communicate in a mutual and interactive style.
- (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2009)

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Supervision for foster carers

The foster carer's social worker (also known as the supervising social worker) provides them with ongoing support. This requires similar skills to that of a first-line manager. Good supervision and support is also key to retaining foster carers – dissatisfaction with the attitude and support offered by social services has been linked to their premature departure from fostering (Maclay et al, 2006). And if foster carers are under strain and inadequately supported, children are likely to receive less sensitive parenting. This increases the risk of placement breakdown (Farmer et al, 2005).

Good support and feeling valued consistently emerge as key factors in the satisfaction of foster carers. Satisfaction is highest when:

- foster carers receive monthly social worker visits that last longer than an hour
- there is effective teamwork and communication, and foster carers have confidence in agency professionals
- professionals provide recognition, respect and encouragement to foster carers for their dedication and efforts
- foster carers are heard and included in decisions being made about the child (Geiger et al, 2013).

The most frequent request from foster carers is for emotional support. Sinclair (2005) identifies those situations when foster carers are particularly likely to be in need of emotional support:

- following a breakdown in a foster care placement
- during carers' own life events (eg bereavements, marital difficulties)
- to deal with grief and loss due to the departure of a child
- dealing with children's behaviour
- allegations
- working with birth relatives.

Carers want support from social workers who:

- are available, responsive and able to listen
- treat the carer as a partner and do not patronise
- give honest information
- understand foster care and the needs of foster carers' families. (Sinclair, 2005)

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Supervision for foster carers during crises and investigations

Support is especially important when problems arise. At times of conflict or crisis, carers have emphasised their need for support that is consistent, sympathetic, responsive, prompt and effective (Sinclair, 2005).

Allegations of abuse against foster carers are upsetting for carers, can lead to children being removed from their care and may result in some foster carers giving up fostering (Biehal et al, 2010). Foster carers who are the subject of an allegation against them are sometimes not provided with information and support from their social worker. This leads to carers being distressed and feeling disempowered. Research by The Fostering Network (2004) suggests that foster carers were not given information about the complaints procedures and were not treated with respect.

The National Minimum Standards for fostering services (Department for Education, 2011) specify that fostering services should provide independent support during an investigation into an allegation. The foster carer's social worker should be the link between the fostering service and the foster carer, even if the carer has independent support (The Fostering Network, 2006).

During an investigation foster carers need to be:

- treated fairly and honestly
- informed in writing as soon as possible about the nature of the allegation or concerns
- given written information about the inquiry, the procedures that are being followed and scheduled timescales
- provided with ongoing support by their supervising social worker
- given information about sources of independent advice and support
- informed about all decisions as soon as possible. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009)

The role of the social work manager

The carer has day-to-day contact with and knowledge of the child and should be invited to contribute to care planning and review. Their perspective will enrich understanding of the child's experience and support child-centred planning.

Social work managers can support this by ensuring that social workers are:

- listening carefully to what children want from the placement, helping to establish the relationship between carer and child, making thorough plans around contact

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with the birth family in the interests of the child, providing dedicated support during times of crisis, and recognising and engaging the carer as a key member of the team around the child

- ensuring there is a choice of placement that is informed by a thorough analysis of the current and likely future needs of the child; where there is a change in circumstances or the original care plan cannot be achieved the plan will need revising
- ensuring carers are fully informed and involved in any assessment of the support that will be needed, including any concerns they have about the child
- recognising that looked after children have existing networks of friends, community and education and that it is important these are maintained alongside the ability to become part of the family life of the carers' household.

Training and development

Access to training is an important source of support for foster carers. It also helps them provide a specialised level of care to each child they look after during their careers (Clarke, 2009). Carers who participate in training are more likely to feel they are part of a profession. Training and development also reduces stress levels and enhances carers' self-esteem (Sinclair, 2005).

