

Supervising for Quality Child Welfare Practice

Supervisors play a critical role in the delivery of effective child welfare services. They are responsible for ensuring frontline caseworkers have the requisite knowledge, attitudes, and skills to engage children and families; assess family safety concerns as well as needs, strengths, and resources; make sound casework decisions; and develop and implement effective service plans. Supervisors also support agency functioning by translating and disseminating agency policies and procedures for staff and ensuring they are adhered to.

This bulletin presents an overview of child welfare supervision, including the domains of effective supervision and strategies and techniques supervisors can use to develop and support their staff. This bulletin is designed to provide new and seasoned child welfare supervisors and managers with tools and resources to strengthen supervisory capacity and skills.

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UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE SUPERVISION

Supervision is critical to shaping, supporting, and guiding child welfare practice (Bostock et al., 2019). It helps caseworkers turn their knowledge and skills into effective practice with families. There is an extensive body of research in the child welfare field linking effective supervisory practices to positive outcomes for staff, agencies, and children and families. For example, high-quality supervision can reduce employee stress (Collins-Camargo & Royse, 2010), increase staff retention (Kim & Kao, 2014), and improve the quality of direct practice with families (Bostock et al., 2019). Additionally, it can serve as a safeguard against stressful work conditions, provide protection from unreasonable job demands, offer emotional and social support during arduous times, and guide and support caseworkers as they navigate the challenges of the job and organization (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). Furthermore, positive relationships between supervisors and caseworkers serve as a model for how caseworkers should interact with their clients (Van Berckelaer, 2011).

To ensure effective supervision that strengthens the workforce and promotes quality services to families and children, it is critical that supervisors, caseworkers, and agency leadership make supervisory sessions with staff a priority and a vital part of the agency's culture. They should also ensure these sessions are regularly scheduled with protected time, informed by the clinical expertise of the supervisor, used to discuss cases and processes, and conducted with the intent to develop and enhance the skills and knowledge of the caseworkers.

SUPERVISORY DOMAINS

Supervisory responsibilities can be categorized into three overarching and complementary domains, which may, at times, overlap: administrative, educational, and supportive (National Association of Social Workers [NASW] & Association of Social Work Boards [ASWB], 2013; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). Each of these domains is critical to effective supervision, quality practice, and positive outcomes for families.

ADMINISTRATIVE

Administrative supervision is the implementation of managerial methods that enable caseworkers to provide efficient and effective services to their clients (NASW & ASWB, 2013). It includes tasks such as recruitment and retention of workers, monitoring and evaluating work, task assignment, and others (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). Under this domain, supervisors also [manage their staff's caseloads and workloads](#) in order to increase their ability to carry out their responsibilities and facilitate communication regarding the quality of caseworker practice. Additionally, supervisors are responsible for championing new practices, adopting new innovations, and enabling reform. Therefore, supervisors must be skilled at anticipating, addressing, and managing change within the agency as well as disseminating the changes to their staff.

EDUCATIONAL

Educational supervision, also referred to as clinical supervision, focuses on advancing the practice of caseworkers by helping them develop knowledge and skills they can apply to promote child and family safety and well-being. During educational work

with staff, supervisors can provide guidance to caseworkers if their practice is not consistent with ethical standards or evidence-based practices (Lietz, 2018). Additionally, supervisors can use educational supervision to encourage—and provide caseworkers with the time needed—to engage in self-reflection so they can examine ways to improve their own practice (Collins-Camargo & Millar, 2010).

Supervisors should discuss a wide range of topics to promote well-rounded professional development in their supervisees. The following are examples of areas that should be addressed in educational supervision activities (NASW & ASWB, 2013; Dill & Bogo, 2009; Collins-Camargo & Millar, 2010):

- Risk and safety assessment
- Treatment and intervention
- Identification and resolution of ethical issues
- Social work philosophy
- Cultural awareness
- Family engagement
- Family dynamics
- Critical thinking

Supervisors can use a variety of methods to educate caseworkers, including developing individual learning plans, reviewing recorded interviews, visiting and interviewing the family with the caseworker, and providing positive and constructive feedback about worker performance (Dill & Bogo, 2009). They can use both individual or groups settings to promote knowledge transfer.

