



Supervising family and  
parenting workers:  
**a short guide**

Honor Rhodes

RESEARCH & POLICY FOR THE REAL WORLD

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## About the author

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# Supervising family and parenting workers: **a short guide**

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## Who this guide is for

This short guide has been written with both new and experienced managers in mind. We know that effective work with parents and families only flourishes when the workers undertaking that complex and often difficult work are looked after well, and that supervision is one of the best ways of achieving this. Safe and good supervision provides a time when workers can tell (and show) their supervisor or manager some of the problems and dilemmas that they are encountering, seek help in applying good practical research to an issue or think creatively about other ways to help parents and families change.

This guide is a companion to the book published in 2007 for those working with troubled families. Both are downloadable free from the Family and Parenting Institute website as are the Briefing Sheets that support them.

This guide focuses on agencies where managers are striving to fulfil the accountability function, performance and appraisal issues, together with the much harder task of helping workers manage themselves and the family work they are engaged in.

Managers are often the group of workers who are so busy with a multiplicity of tasks that their own training and development needs get pushed to one side: don't let that happen to you. If you are going to be engaging in supervision of areas of work that are new to you then you need training and support yourself to be as effective as you can be.

Many managers undertake formal management training; this short guide is not a replacement for such study, but a starting point for those new to the task or a refresher for those who have been working in these roles for some time.

It pays to remember just why we are doing this job in the first place sometimes, especially after a difficult meeting or a hard day. Most of us are doing this work because we want to, and because, ultimately, we believe that it makes a difference to the help troubled families get. Good containing management does make a difference and indeed, what you say and do, how you behave and what you consider important serves as a powerful learning tool for those for whom you are responsible.

***"I know that I need to leave my troubles by the door; my staff have too much else to be concerned with - if I distract them with my moods and annoyances it is just another thing they worry about."***

*It is why I have practised smiling at anyone who pokes their head around my door, even when I don't feel like it."*

Hamid, Housing Manager responsible for the ASB Team

## How to help families in trouble: a short guide

This companion guide is available at [www.familyandparenting.org/publications](http://www.familyandparenting.org/publications)

To complement *How to help families in trouble* there is a set of free downloadable factsheets at [www.familyandparenting.org/publications](http://www.familyandparenting.org/publications) including:

- Assessment and tools to use: family trees and ecomaps
- Helping parents help their children to behave well: behaviours, star charts, rewards and discipline
- The art of making good referrals.

## What do we mean by parenting work? Thinking about families, difference and comprehension

One of the challenges for many supervisors is in the word 'parenting'. Many of us will have worked in the field of family work for a long time; we may have had a specific focus depending on our agency's role. Housing Managers have offered support and a line of accountability for their teams of workers engaged in resolving tenancy/family issues; schools have offered support to Home School Liaison workers, and health services have also been working within the family context for a long time as have their colleagues in children's social care, now Children's Trusts, and the voluntary sector.

We all have to acknowledge that the world has changed; the Government's emphasis on supporting every parent to be the best parent they can is demanding particular attention from anyone responsible for these services and their future development.

The role of the supervisor has not changed but what we have to attend to has. Some of the research that should underpin our workers' practice is new and potentially very challenging. The skills that workers acquire are also ones that we may not be familiar with; for example, the formalised Parenting Group work programmes and approaches promoted by Government as effective interventions (have a look at the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners' website for more details and some interesting research – see

Practice Information, overleaf). Workers may be having supervision from other people if they are involved in running these types of groups in order that an expert can check that the worker's practice remains 'true' to the programme's manual to ensure maximum effectiveness. As managers and supervisors we need to understand what aspects of the worker's performance we are properly responsible for and make sure we know how any other sort of supervision can be reviewed and remembered by the worker's 'home' agency.

The majority of managers do not share responsibility in this way. We are solely responsible for the worker's activities and hence we need to understand what they know (so that we can add other information), what they do (so that we can test whether the approach they are taking is likely to be the most useful) and what they are expecting to happen as a result of their intervention.

However we are working we will need always to be alert to the idea of 'difference'. It is often what troubles workers most. Examples of such difference which can confuse and worry workers might be a male worker offering support to a single parent mother; a black worker intervening in a white family's life; a very young worker being asked to advise a much older parent and so on. Because families come in all shapes, sizes and from the many communities that form our society, we have a crucial role in helping workers develop sensitive and thoughtful practice when confronted with families who are very different from those they have previously experienced.

We need to help workers think about their own beliefs and values, and then probe and challenge these when they are not helpful. We, as managers, need to have done that thinking, too, about our own beliefs and judgements, so that every family offered a service by our agencies is given the most helpful intervention, based on sound evidence rather than unexamined belief.

Helping our workers when faced with a family who are very different from themselves can be a time when a manager can suggest co-working as a useful way of helping a worker make better sense of what is going on. Pairing workers allows both to learn and to teach each other and is an ideal way of helping the most distressing families, who can easily defeat a single worker.

*"Because Lara is both very experienced and a real expert in working with families where there are teenagers in trouble, the pair of them made a real difference. Shahid is new in post but has the advantage of being able to frame the work in the context of a Muslim family, he changed the way Lara worked as much as she got him to be more assertive and clear about what needed to*

*change. Yes, I knew I was doubling the resource we were using but I reckon we got there more than twice as fast, so I was happy!"*

Sheena, Youth In Need Service Manager

### **Practice Information:**

National Academy for Parenting Practitioners: [www.parentingacademy.org](http://www.parentingacademy.org)

Fatima Husain, *Cultural Competence in Family Support - A Toolkit for working with Black, Minority Ethnic and Faith Families*. Family and Parenting Institute 2005, revised edition 2007.

### **What is supervision? And what is it for? Differences between types of supervision**

*"Supervision is, in principle at least, a process through which an organisation seeks to meet its objectives through empowering its staff." (Thompson, 2005)*

Supervision serves several overlapping functions which is why it is one of the most useful activities an organisation concerned with human relationships can undertake. It holds the worker to account and, through the manager, the whole organisation. It develops staff and enables them to do more, with better and more reliable outcomes. It can add a real evidence base to practice and we can evaluate what we do, how we do it and what works best for whom through the mechanism of supervision.

