Rough Guide to Supervision

Hartlepool & Stockton-on-Tees
SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP

Introduction

Rough Guide to Supervision is one of a series of practice guides produced by Hartlepool and Stockton-On-Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSSCP) which have been designed to be read and used by the range of practitioners and professionals, and their supervisors, working across children's services in the borough.

All of the *Rough Guides* have been developed to support the valuable work that is carried out with children and young people[1] and families by identifying the key elements which underpin good practice and incorporating significant messages from research.

No single publication can provide all the information needed to promote effective supervisory practice, explore all of the relevant issues, or reflect the multitude of policy and practice variations in place across organisations. What this guide aims to do is to provide a starting point and a solid foundation for effective practice. It should be augmented through training and other professional development activities.

The *Rough Guide to Supervision* does not replace, provide the detail of or interpret legislation, policy, frameworks and procedures, which are all subject to change, but focuses more on the *'how to'*, offering advice, suggesting ideas and providing signposts to sources of information and further reading.

Whilst focused on supervision in relation to child protection, it is likely the following information will have wider relevance.

What do we mean by 'supervision'?

There are numerous definitions but, for the purposes of this *Rough Guide*, supervision in the context of child protection work is defined as:

> ***the relationship between supervisor and practitioner in which the responsibility and accountability for appropriate professional behaviour, the development of competence and ethical practice takes place. As a result, outcomes for children are improved.***

In this relationship, the supervisor, who may or may not be the line manager, is responsible for providing direction to the practitioner, who applies theory, knowledge, skills and values in the practice setting. The supervisor and the practitioner both share responsibility for supervision in what is a collaborative process.

[1] To avoid repetition in subsequent sections, child or children are the terms used to refer to children and young people.

Child protection work is undeniably challenging for all practitioners. Ensuring children are adequately protected means practitioners have to manage and assess complex risks, work with troubled and troubling families, share relevant information and manage the stress and anxiety that comes from this. We know that good supervision is crucial for supporting and improving practice, including encouraging reflection and critical thinking skills, building upon training to enhance performance, and supporting practitioners through casework decision-making and crises.

It is widely agreed that supervision has a number of key, inter-related functions:

'Supervision interrupts practice. It wakes us up to what we are doing.'

Ryan (2004) in Carroll, M. (2007).

- **Educative:** Attention is focused on developing the practitioner's knowledge, understanding and skills that will improve child protection practice. This element of supervision necessarily involves a facilitated process of exploration, analysis and critical reflection of practice which aims to increase the practitioner's understanding of the children and families they work with, of themselves as practitioners, of the impact they have and the knowledge, theories, values and perspectives that can be applied to improve the quality of their work and children's outcomes.

- **Administrative:** Attention is focused on performance management, oversight of caseloads, compliance, recording etc. Supervision is the forum for reviewing practice alongside the policies and procedures of the employing organisation and the LSCB. It helps to clarify the role and responsibilities of the practitioner in their particular practice context.

- **Supportive:** Recognition is given to the personal impact that child protection work can have on practitioners. Supervision provides a space where practitioners can become more aware of how their work is affecting them and, in turn, how their personal reactions and emotional state are impacting on practice.

At times, supervisors may also take on a **mediation** role in which they act as a bridge between the individual staff member and the wider organisation or the LSCB.

These functions of supervision are not discrete but overlap, interplay and complement in different ways. The supervisor might address all supervisory functions. For some practitioners, supervisory functions may be split between a line manager, who focuses largely on management and organisational accountability, and another professional (either within or external to the organisation) who focuses on a deeper analysis and support of the practitioner's child protection practice.

The arrangements for how supervision is organised and delivered will undoubtedly vary from agency to agency but there are overarching key essential aims. So, for every practitioner working in child protection, supervision should:

- Help to ensure that practice is soundly based and consistent with organisational and LSCB policy and procedures
- Ensure that practitioners fully understand their roles, responsibilities and the scope of their professional discretion and authority
- Provide the opportunity to explore, analyse and critically reflect on practice
- Help identify training, development and additional support needs

Remember……

Supervision aims to enable practitioners to achieve and sustain high quality practice through the means of focused support and development.

Why is supervision crucial?