Clarke (2009) makes the following recommendations in relation to the provision of training for foster carers:

- Provide foster carers with a range of flexible and accessible learning and development opportunities throughout their careers.
- Ensure that all foster carers are encouraged and supported to undertake ongoing learning and development opportunities to maintain and develop their skills and knowledge.
- Ensure that foster carers have access to specialist learning and development opportunities when they require it.

Increase access to flexible learning and development opportunities, such as online training.

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Reflective Practice and Critical Analysis

- Supervision provides an opportunity for reflection, challenge and the testing out of hypotheses and ideas
- It enables the worker to critically analyse their actions with the goal of improving practice and outcomes for children
- Supervision of the carer provides an opportunity to reflect on their experience, perceptions of the child, support and development needs
- An effective framework to support analytical thinking are the Anchor principles (Brown, Moore, Turney 2012)

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Reflections on Supervision

- Is it about challenging thinking or process compliance?
- Does it focus on questions about what needs to be done or enquiring questions about why and what?
- Are assumptions challenged and evidence interrogated?
- Is there scope for ideas to be tested?
- Does it explore the experience of the carers and their needs?

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Why is good social work supervision important?

- Supervision provides critical appraisal of the assessment and planning process:
 - information gathered during assessments is often ambiguous
 - Working with vulnerable children and families can have an emotional impact on social workers, which can affect how they reason and act
 - It provides emotional and practical support, particularly after traumatic experiences to alleviate stress and 'burn out'

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Supervision for foster carers

- Good supervision and support is key to retaining foster carers
- Foster carers who are under strain and not adequately supported provide less sensitive parenting, increasing the risk of placement breakdown
- Foster carer satisfaction is higher when:
 - they receive monthly social worker visits lasting over an hour
 - there is teamwork, communication and confidence with agency professionals
 - professionals provide recognition, respect and encouragement to foster carers for their dedication and efforts
 - they are heard and included in decisions being made about the child. (Geiger et al, 2013)
- Foster carers want support from social workers who:
 - are available, responsive and able to listen
 - treat the carer as a partner and do not patronise
 - give honest information
 - understand foster care and the needs of foster carers' families.

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Supervision during crises and investigations

- Allegations of abuse against foster carers are upsetting for carers and can lead to children being removed from their care
- During an investigation foster carers need to be:
 - treated fairly and honestly
 - informed in writing as soon as possible about the nature of the allegation or concerns.
 - given written information about the enquiry procedures that are being followed and scheduled timescales
 - provided with ongoing support by their supervising social worker.
 - given information about sources of independent advice and support.
 - informed about all decisions as soon as possible. (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009)

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Role of the social work manager

- As part of their supervision social work managers should be making sure that social workers are:
 - listening to what children want from the placement and helping to establish the relationship between carer and child
 - making thorough plans around contact with the birth family
 - ensuring that there is a choice of placements
 - ensuring carers are fully informed and involved in any decisions
 - making sure that children maintain existing networks of friends, community and education
 - familiar with research that demonstrates that increased multi-agency and multi-disciplinary support to placements improves foster carer satisfaction and reduces the level of placement disruption
 - actively encouraging foster carers to take part in good quality training and development opportunities

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References

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Reflections on the supervision you offer/receive including the support and challenge you provide to carers

Methods

Suitable for self-directed learning or reflection with a colleague or supervisor.

Learning Outcome

Review the supervision you offer/receive and identify actions you can take to improve it.

Time Required: 45 minutes

Process

Thinking of your current approach, answer the following questions.

- What proportion of supervision time is spent on challenging thinking and reflection compared with process compliance?
- Is the focus on what has been done and what needs to be done or more reflective questions such as:
 - what does this mean for the child;
 - what is the most challenging part of this;
 - which aspect of this case are you most worried about;
 - how do you feel about ...?
- Are assumptions/hypotheses examined and challenged with questions such as:
 - what are your assumptions about this family;
 - what is the evidence to support this;
 - at what points have you changed your assessment of the situation and why;
 - what alternative explanations might exist?
- Do you provide/are you provided with the opportunity to test out ideas –
 - what would happen if;
 - what would be the consequences of;
 - could there be another way of looking at this; what alternative approaches might there be?
- Does supervision empower the supervisee to exercise judgement?
- Is the supervisee/carer encouraged to share and explore their own judgements/perceptions?
- Does the organisational and team culture value analysis, critical thinking and reflection?
 - How is this demonstrated?