For workers though, supervision is a place where they can come to work on difficulties they are experiencing, a place to reflect on what has not gone so well and a chance to show a manager how well they are doing.

*"Reflection is good in itself, not just when things are difficult. I tend to explain it by using phrases like sharing thinking and ideas, considering different perspectives, looking at new meanings and, crucially, generating ideas. I think that supervision is about a relationship, not just a place, time and a process. This relationship needs to be 'safe' in terms of a process of building mutual respect, trust and collaboration. Just to make it that bit more challenging, I also think that big issues like authority, knowledge, power and differences should be acknowledged from the outset so that we don't get tripped up by them later."*

Sarah, Children's Network Coordinator

Safe, 'protected' time is what we all need. This short guide seeks to help managers give just that to the staff and volunteers they are responsible for.

Some agencies use peer and group supervision; sometimes you will find yourself supervising someone down the end of a 'phone (or by email). These types of supervision are explored later.

Other agencies have decided to purchase 'clinical' supervision for staff, leaving a team manager or centre leader with the task of managing performance. The issue here is how the agency's manager knows enough about what is being discussed in clinical supervision, how risk is being considered and how agency practice is being followed. It works well for many agencies and there are numerous articles and books about it.

Neil Thompson, *Understanding Social Work: Preparing for Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan; 2nd revised edition, April 2005.

John Driscoll, *Practising Clinical Supervision: A Reflective Approach*. Bailliere Tindall, 2000.

Carol A. Falender (ed) and Edward P. Shafranske (ed), *Casebook for Clinical Supervision: A Competency-based Approach*. American Psychological Association; 1st edition, 2008.

Carlton E. Munson, *Handbook of Clinical Social Work Supervision*. Haworth Press Inc; 3rd edition, 2001.

### **What is not supervision?**

A conversation in a corridor is not supervision, we are all probably wise enough to know that and yet we can find ourselves doing it more often than we'd like. Whilst it can resolve a problem quickly for a worker, it can go unremembered and unaccounted for when we come to review the work. It is worth the trouble of jotting down the gist of the conversation in a running file so that when you and the worker next meet for supervision you can refer to it and it becomes part of the supervision proper. It is often these 'corridor' conversations that generate activity and a change in the worker's work plan with the family, as you are usually being asked to help in a crisis or difficulty.

The same thing can happen in a meeting on a different topic: the worker tells you something about a family that you need to respond to - make a short note about this too and then it won't get lost amidst the welter of information you are having to manage every day.

*"I just make a mental note when a worker grabs me to see if there is a pattern to it; it makes me wonder about what is not being contained by me, and the worker, in supervision. Haven't we all had workers who always seem to find us just as we are leaving at the end of the day or in a rush to go to a meeting!"*

Mehmet, Family Housing Manager

### **Practice Suggestion:**

Keep a notebook with pages specifically allocated for each worker to record issues that have emerged outside supervision and bring these into the supervision session - workers are usually amazed at your power of recall!

### **Safe and excellent practice**

It is one of the overlooked features of supervision that it provides agencies with the most certain way of ensuring 'good enough' practice, and sadly, its absence is usually noticed as a key feature in an agency crisis or tragedy, like the death or serious injury of a child. By offering regular, sufficient supervision to the workers for whom you are responsible you are making a vital contribution. It is your attention to the details, your experience and understanding that help workers continue with 'hard cases' and learn to manage risks.

*"I did sometimes feel it can get a bit humdrum, I looked at my diary and could see that I'd be supervising some workers every Tuesday from here until I chose to leave. I wanted to make it as regular and consistent as it needs to be for them but it made me want to scream... I have played about with spreading it across different days but have decided that, for me, a supervision day sort of works best. It was only when I asked for, and got, regular supervision for myself that I felt better able to listen and be as interested as I needed to be to make it valuable for the team; that, and being more focused on what changes we were making for the families."*

Tony, Children's Centre Manager

### **Practice Suggestion:**

If you are feeling a bit stale and overwhelmed by all the supervising you do, introduce a new element: insist on being shown the family's geneogram or family tree, draw an ecomap of the family with the worker and see what new questions these tools suggest to you.

## **Planning, starting and ending**

Just as workers need to plan their work with families, it helps to plan supervision sessions. When you take on a new worker this is an ideal time to start a disciplined approach. If they are in the planning and preparation phase of work then your supervision should reflect that; if they are nervous and anxious, a session devoted to 'starting work' will be one of the most helpful things you can do. Calm listening and thoughtful direction setting are the two things that workers value most.

*"She just listens, only asks a few questions, and then she is just quiet for a time. It felt really strange as I'd expected she'd say do this and do that, I hoped she give me a shopping list of stuff to do. It was me who had to say 'I think I'll contact the Dad', I ought to talk about the dogs and then I'll use some time to see how the Mum is feeling. After I got over feeling a bit narked I realised she was helping me think for myself and then I discovered that I can do this with the families I meet; my quiet time helps them find out what it is they want and need to do. I suspect they get narked too, I just hope it as useful for them as it is for me."*

Eva, Parenting Support Worker, Local Authority Housing Team

How we end an individual supervision session matters, just as how workers end sessions with families can have a tremendous effect on the family's ability to use what they have discussed between sessions or not.

For workers it is usually sensible to start the session by agreeing the time you both have available, whether that is 30 minutes or an hour. You will also have experienced the 'last thing before I go' rule which is the hard issue the worker wants to leave you with as they go out of the door; not intentionally, of course, but because it is a painful conversation they would rather avoid or something that they are finding difficult to express – a conflict, an anxiety or a concern that is hard to articulate.