Quite simply, the ultimate goal of supervision is to improve outcomes for children. Evidence from Inquiry Reports and Serious Case Reviews, where children have died or been seriously harmed at the hands of parents or carers, indicates that inadequate supervision, or supervision that is overly focused on administrative and compliance aspects, risks losing the focus on the child, with the potential for devastatingly fatal consequences.

The quality of the direct services provided to children and families, and the positive outcomes achieved as a result of service interventions, is dependent on the provision of regular high quality supervision of frontline staff. The requirement for supervision is laid down in *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, (HM Government, 2015) which recognises its crucial role in supporting and developing practitioners.

'Regular, high quality, organised supervision is critical.'

(Lord Laming, 2009)

Supervision is the lynchpin to achieving a number of desired outcomes - a sustainable, committed, engaged workforce, a children's services culture based on learning and evidence based practice, improved practice with families, and improved outcomes for children. It strengthens child protection practice and supports robust decision making by:

- ensuring practice is consistently child focused
- helping to avoid drift and delay
- providing a forum where fixed ideas can be challenged, objectivity promoted, and self-critical reflection supported
- enabling and empowering practitioners to develop skills, competence and confidence in their child protection practice
- addressing the emotional impact of child protection work and helping to reduce stress
- addressing issues of practitioner safety

Remember:

Regular, high quality supervision is absolutely crucial for every practitioner working with vulnerable children and their families.

'Supervision helps practitioners to think, to explain and to understand. It also helps them to cope with the complex emotional demands of work with children and their families.'
(Brandon et al, 2008)

What supervision isn't

We know that it is all too easy for supervisors to focus on compliance, on checking that timescales have been met, reports written, documentation completed, boxes ticked. Yes, these are important but simply focusing on whether procedures are being followed carries the risk of lulling people into a passive mind-set of just following the steps, of not really thinking about what they are doing. This isn't what we mean by supervision.

In children's services, supervision is a core mechanism for helping every practitioner critically reflect on the understanding they are forming of the child and family, of considering their emotional response and whether this is adversely affecting their reasoning, and for making decisions about how best to help. Supervision is key to providing time and encouragement for practitioners to pause and critically review their work.

Remember:

- **X** Supervision is not a box ticking exercise
- **X** Supervision is not case consultation
- **X** Supervision is not practice audit
- **X** Supervision is not compliance checking
- **X** Supervision is not therapy
- **X** Supervision is not optional

Types of supervision

Supervision can be undertaken in a number of ways and practitioners may experience just one of the following main methods of supervision or a combination:

➢ Scheduled or formal individual supervision

This is the more traditional format for supervision, involving regular, planned, one-to-one, uninterrupted sessions which are held in a private setting between the supervisor and the practitioner. This is probably the most common kind of meeting between supervisors and practitioners, but in some agencies individual supervision is supplemented by other forms of supervision.

➢ Unscheduled individual supervision

This is supervision which takes place outside of scheduled sessions. The nature of child protection practice means that emergency situations arise and complex issues are discussed in a supervisory relationship as they occur because their resolution cannot wait. Informal, 'in the moment' supervision can be an effective way to develop practice insights as it works with the heightened awareness and experiential engagement with the issues at the time. This should, however, be balanced with formal, scheduled supervision that allows for more holistic planning and critical reflection in a place and time that is dedicated for that purpose.

➢ Group supervision

Supervision that takes place between an appointed supervisor and a group of practitioners (which may be multi-disciplinary) is commonly referred to as group supervision. Participants benefit from both the collaborative contributions of the group members as well as the guidance of the supervisor. This method involves structured sessions to address some of the supervision functions, most commonly with the focus on reflective practice. Effective group supervision can result in faster, more effective problem solving by drawing on the expertise of a number of people. It provides the opportunity for learning from the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the participants who may provide different perspectives. It should be noted that team meetings do not automatically constitute group supervision, but they can be used in part, or in full, as group supervision if planned as such and if this intention is known to team members.

➢ Joint supervision (sometimes called co-supervision)

Whilst practitioners come together regularly to attend multi agency meetings as part of child protection processes, they usually have very little opportunity to come together for critical reflection. Joint supervision does not replace single agency supervisory practice but aims to supplement and complement it, promoting inter professional and cross agency learning in the process. As with group supervision, this method can be very effective where practitioners from two or more agencies are working together with complex situations and issues. The supervisor(s) may be from one of the involved agencies or from an external organisation.