Topic 7**Leadership and Supervision: Reflective practice, case management and tracking****Key Questions for Individual or Group Supervision or Case Study Analysis****Methods**

Suitable for individual or group supervision or case study analysis. Individuals will need a copy of a recent case or one of the case studies.

Learning Outcome

Review and reflect on a recent case or case study and identify strengths and areas where you require further information or support.

Time Required: 60 minutes

Process

Think about a recent case or case study and answer the following questions.

- What are the specific needs of this child (currently and in the future)?
- How will this placement meet these needs (currently and in the future)?
- How will you know if progress is being made?
- What is the behaviour of the child telling you?
- What is his/her understanding of the situation?
- What does the child want?
- What don't you know about this case?
- What is the critical information to gather and who holds it?
- What is the quality of the information sharing and relationships between the professionals in this case?
- How confident and effective do you feel to challenge differences of perception among professionals and keep the focus on the child?
- What needs to happen now?
- What concurrent planning is taking place?
- What are you most confident about in this case?
- What are you most worried about and why?
- Do you need further support to develop your skills / knowledge in relation to this case?

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Case Study - Toby

Methods

Suitable for individual or group supervision. Individuals will need a copy of the case study for Toby.

Learning Outcome

Review and reflect on a child's story and identify strengths and areas where you require further information of support.

Time Required: 60 minutes

Process

Give individuals a hand-out of the case study for Toby, ask them to read it and discuss the following questions.

1. Consider Toby's story and consider how Toby's social worker, the adoption social worker and the supervision social worker will work together to support everyone in achieving the best transition for Toby.
 - What could get in the way of effective working together?
2. Lead a discussion on the following areas.
 - What is the child's story?
 - What does this mean for the child and the placement?
 - What is the child's experience of this placement?
 - What is the foster carers' experience of this placement?
 - How are the carers understanding and responding to the child's behaviour?
 - How does knowledge and information from the carers inform the planning and decision-making process?
 - Can the carers support the child's relationship with their birth family and manage this in a way that is positive for the child?
 - Can the carers support the child in 'moving on'?
 - Is this the appropriate placement for this child now and in the longer term?
 - Is there a need for additional support or training for the carers?
 - How do/will you know if the desired outcomes of the placement are being achieved?
 - How might you monitor progress?
 - What worries you most about this placement and why?
 - What element are you most confident about?

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Case Study - Rosie

Methods

Suitable for individual or group supervision. Individuals will need a copy of the case study for Rosie.

Learning Outcome

Review and reflect on a child's story and identify strengths and areas where you require further information of support.

Time Required: 60 minutes

Process

1. Give individuals a hand-out of the case study for Rosie and ask them to read the case study and the following key questions.

Key Questions for Individual or Group Supervision or Case Study Analysis

- What is the child's story?
 - What does this mean for the child and the placement?
 - What is the child's experience of this placement?
 - What is the foster carers' experience of this placement?
 - How are the carers understanding and responding to the child's behaviour?
 - How does knowledge and information from the carers inform the planning and decision-making process?
 - Can the carers support the child's relationship with their birth family and manage this in a way that is positive for the child?
 - Can the carers support the child in 'moving on'?
 - Is this the appropriate placement for this child now and in the longer term?
 - Is there a need for additional support or training for the carers?
 - How do/will you know if the desired outcomes of the placement are being achieved?
 - How might you monitor progress?
 - What worries you most about this placement and why?
2. Discuss the following questions about Rosie.
 - What element are you most confident about?
 - How could Rosie's social worker and the supervising social worker work together with Leann to support Andrea in keeping Rosie safe and setting and maintaining boundaries around contact and behaviour?