By reminding people that they have 10 minutes more and whether there is something pressing they need to talk about, you are giving them a choice to talk about the hidden issues. Unless it is a real crisis issue you are also giving yourself a choice about whether you deal with it then and there or make a note of it to act on first the next time you meet, and explain that this is what you are doing to the worker involved. Being able to 'hold on' to difficult things between sessions is the mark of a good manager but don't hold on to too much otherwise you just end up feeling overwhelmed. If it needs to be dealt with, deal with it; otherwise note it and return.

*“She’ll say things like, ‘We left the Jones family with a problem last time didn’t we? Tell me what happened and what do we need to think about today?’ She always reminds me where we left off which is comforting given she has so many other people’s cases to think about too.”*

Asma, Family Action Valuing Families Project, Leicestershire

### **Practice Suggestion:**

Avoid the ‘just one thing before we finish’ problem by managing the time effectively.

### **What are the elements of parenting work that challenge workers and their supervisors?**

The one thing that challenges us all is working when we are afraid. Whilst it might seem ridiculously obvious to suggest this, the truth of the matter is that acute anxiety is not conducive to the sensible, sensitive and well-ordered thinking that is required from managers. If we are really honest, we can recognise a feeling of anxiety in the face of a frightening situation, which is a proper reaction, but we can also be fear-filled when faced with circumstances about which we know little or nothing; then our biggest trouble is ignorance.

The role of the supervisor here is hugely important; how we manage ourselves in such situations gives workers a clue as to how to manage themselves.

Faced with a very new situation it is usually helpful to be clear that this is, indeed, new to us and that the right thing to do here is to either talk to someone who knows about it or do a quick knowledge search. This is the point at which to use your computer like the door to the largest library in the world rather than a super-typewriter. Bookmark helpful sites as you find them using ‘Favourites’ with very clear categories and this will save you time when you want to search later.

*“Neither of us had a clue as to the nature of the Mum’s condition. I had a feeling that it was a long- term degenerative illness and that would complicate matters and if so we’d need to be planning for a different sort of work and referral on, I was interested that Danny (the worker) had not asked the mother about it or done any research. I googled it in the session and we then had something both very concrete but also incredibly painful to talk about. I could*

*entirely see why he hadn’t wanted to know but I felt that neither of us had the luxury of ignorance any more. It made me feel very hardnosed. I don’t think I am but I do need my workers to plan using reality rather than a hopeful fiction.”*

Nadira, Safeguarding Manager, Children’s Trust

The most challenging element of our work, whatever agency we undertake it in, is the weighing of risk, usually a consideration as to the safety of a child, a vulnerable adult or worker and sometimes a combination of all three. What it pays to know here is what you must do: when presented with a crisis it is not the time to re-invent a wheel. Know your agency’s safeguarding procedures, know where to find them, know that they are up to date and know who to call to talk things through with if you need to.

One of the most useful things we can do as managers on occasion is to ‘walk the walk’, so when the need arises do that joint visit with the worker. They can see how you operate and going as a ‘pair’ can be helpful, one of you can lead the conversation and give the difficult messages whilst the other acts as an observer and a supporter. It gives us the chance also to see the worker and assess their level of skill and knowledge.

What is important here is a good de-brief afterwards. The worker may feel extra vulnerable having had you observe their practice; feed back both the good and the not so good carefully. It is useful to say things like, *“I liked the way you reminded the mother of her agreement to make sure the children went to school every day, but the conversation about the playground incident looked a bit difficult. What would you do differently next time?”* This can help workers reflect on their practice and do some better anticipatory planning without feeling crushed and defeated.

We all learn best from our own experiences especially when we are helped to analyse what went well and what needed more attention. That is the manager’s role, less in telling and more in helping workers to discover for themselves what is going on and what they can do about it, now and when faced with similar situations in future.

### **Practice Suggestion:**

Start a helpful research sites folder in ‘Favourites’ and add web pages as you browse. Have a look at sites like Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) at [www.scie.org.uk](http://www.scie.org.uk), Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk) and Research Into Practice at [www.rip.org.uk](http://www.rip.org.uk)

### Practice Suggestion:

Locate your copy of the appropriate Children's Safeguarding Manual. Did you find it easily? Is it up to date?

Check that you know what to do out of normal office hours.

### Practice Suggestion:

It is sensible to ensure that workers keep a Training and Development Needs Log which can be used to plan how these needs will be addressed. After a session where you have observed the worker in action you may want to make additional training or professional development suggestions.

## Understanding agency roles, responsibilities and systems

One of the areas of most painful conflict for workers is not actually with families and parents themselves, but with other agencies with whom they are working.

Our own agency setting is something we need to think long and hard about. As a manager you will meet workers who are profoundly angry, not with a family but with another agency, perhaps a GP or the children's school. The strength of these feelings can be surprising and our job as managers is to help colleagues work out where they came from.

Managers know, having seen it many times before, that workers (and ourselves) can have feelings 'put inside' them or 'projected' by families they work with. The worker will need your help in understanding that and realising that, indeed, it can be helpful; giving them an insight into the world of the family they are working with. What they really need your help with is not to act upon those feelings without understanding what they are and where they came from. Help workers ask questions of themselves like, *"that's interesting, why am I feeling so angry with the school/sad about the couple's separation/mad at that stupid doctor?"*

Rather than getting sucked into a welter of emotions and feeling moved to phone up or fire off a fierce email in defence of your worker, consider your response also. We can easily escalate problems and, as agencies, get involved to protect our workers whilst none of us has time to notice that the emotions came from the family for whom we are all working. None of this is conscious, which makes it all the harder to spot and all the more necessary that we have some thinking time before we decide that the school secretary deserves an earful for sending the children home or a housing officer should be reported to their manager for a lack of co-operation.

Take a moment to think about the last time your agency got involved in a battle with another one. Be honest, it was probably concerning a family whose powerful feelings had spread like flu across the system and acted on individuals and agencies in ways that they did not recognise but were unhelpful.

Families in trouble lead complicated emotional lives; their feelings do affect us and can lead workers to either get far too close (a sort of co-opted friend), or get angry on their behalf, or get angry and punishing towards them. None of these reactions is rational and, indeed, when you point them out - however gently - you will find yourself being resisted, but continue the challenge and help the worker identify their unusual behaviours and reflect upon them more. This is the point where the difference between the idea of what the agency should do and the reality of working with families can be most pronounced. Workers will need your help in bridging the gap.