➢ Live supervision

Essentially, this form of supervision involves the supervisor directly observing practice or accompanying the practitioner while engaging with children, families or other professionals. The supervisory relationship from formal individual supervision is therefore transferred to the 'live' work setting. So, for example, if a practitioner is on duty, the supervisor sits alongside for a specified period of time, observing and supporting critical reflection on aspects of practice (the possibilities are wide). Or, the supervisor might, with the service user's permission, accompany the practitioner on a visit, observing what takes place and enabling critical review and reflection immediately afterwards.

Remember....

Whether you are a supervisor or practitioner, and whatever the format for supervision, you should commit to the supervisory relationship and always be clear about the purpose and aims of supervision.

Effective supervision

Throughout this *Rough Guide,* the widely accepted view (and research to date does appear to support this) that good quality supervision is absolutely vital for enabling child protection professionals to be the best they can be in their work with children and families has been emphasised. So what makes supervision 'good' supervision?

Whilst supervisory practice will vary between organisations and agencies, there are a number of key elements of effective supervision:

- Supervision is viewed by everyone as a priority and absolutely integral to child protection practice
- Supervision is regarded as a shared responsibility with the supervisor and the practitioner each committing to the supervisory relationship
- The aims, purpose, expectations and parameters of supervision are understood by both the supervisor and the practitioner
- Supervision provides the opportunity for self-reflection, analysis and critical thinking
- Records are maintained by the supervisor of each supervision session
- Feedback and challenge is an integral part of supervision and is expected and welcomed
- Both the supervisor and the practitioner prepare for supervision including, for example, the supervisor reading any necessary recording and documentation in advance of the session, and the practitioner completing any specified preparatory tasks or completing agreed actions from a previous session and considering issues they wish to discuss and explore within the session
- Always maintaining a focus on the child

Remember:

Supervision should both support and challenge the practitioner.

Avoiding the pitfalls

We know from audit activity and feedback from practitioners that the experience of child protection supervision is variable, both within and between organisations, in terms of the quality and frequency. Supervisors and practitioners experience a range of competing priorities and all too easily supervision can be relegated to the bottom of the to-do list or even disappear altogether.

What can improve this clearly unacceptable situation? The following components of best practice are all included here as ways of ensuring supervision is accorded high priority and undertaken robustly across children's services:

- A **supervision contract** should be negotiated to specify the aims and expectations of supervision, how difficulties and concerns will be dealt with, confidentiality boundaries, practical arrangements and scheduling, how sessions will be recorded, what will actually happen within supervision sessions and what sorts of records and documentation will be required.

- For supervision to be effective it should take place on a **mutually agreed schedule** (unless it is necessarily unscheduled as highlighted in an earlier section), with sufficient time allocated to its practice. This time, while precious and hard to come by, should be protected from cancellation, rescheduling, or procrastination. Yes, everyone working in children's services knows that there are times when emergencies arise or diaries clash, making it necessary to reschedule supervision meetings. But when this happens, another time to meet should be agreed as soon as possible. If the need to reschedule arises frequently, it makes sense to consider why this is happening.

- Far too often supervision can be dominated by a focus on the administrative function and performance management at the expense of the other functions, with not enough time (or any time at all) being given to reflection and critical thinking. **Time to stop and reflect** has been reported as a missing element of day-to-day practice for many members of staff working in children's services. For supervision to be effective, supervisors should work collaboratively with practitioners through the following four stages:

'We know that there is a danger of supervision being process-driven and overly focused on management and surveillance at the expense of reflection and professional development.'

(Munro, 2011)

- **Experience** – working with the practitioner to understand what is happening in their current practice. This is an opportunity to make sure that the perspectives of children and their families are introduced into the discussion.

- **Self-reflection** – engaging with the practitioner to explore their feelings, reactions and intuitive responses. This is an opportunity to explore any assumptions and biases that might be driving practice. It is also an opportunity to consider any anxieties and acknowledge situations where stress may be impacting on practice.

- **Critical analysis** – supporting the practitioner to consider the meaning of the current situation and use their knowledge of research evidence and experience of similar situations to inform their thinking. At this point alternative explanations and perspectives should be explored alongside relevant research and practice knowledge.