For more information, visit Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Clinical Supervision](#) webpage.

Example From the Field: Supervision Throughout a Case

The Oklahoma Department of Human Services developed the [Safety Through Supervision Framework](#) as a detailed guide and supportive approach to supervision throughout the life of a case. The goal of the framework is to increase the accessibility, practicality, and relevancy of daily supervision to ensure safety and enhance permanency and well-being outcomes for the children and families involved with the child welfare system.

SUPPORTIVE

In supportive supervision, the supervisor builds a trusting, safety-focused relationship that decreases job-related stress and encourages self-efficacy and the development of the employee's sense of professional identity (NASW & ASWB, 2013). Examples of supportive behaviors include expressing concern for employees' needs and feelings; actively listening and showing empathy when staff are struggling, stressed, or unhappy; being considerate; providing support and encouragement to staff confronting difficult or stressful tasks; and expressing confidence in staff (Barbee, Winters, Putnam-Collins, & Ciola, 2020). As supervisors seek out ways to support their staff, they should keep in mind that each employee's needs for support may be different and require different strategies.

SUPPORTING STAFF EXPERIENCING SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS (STS)

Child welfare workers—including supervisors—may experience STS due to the nature of their work. Supervisors should be trained to identify and respond to STS among their staff. Discussion of self-care and stress management should be a regular part of supervision (Collins-Camargo & Antle, 2017). This provides the supervisor the opportunity to regularly assess for STS and burnout and to take the necessary steps to meet the needs of their staff. Supervisors should support self-care activities, including agency-level resources, which can help prevent or mitigate STS and compassion fatigue.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network's [Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit](#) (free registration required) includes a *Supervisor Consultation Series* that provides information about recognizing STS and how to speak with staff about it. The following are additional resources about STS:

- [Burnout, Compassion Fatigue, and Secondary Traumatic Stress](#) [web section] (Information Gateway)
- [Children's Bureau Express](#) [July 2016 issue] (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau)
- ["Supervising From a Trauma-Informed Perspective"](#) [webinar] (Child & Family Research Institute)

Building Caseworker Resilience

The [Resilience Alliance](#) (RA) was developed by the ACS-NYU Children's Trauma Institute (a collaboration of the New York City Administration for Children's Services and New York University) to help child welfare professionals identify, understand, and address the ways their work and related STS affects them personally and professionally. The Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development (QIC-WD), which is funded by the Children's Bureau, partnered with Nebraska and Ohio to implement RA in those States' child welfare agencies. More information about Nebraska's [CFS Strong](#) project and [Coach Ohio](#) is available on the QIC-WD website.

For additional information on resiliency and self-care, refer to Information Gateway's [Self-Care](#) and [Supervisory Development and Well-Being](#) webpages.

SUPERVISION STRATEGIES

Supervisors can use a variety of strategies and techniques to support their staff within the three supervisory domains. This section describes a sampling of ways supervisors can engage with and support their staff, including reflective supervision, coaching, adaptive leadership, and virtual supervision.

REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION

Reflective supervision is the regular collaborative discussion between a supervisor and caseworker that helps develop the caseworker's ability to be aware of, reflect on, and regulate their internal experiences while also considering the internal experiences of others, such as a child, parent, or other professional (Flowers & Burgeson, 2015). Reflective supervision improves self-regulation so that providers have access to their own higher-level thinking and wisdom, and it promotes the ability to make critical judgments. The process also offers critical emotional support to those who are frequently exposed to traumatic situations and helps them avoid reactive responses. For reflective supervision to be effective, however, supervisors and caseworkers must meet on a regular basis—at least weekly with new workers—to process a worker's emotions related to difficult cases.

The following are three building blocks of reflective supervision (ZERO TO THREE, 2016):

- **Reflection:** Taking time to think about how workers' experiences, thoughts, and feelings are directly connected to their work and using active listening and

thoughtful questioning by both parties to identify interventions and services that best meet a family's needs

- **Collaboration:** Sharing power between the supervisor and caseworker, which enables staff to express their ability to handle various situations and encourages supervisors to recognize opportunities to share responsibility and decision-making
- **Regularity:** Meeting and interacting on a regular basis to facilitate reflection and collaboration

For additional information about the building blocks, visit ZERO TO THREE's [Three Building Blocks of Reflective Supervision](#) webpage. For more information on reflective supervision, refer to Multiplying Connections' [What Is Reflective Supervision](#) webpage and "[Best Practice Guidelines for Reflective Supervision](#)" from the Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center.