Agency battles are inevitable but by maintaining a calm tone, an undefensive manner, a clear view of what you can lawfully offer and what you must do in the light of the information you have you stand a greater chance of persuading other agencies to meet your expectations in their work with families.

*"I take a deep breath, sit back in my chair and listen hard to my tone of voice. When I get a bit cross my voice gets a bit higher and I can easily sound more combative than I feel; when I am really angry I end up squawking so I really don't want to get to that pitch. It is always, always about money, money and resources, who can't do what because they haven't got a worker and things like that... I try and get my offer in early and use that as a reminder that we can all collaborate. No, it isn't easy but when it works it really produces a benefit."*

Ade, Family Intervention Project Manager

Workers have to learn that families are complex systems; managers have to remember that agencies working with families are an even more complicated system. It can help to map them all out so you can see where the overlaps (turf wars) and gaps (no agency taking responsibility) are and then think again about what needs to be done. As managers we have greater access to key strategic groups where such inter-agency battles can be fought more appropriately than by a worker on a family's behalf. It also pays us to remember that the workers we manage may have high hopes that we will take the battles on and 'win'. Our thoughtful decisions to take the

disagreement to a multi-agency forum can be seen as disappointing to a worker who was usually hoping that we would ride in on their behalf like a knight on a charger. We have to resist their desire to make us omnipotent however seductive that might be.

In the longer term what we know is that it is relationships between individuals in agencies that produce good inter-agency working which means that we must pick our battles carefully and always with the best outcomes for families in mind.

*"I could have fought it but firstly I wasn't sure I'd win and secondly a big row about who said what to whom was going to go precisely nowhere, and I've spent a long time cultivating relationships with my colleagues in the YOT so in the end we agreed to disagree which made my worker angry but I was better able to tolerate that knowing that I was right to do so. The joys of management, eh, the compromises and sleights of hand."*

Tammy, Senior Education Social Worker

### Further reading

A. Obholzer and V. Zagier Roberts (eds) *The Unconscious at Work. Individual and Organizational Stress in the Human Services*. Routledge, 1994.

C. Huffington, D. Armstrong, W. Halton, L. Hoyle and J. Pooley (eds) *Working Below the Surface. The Emotional Life of Contemporary Organizations*. Karnac, 2004.

### Practice Suggestion:

Use an ecomap to help locate the family in the multi-agency context.

See the downloadable briefing sheet for *How to help families in trouble* at [www.familyandparenting.org/publications](http://www.familyandparenting.org/publications)

Assessment and tools to use: family trees and ecomaps.

### What are the skills managers need to be successful supervisors of parenting work?

The skills we need as managers are those we need to be effective workers: listening, critical thinking, analysis, case planning and using research, to name but a few.

What we need more of as managers is excellent self-regulation and a deep insight into the emotional world of the workers we are managing. We can't do it all the time, but this is the 'gold standard' we should be holding in mind. The ability to manage ourselves and our responses means that we can be reliable and trusted as supervisors. We earn the trust placed in us so that we can ask probing and sometimes really uncomfortable questions, and suggest equally challenging courses of action. The building of a supervisor-supervisee relationship is very like that of building a relationship with a family; the same rules apply, going at the worker's pace wherever you can, using a contract for clarity of purpose and to resolve disputes and the ability to bear 'not being liked' on occasions when we need to confront and help the worker change.

Of all our many skills it is usually the active listening that is the most influential and the one we find hardest to offer when we are pressed for time and have many other things weighing on us. It is the one skill we can, all of us, always improve upon: just by listening to yourself listen you can discover when you indicate you've heard enough by a gesture or a sound. This may be appropriate; you may indeed have heard enough to need to test out the idea that has formed in your mind or on the other hand you may be bored, anxious about something else or just wanting to get a move on - it happens to us all. The question we need to ask ourselves at these points though is, 'Why now?', what is it that the worker is evoking in you; is it something from the family that is being brought into the room; is the worker showing you how bored and frustrated they are with the family? This can feel like an endless set of reflecting mirrors but a helpful supervisor will look at the reflections and pick out from the images the ones that are going to help the worker most. You may find a clue in the language a worker is using that gives you the handle on a family, or in their body language.

*"She is normally quite a loud person but in this session her voice was dropping and I found myself struggling to hear. I sort of gave up - if she wasn't making it easy for me then I was going to think about something else and then I heard her describe the girl's boyfriend as very, very, very aggressive. It was the triple 'very' that made me jump back into it all; that is not her style at all, that coupled with the near whispering made me think that she might have been very frightened when she met this man unexpectedly at the girl's house. We talked about all of that and she was surprised to find herself talking about her emotional response. I wasn't so surprised at all; she's told me by showing me in a way."*

Irene, Outreach and Family Support Manager

### Practice Suggestion:

Build a mental map of the workers you supervise, add details as you find them. This will help you identify thematic difficulties (the worker who finds it hard to recognise change, the one who finds couple conflicts nearly too hard to bear and the other whose peacekeeping looks a bit too like appeasement for your liking). This helps us check and think harder about issues they present and, even more importantly perhaps the issues they are not bringing to supervision.

### What are the tools managers need to be successful supervisors of parenting work?

Apart from active and acute listening, managers need to use the skills they want their workers to demonstrate every day in their work, so being organised and prepared is important. It is often hard to find the time to be as prepared as we would like to and it is supervision sessions that can get squeezed, because they are internal meetings with colleagues. We often arrive under-prepared, not having had time to recollect the previous conversations, to look through notes and to consider how we are working in appraisal issues too. Even if you can give yourself just three minutes to review and prepare, you will find yourself saving a lot of time in the session itself and helping the worker feel that previous conversations have registered with you.