- **Action planning** – working with the practitioner to identify how learning from critical reflection will be acted upon and subsequently reviewing any improvement actions implemented.

Remember.....

Given the high risk nature of child protection work, there is tremendous pressure *to do, to act,* but less focus on actually *thinking*. Yet every day, significant decisions are made which have long term impacts on children and families and we need to ensure that those decisions are as robust as they possibly can be.

Critical reflection in supervision

There is considerable evidence that problems can arise in the way practitioners reason when they are making sense of complex information, and research (and the findings of numerous Inquiry Reports and Serious Case Reviews) has identified a number of common errors:

- Failure by practitioners to revise risk assessments
- Difficulty in changing minds and considering alternatives (in other words, 'being led down the garden path')
- Discounting or ignoring family history
- Failure to identify patterns
- Written evidence is overlooked in preference of direct reporting
- Discounting evidence that does not support the practitioner's own view
- Being uncritical of evidence that supports the practitioner's own view

Having the time to stop and critically reflect (in simple terms, critical reflection provides a way of 'standing back' and analysing the issues from a different perspective) is essential for high quality child protection practice. Yet, in reality, opportunities to do just that within supervision can be few and far between.

Every supervisor should encourage reflection and critical thinking to take place within the supervision session and, as Burton (2009) states, supervisors should support and challenge practitioners, helping them to avoid the temptation to slip uncritically into either an analysis skewed by bias and unfounded assumptions, or simply defaulting to the entrenched 'agency view'.

It is crucial, therefore, that supervisors ask questions that help to avoid those common errors highlighted, that they should think about how to help practitioners to:

- Develop an evidence-based hypothesis and formulation about the situation – the causes, the risks, the protective factors, the impact, the ways forward

- Articulate the child's and carer's perceptions and explanations for the concerns and the impact of those concerns

- Identify gaps in information and how to fill the gaps

Whilst it would clearly be impossible to provide an all inclusive list of the questions to be asked by supervisors in every supervision session, here are some examples that may assist practitioners to be more critically reflective:

- What are your thoughts so far about this family? What patterns are apparent?
- What are the critical issues for us to think about? Who is your client?
- What are the risks for the child currently and in relation to their future development?
- How is historical case material being considered to ensure we are seeing the whole picture?
- What do you think life is like for this child?
- What theories, research and ideas help us with this assessment?
- Can you think of any other explanations for why the situation has changed and deteriorated?
- I know about the things that are concerning you, but what are the strengths and positives associated with this family?
- What are the possible protective factors?
- What assumptions are we making about each of the parents? Is there any other way of thinking about their behaviour? What do you think we need to do and why?
- What other options do we have?
- Who else might help us here?

- What safety issues are there and how can we manage these?

  What's gone well in this case?

- How do you know?

- How will the family know they are being successful in keeping their child safe from harm?

- How are you and other involved professionals communicating the measures of success to them?

- How can I support you?

In preparing for supervision, practitioners can develop critical reflection by asking themselves the following:

- What was I trying to achieve? Why did I intervene as I did?

- What were the consequences of my decisions and actions for the child and family? For myself? For other people I work with, including other professionals?

- How did I feel about this experience when it was happening?

- What internal factors (assumptions, beliefs, values etc) influenced my decision making?

- What external factors influenced my decision making?

- What sources of knowledge influenced my decision making?

- What sources of knowledge should have or could have influenced my decision making?

- Could I have dealt better with the situation? What other choices did I have?

- What would be the consequences of these choices? How do I now feel about this experience?

- How have I made sense of this experience in the light of past experience and my future practice?

- How has this experience changed my ways of knowing:

    - my internal beliefs/my thoughts/ my knowledge
    - my outward behaviours/actions
    - my ethical/value base

Remember….

Practitioners who are more procedurally driven tend to have prescriptive and restrictive responses to practice situations and are less inclined to ask 'why' questions. Practitioners who use critical reflection are much more likely to focus on analysing, questioning and reconsidering what they did and why they did it with a view to learning and improving. They are much more aware of their role and how it impacts upon children and families.

Critical reflection is that ability to pause, to take a step back and ask yourself what you are thinking, why you are thinking it, what you are doing, why you are doing it, what are other ways of thinking and doing. It is about being open to other perspectives, new information, taking a wider view and making changes to develop your practice to improve children's outcomes.

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