Another key skill, of course, is knowing what questions to ask, how and when. Workers often expect their manager to 'know all the answers' particularly those new in post. It helps to explain that the supervision conversation is a dialogue, with questions from both sides. The manager is not in the room with the worker when they meet the family so they need to know not only what was said and done but to help the worker consider their relationship with family - how the worker felt before, during and after the session - as this helps the manager form the best picture they can of the work. 'Triangular' questions can help if you feel the worker is getting stuck: something like, *"What would Yusuf, the eldest boy, say about the session if I asked him?"*

What managers have and need to use to their advantage is the position they hold as an 'overseer', together with a degree of emotional objectivity. We are able to see the family and the worker as a system; our questions need to relate to that to be most helpful. When the worker is in the room with the family, the tool they have to use is the relationship they build with the family. By helping the worker focus on this we are helping them make the changes they, and often the family, desire to happen.

Workers need our support when they realise, with our help, that the only behaviours they can reliably change are their own and by making changes in how they think about and act with a family the system changes with them. This is one of the hardest parts of family and parenting practice for workers to grasp and one of the most anxiety-provoking. It is here that a supervisor makes a difference. By shifting workers' perceptions from feeling persecuted by families, or from being co-opted as a friend, we help them become more effective.

We have to remember, though, that the changes we are suggesting mean that the worker, inevitably, relinquishes something: resistance to a new idea or position from you will tell you something about the worker's strength of attachment to their previously held viewpoint. All we can and should do is to carry on, continuing with our suggestions and offering appropriate explanations. We may not see immediate change in the room but it is often in the next session that the worker shows you they have both thought about and acted on the supervision conversation you had with them.

An under-used skill is praise giving. We intend to do so but it can get lost in the maelstrom of a session. Decide that you are going to use authentic praise and regard in session and do it just to see what happens. This will be a skill the worker will be helping parents use, particularly if they have undertaken the formalised parenting programme training. It is therefore all the more important that we understand its 'currency' and use it ourselves. Truly, we can all of us never be thanked enough for the hard and emotionally laborious work we do, it just requires someone to start the praise giving and that is one of the important things that a manager can do. Praise is particularly helpful as a way of underlining the behaviours we want to see more of: *"I do like the way your records are clearly showing how the work plan is going"*, or *"Your being on time and prepared is something about you that I really admire"*. It does need to be authentic; we humans are very sensitive to falsity so use it with care, but do use it.

### Practice Suggestion:

A family therapy teacher once suggested that there really were only three questions that needed to be asked: *Why now? What for? and Why Worry?* See if they work for you.

### Supervision in difficult circumstances

Helping workers in crisis is a key skill of any manager. What we have to do, however hard, is to be as calm as we can be whilst undertaking any form of

risk assessment. What makes it harder for us is that we are at one remove. We must both use the worker's intelligence about the family but bear in mind also their 'blind spots' that we know from supervision. Whilst not wanting to advocate the 'rule of optimism' (things will be all right) it is sensible just to try out the thought about what would happen if you did decide to do nothing. Usually we do try and do something: the issue is that in a crisis, with thinking clouded by anxiety, we can pick the least helpful thing with long-term damaging consequences.

Talk with the worker about the range of options open and the risks and benefits of each. Accept that in most cases the final decision will be yours, that is what you are being paid for but you are using the worker as colleague to think through the process. Crises in family and parenting work come in all shapes and sizes: for the families that are really troubling we usually have a multi-agency system on which to call; use it to check your thinking and to get up-to-date information on the family.

We can and should prepare for a crisis. At regular intervals in the work we should check out with the worker any contingency plans we make: *"If she does need to go into hospital is the carer really ready for the children?"* or *"If they do say that Lennie can't come home after an incident in the police station what is our plan?"* It is the manager's job to help the worker think about crises and general emergencies for all their cases. It is easiest to do this when things are relatively calm and once a worker has been encouraged to use this discipline they learn to do it across all their cases.

## Using telephone supervision

Occasionally you will find yourself supervising someone at the end of a telephone; perhaps this is not ideal in a crisis, but it happens. We just have to have the same discipline as we would if we were in a room together: a logical sequence of questions, a clear checking back that you have properly understood what is being said by the worker and a mutually agreed action list.

The conversation needs to be clearly recorded for the file and workers need a manager to check with them, preferably on the same day, that whatever was needed has happened. This 'punctuation' is important and makes workers feel more secure in their practice and confident in your confidence in them.

Experienced supervisors indicate that much can be accomplished in a short telephone supervision session; the manager and worker feeling less constrained by each other's physical presence in the room with more opportunities to check that issues have been understood. Here the manager

will be considering information on the worker's tone of voice, the pauses they leave, and the words they use to describe situations and emotions. This type of information may be absorbed unconsciously when a worker is in the room with us; the telephone forces us to attend to it in a much more dynamic way. Try it and see for yourself.

## Telephone and email supervision as a matter of general practice

Some managers need to use supervision over the telephone as a means of offering regular supervision, perhaps because the worker is off site most of the time. This is perfectly acceptable but requires of both parties to understand what is required of them and to write the issues into the supervision agreement they create together.

Telephone supervision should take place at a regular time. Both people need to be in a comfortable place with easy access to writing materials, both should avoid having a computer nearby unless by mutual agreement you are going to look at emails and documents at the same time. The supervisor here needs self-discipline to concentrate only on the conversation at hand and not to take the opportunity to tidy their desk, water the plants or do a spot of filing. We would not do this if the person was in the room with us and such tasks, small and trivial though they may be, detract from our complete concentration and are detected by our supervisee.

As a telephone supervisor you may find yourself listening harder and being more ready to challenge a worker's perceptions or plans of action. You may also find it places you at a healthy 'remove' from the problems being discussed and so we may be less tempted to involve ourselves in the work than if the worker were in the room with us.

The supervision must be recorded as any other 'in the room' session would be. Many telephone supervisors send an email soon after the session with the key points and agreements; this is then followed later by a fuller digest of the session.

Some supervisors are experimenting with email supervision. This would work where both sides are fast typists, where a worker can write lucidly about issues and a manager can respond with equal clarity on the issues and questions raised.

I would suggest that for the particular types of family and parenting work we are considering here and the dilemmas and risks we face within it,

e-supervision and to some extent tele-supervision are not ideal. They can be used if they are the only opportunities available, on occasion, but not as the sole mechanism for supporting workers and holding them to account.

Really good management is about intelligent sympathy, doing what workers need, rather than want, us to do, and indeed, what we would like to have done for us, even if it is at some cost to ourselves.

### **Practice Suggestion:**

Review all the cases and consider contingency plans for each; make sure that they are noted on the file in case both you and the worker are unavailable.

*Guides For Working With A Coach Or Supervisor* (adapted from Vital Kit in 'Vital Practice'), 2004, see further Sheila Ryan at Sea Change: [www.seachangeuk.com](http://www.seachangeuk.com)

### **Using supervision contracts**

Just as some of the most successful family work is based on an agreed and equitable contract, so good supervision flows well if the rules are agreed in advance, and that is what a supervision contract or agreement does. By organising a conversation about expectations on both sides you can understand from the worker what style of management is going to suit them best, and they can understand what their agency and you expect from them. Ultimately it is not the piece of paper that you create together that counts but the process that you both undertake to get it written. What does not work as well is using a generic template that you both read and sign. Use a template, but adapt and personalise it to make it relevant and real for you both. There are lots of examples available and FPI has consolidated these as a Briefing Sheet to act as starting point if you'd like to use it.

FPI Briefing Sheet *Template for Supervision Agreements* (downloadable resource at [www.familyandparenting.org/publications](http://www.familyandparenting.org/publications)).

### **Recording supervision, agency requirements and professional needs**

Your agency will have clear expectations about how, where and when work is recorded. Our job as managers is to help workers comply with these requirements and, better still, understand why these are in place.

*"I explain why I need people to write work up when I supervise them, and remind them of the functions as we go along. Aside,*

*of course, from the accountability, planning, reviewing, evaluation parts of it, in my experience this is the place for workers to pull together their thinking of what they have observed, see patterns and show their reasoning. No one likes it but I try and make it make sense rather than being a weight of bureaucracy."*

Dora, Children's Centre Manager

Writing up of work is universally loathed; it is time consuming and can easily get left as 'real' work with 'real people' takes a necessary priority. The trick is to make sure workers are not getting overwhelmed and we can do this by regular review of files and computer held records. Knowing that your supervisor will be looking at the record is a useful motivator for most workers. It is interesting to note that some families' records are rarely up to date, perhaps because there is a great deal of activity or because it is a family where a worker finds it hard to process the information in a way that allows for recording. Here we need to help workers think about how and when they record. Perhaps this is a family where a changes chart, re-worked family tree or other more pictorial record might be useful.

In all of this process-driven work it is easy to overlook critical elements; for example, a clear focus on any child or children in the family. A supervisor should always ask about children in a family at every supervision. The focus of work may well be through the parents and helping them change their behaviours so that a worker can forget to 'hold the child in mind'. One of the most important things we can do as managers is to train ourselves to always remember the vulnerability of children and demand from our workers that attention is paid to them throughout the course of the work.

### **Practice Suggestion:**

Talk to workers about the wellbeing of children in a family at every supervision meeting, and then on one planned occasion choose not to and see if they give you the information unaided; in this way you can test how child-focused their practice is.

### **Practice Suggestion**

A changes chart is simply a series of sequential boxes in which the worker tries to capture the most significant events in a family's life. This tool helps with finding patterns so you can better predict outcomes and interventions that are most likely to make a significant, helpful change.

## Resolving problems: in the work; in the relationship; helping workers who feel stuck, frightened, bored or overwhelmed

One of the problems supervisors contend with regularly is a worker with a difficulty in engaging a family or feeling very stuck and miserable about the way the work is going. The particular challenge for the supervisor is to enable change to happen but at one remove, helping a worker reframe their work so that change occurs. This is the point where we have to resist the temptation to weigh in with our years of practice experience and knowledge; this can simply overwhelm the worker who is already feeling unskilful and anxious. Offer them help and support in making a change. Perhaps some training or development through co-working will 'unstick' them but most often it happens in supervision with someone like you. Have some relevant research to offer them and time to listen to the feelings the family evokes, what this means for the worker and what they have tried already. Think with the worker about the stage their work has arrived at. Are they still in the foothills of the 'beginnings', stuck in a slough of despond in the 'middle' or finding the 'ending' difficult? What we might choose to offer them will vary according to the pace and intention of the work.

Sometimes the family's difficulties spill over into the supervisor-supervisee relationship and sometimes that relationship is already difficult without adding extra dilemmas. The plain truth is that we will all have supervised, are supervising or will supervise someone whom we find difficult. What we need to do in these circumstances is acknowledge to ourselves that this is so, rather than not think about the issues and hence be less prepared than we should be to circumnavigate the problems as they arise.

The power dynamic of the relationship can be painful for some workers who find it difficult to deal with the supervisor's clear role as scrutiniser or challenger, or the fact that they are being supervised by someone younger than themselves or of the opposite gender or a different ethnicity. Where these differences cause difficulties they are best talked about and not just once but regularly to prevent them obscuring work that needs to be done. These, whilst painful, are issues where nothing can be changed: you can't change gender, become older or a white person but you can help the worker reflect and start thinking differently. This is all the more important if you think that these issues of difference might also affect their work.

It also helps to remember that we will all be influenced by earlier experiences, both of supervision and of other, often family relationships and inevitably

these come with us into the room. We just have to be knowing enough to avoid allowing them to obstruct us.

The really troubling relationships are those where you can't quite tell what is going wrong:

*"It was strange from the start; I just found her hard going. She was late for sessions, forgot what she had agreed to do, was reluctant to talk in any detail about cases where I did want to have a closer view. I found myself losing all humour and becoming very demanding, not my style at all. I tried to talk about the issues with her and she just flatly denied there was a problem. I found myself acting covertly, checking her cases when she was out and then I thought this is nonsense. I put it to her straight that it wasn't working and she then told me that was what her previous manager had said to her as well. I could have left it but rather than just go away thinking it was her fault for being unmanageable I did some hard thinking and started to change the way I behaved: I asked her opinion more, I tried to treat her as a valuable colleague. It has changed; we are not out of the woods yet but I can trust her and I know I have a decent enough overview of her work."*

Tina, Children's Centre Manager

In circumstances where you feel it is just not working out between you and a supervisee then seek help from your own manager, and don't leave it too long, as feeling undermined and uncertain in one relationship can affect others and it will probably take up a disproportionate amount of your time in 'worry work' whilst generally making you feel less effective. Whilst you are being paid to be a manager, you are not required to do everything all the time. Protect yourself and your own wellbeing by asking for and getting help when you need it.

### Practice Suggestion:

The FPI Guide *How to help families in trouble* has a section on what works with families who make workers feel anxious, frustrated and bored: see [www.familyandparenting.org/publications](http://www.familyandparenting.org/publications)

### Practice Suggestion:

Do you have a supervision agreement with your own manager? If not, work on one so you can have an agreement in place about the support and help you need (and deserve).

## Helping workers to ask difficult questions

Just as you have to ask hard questions of workers on occasion, so workers need our help in asking them of families and giving hard messages. One of the most useful ways of helping our staff is to ask them to role-play the session they need to have and practise the tone of voice and the language they need to use. Even the most proficient worker can find themselves 'softening' a hard thing to say, by smiling as they say it, which confuses families as to whether it is really meant or not. Workers can resist doing this sort of work with you. Sadly, this usually means they need your help all the more. Persist and make an offer of ideas yourself: *"I wonder if saying something like – 'We had an agreement that the children would be in bed by 8pm, it isn't working, is it, and I've noticed that the shouting is starting again'".* The worker can then try out that script and see if it works for them and how they can improve upon it.

When we know our workers are going to undertake a difficult meeting with a family then that is the time to be available for them afterwards and analyse how the session went, what they thought they did well and what they could have done differently. A manager who acts in such a thoughtful and considered way is one who truly understands the job.

## Helping workers to be most effective: how can we know how good we are?

All our endeavours have a single end in view: helping our staff be as useful as they can be to parents and families in distress and trouble. Whilst we all have strengths and weaknesses, it is the manager's role to bolster, support, cajole, convince and lead staff to be as good as they can be in this common purpose.

One of the ways we do this is by asking workers how effective they are being in the work they do. Many just don't seem to know, some are modest and some have a different perception of their excellence from yours. We can use standardised measuring tools to help us know that what we do is making a positive difference. Many agencies are using simple questionnaires before work starts and at the end so as to measure the effect of the interventions they make. A simple tool to use is the Goodman Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire but there are many more. If your agency is not using such measuring devices then talk the idea through in your management team and your agency generally.

## Practice Suggestion:

If you do not currently use any measuring tools have a look at the *Goodman Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* and see if it would work in your agency. There are others so ask FPI for help if you'd like to be directed to them.

[www.sdqinfo.com/b1.html](http://www.sdqinfo.com/b1.html)

## Group, peer and 'live' supervision

One way we can get a real sense of what workers are really good at and what less so is through a pair or group supervision session. Some supervisors use groups all the time. Whilst it does cut down on the time spent in face-to-face supervision, there are challenges of course, not least in managing the complicated group dynamics that are an inevitable consequence of bringing people together to talk about human issues and problems. If you are interested in group supervision, then this is a fascinating area for your own development and learning.

Some agencies use 'peer' supervision: workers meeting together to offer each other support and reflect on dilemmas. The process is valuable and has a good evidence base for supporting learning; try it yourself with a colleague and if you are interested read some more about it and secure some training on supporting it.

'Live' supervision is just that: real time supervision taking place in the room with the family. Every supervisor should make a point of seeing how their workers actually work. Plainly a family has to agree to the idea; most are unusually receptive in that it gives them a confidence that the worker's agency is keenly interested in them. Families are often more accommodating to the idea than workers, who can find the process intimidating, but once you explain fluently the reasons for needing to see them at work then the reluctance, if not the anxiety, can be overcome. It is helpful to explain to the whole team at the same time this approach so that no one feels singled out for 'special' treatment.

Talk the session plan through before you go. Decide whether you are merely going to observe or at points intervene with suggestions. For new workers lots of support and little challenge is the best model in terms of their learning and confidence: for experienced practitioners the more considered challenges may be helpful. If you have not undertaken 'live' supervision before, then try it out first on yourself by asking your supervisor or a colleague to observe you at work in supervision and to give you feedback

afterwards. Whatever you are feeling about the process your workers will feel too, in vivid Technicolor, as for them it is happening in front of a family with whom they will need to continue working.

After the session with the family make sure you have time to meet with the worker to consider the issues. Acknowledge that their anxiety may have affected their performance, identify clearly the areas where you could see they did well, and offer some general feedback on the issues with which they struggled somewhat. Don't feel the need to go through each and every one then and there; you have other supervision sessions in which the issues can be more fully explored. One of the very helpful things that you can then do is to write a short note to the family thanking them for allowing you to observe the work, pointing to several things that the worker seemed to do well and the progress that they themselves have made with the worker. This allows the worker to talk through with the family what happened when you were in the room and some of the ideas you two have talked about since then that might be helpful for them.

Live supervision is an invaluable tool, but rarely used, perhaps because of the emotional complexities involved. With forethought, planning and a high degree of honesty you can make it one of the most illuminating tools you can use to help workers develop and change.

Brigid Proctor, *Group Supervision: A Guide to Creative Practice*, Second Edition, 2008, Sage Publications.

[www.peer-supervision.com/](http://www.peer-supervision.com/)

[www.salomonsclmd.org.uk/news/Free-Guide-Action-Learning-Sets-Peer-Supervision.php](http://www.salomonsclmd.org.uk/news/Free-Guide-Action-Learning-Sets-Peer-Supervision.php)

[www.shsu.edu/~piic/fall2005/esposito.html](http://www.shsu.edu/~piic/fall2005/esposito.html)

[www.cyc-net.org](http://www.cyc-net.org)

### **How do we know how effective we are as supervisors?**

It is important that we continue to improve our own supervision practice. One of the best and hardest ways is to ask those whom we supervise what they think. A general conversation can be helpful, perhaps when you come to review a supervision contract, but this seems to evoke one of two responses: those who like you suggest that your practice is excellent and those who find the process hard going suggest that it is deficient. Neither is helpful in terms of your own learning. If you really want to know be more scientific about it, use a questionnaire, administered anonymously to your team for the

most truthful results or, if you supervise just one or two people, accept that they may have to pull some of their punches but that the process will still give you things to think about and something to work on. We have supplied a questionnaire for use as a downloadable tool. It is helpful to undertake this type of activity at regular intervals, perhaps once a year just before a supervision agreement or review meeting so that you can see how you might be able to help your workers more.

The trick here is to be undefensive about the results. We all know that our practice is limited by the time and the emotional resources we have; we can never be 'perfect' supervisors and that is probably a good thing as we would daunt and overwhelm our staff. To see us struggle on occasions and to win through difficulties is more helpful.

Accept that the staff we supervise have a legitimate viewpoint and that they have useful things to say about our organisational skills and our ability to listen and communicate. In this way we are able to encourage them in the task of asking the families they work with how the work has seemed to them and hence improve their practice. There is equity and encouragement if the whole organisation is regularly asking itself how it is doing in the complicated tasks it sets itself.

### **Practice Suggestion:**

Ask your supervisees what is helpful about your supervision and what you could improve upon. Use this tool as a starting point:

FPI Briefing Sheet: *Supervisor Effectiveness Tool* (downloadable from [www.familyandparenting.org/publications](http://www.familyandparenting.org/publications)).

### **Supervision for supervisors**

Do you have regular, helpful supervision? If not, why? Are you assumed not to need it? Perhaps it looks at performance rather than having any emotional content? Perhaps it is just not as good as you would like? Whatever the reasons and circumstances it is clear that those who supervise others need to have a thoughtful and safe place themselves to talk things through. Most agencies accept this and you may want to argue the case for some external supportive supervision for yourself if no one in your organisation has the time or capacity to offer it themselves. The same rules apply as when workers have 'off line' supervision; it needs to be recorded, and linked with agency practice; issues identified need to be taken up within the agency and resolved; your manager needs to know what you are talking about and about any actions you are taking as a result of it.

Many supervisors are getting together across agencies for support in practice learning sets, a good example of both group and peer supervision. Find out if anyone in your local authority area is starting a group or start one yourself, with support. The Training/Development Unit within the Children's Trust would be a good place to start for information and direction.

[www.actionlearningsets.com/](http://www.actionlearningsets.com/)

## Finally, some other things to think about

Some managers choose to make sure supervision comes with tea and a biscuit. This can be helpful; we are showing that we are attending to workers' human needs. Some don't: whatever you do needs to fit with your personality and style of engagement. There is very little that is simply right or wrong, and it is comforting to remember that management is as much an art as a science.

What makes some managers special is the fact that they can bear to notice staff distress; they make themselves available to attend to it whatever else they have to do. This does not mean that their door is always open and that they are diverted from important tasks, it is just that they manage to do both in a way that satisfies agency demands and staff needs. A good manager is 'taking the temperature' of the team at regular intervals, asking people how they are in a way that allows the worker to really tell them rather than offering a smile and saying "Fine" because they don't want to be a bother or take up time.

Another skill that good managers have is the ability to remember birthdays, when people have booked leave, anniversaries and painful days, some of the doings of workers' families. Some managers make it look effortless and undertake the task without being intrusive or trying to be everybody's best friend. Whilst this is not 'supervision' in the sense that we have been talking about before, it is a part of the managerial role. Taking care of your workers collectively assists you in taking care within supervision; you are showing your trustworthiness and strength. What such managers get in return is a loyal team and one that feels cohesive and supportive, able to extend care giving to all members. Like every family, teams have their ups and downs but the manager's supportive role is obvious and all the more important for those of us engaged in family and parenting work.

With attention and thought we can all be better managers and a few of us will be lucky enough to be the sort of inspirational manager that people seek out to work with, and remember for ever, just like a good teacher, which is what we are.

Whatever we do, we just need to remember that each of us has a beating human heart; it is this that adds complexity and challenge. We bring into the room not only the family we want to talk about but our own family relationships and those of the supervisee. It is these refractions in the mirror that add the opportunities for change and growing in learning and skill. A good manager can look in the mirror and see the puzzle for what it is, helping the worker to a clearer view.

Whilst the glamour and the pain may seem to be in the direct work with families, workers are entitled to expect truly helpful understanding, and containment, from a manager standing behind them, providing comfort and enduring support.

## Further training and resources

A more orthodox overview of supervision can be found on the Children's Workforce Development Council's website, downloadable:

*Providing Effective Supervision from Skills for Care*  
[www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/providing-effective-supervision](http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/providing-effective-supervision)

A thoughtful and interesting view of the management task in the ever changing world of social care is:

Lynette Hughes and Paul Pengelly, *Staff supervision in a turbulent environment*. Jessica Kingsley, 1997.



This highly practical guide is for new and experienced managers. Effective work with parents and families only flourishes when those undertaking it are looked after well; and good supervision is one of the best ways of achieving this. This book covers key supervision techniques including:

- **safe and excellent practice**
- **planning**
- **the challenging elements of parenting work**
- **understanding agency roles and responsibilities**
- **difficult circumstances**
- **contracts**
- **resolving problems**
- **and much more.**

Managers are often so busy that their own training needs get pushed to one side. Yet good management and supervision skills should be a priority as they are essential for family workers to succeed in this complex and challenging field of work.

*Supervising family and parenting workers: a short guide* is a companion guide to *How to help families in trouble: a short guide* – available at [www.familyandparenting.org/publications](http://www.familyandparenting.org/publications)

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