COACHING

Coaching is distinct from performance oversight. It is used to help new and veteran staff develop competencies, practice critical thinking, and improve performance (Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center [ACCWIC], 2013). Exercising empathy and trust, devoting attention to workers' individual needs, and creating a supportive feedback environment are ways supervisors can strengthen the coaching relationship with their supervisees (Gregory & Levy, 2011). For coaching to be successful, it requires a safe learning environment that encourages experimentation, reflection, and learning from mistakes (Hafer & Brooks, 2013).

Coaching can be conducted using a formal model or through informal interaction. The following are techniques often used in coaching to promote learning (Capacity Building Center [CBC] for States, n.d.):

- Asking questions and using active listening, reflection, and discussions
- Demonstrating and observing skills
- Providing feedback
- Helping caseworkers recognize opportunities
- Acknowledging successes and contributions
- Encouraging self-directed change
- Reviewing caseworkers' progress toward goals and promoting accountability

Example From the Field: Coaching Protocols

Over more than 5 years, Jefferson County, CO, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation worked together to strengthen the workforce, including caseworker and agency decision-making, through the On the Frontline Initiative. This included developing a supervision framework as well as coaching protocols to address caseworkers' personal and professional growth. To learn more about this initiative, refer to "[Jefferson County Human Services, Division of Children, Youth, Families and Adult Protection \(CYFAP\) Protocol](#)," "[Tips for Supervisors for Individual Supervision and Coaching](#)," "[Supervisor's Individual Coaching and Supervision Guide – CYF](#)," and "[Employee Preparation for Individual Coaching and Supervision](#)."

For additional information about coaching, refer to the following:

- [Coaching in Child Welfare: Two-Day Training Curriculum](#) (Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center)
- [Coaching in Child Welfare](#) (CBC for States)
- [Resource Library: Coaching](#) [webpage] (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute [NCWWI])
- [Child Protective Services: A Guide for Caseworkers](#) [see chapter 13] (CBC for States)
- [Supporting Quality Contacts Through Supervisor-Worker Coaching](#) (CBC for States)
- [The Coaching Toolkit for Child Welfare Practice](#) (Northern California Training Academy)
- [Coaching in the Field of Child Welfare](#) [webpage] (Northern California Training Academy)

ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP

Adaptive leadership is a framework that helps employees and organizations adapt and flourish in challenging environments (Cambridge Leadership Associates, n.d.). Rather than relying on a top-down approach to change and decision-making, adaptive leadership highlights the importance of engaging workers throughout the organization to promote and enact change through transformations in culture, values, and behaviors.

For more information about adaptive leadership, visit the [NCWWI resource library](#).

VIRTUAL SUPERVISION

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, child welfare agencies across the country required staff to work from home, as appropriate, depending on the task. This required supervisors and staff to alter their work habits and pivot quickly to using technology as the primary means of communication. Effective supervision became even more critical to ensuring the continuation of high-quality service provision, child and family safety and well-being, and protecting the health of staff.

Even prior to the pandemic, some child welfare agencies were exploring allowing staff the option to telework. Best practice shows that teleworking 2 to 3 days per week is ideal for maintaining staff engagement and coworker relationships (QIC-WD, 2019). Additionally, telework can help attract and retain staff; provide a productive work environment; and improve employee job satisfaction, stress, work-life balance, and retention (Boell et al., 2013).

The following are additional resources to assist supervisors in managing a remote workforce:

- [Virtual Workforce Supports](#) [webpage] (NCWWI)
- [Knowledge Management Research: Telework in Child Welfare](#) (CBC for States)
- [Supervising Child Welfare Professionals Virtually During a Pandemic](#) [webpage] (QIC-WD)

Example From the Field: Virtual Supervision

The Washington State Department of Children, Youth, & Families (DCYF) is working with the QIC-WD to implement a telework program to support and retain child welfare staff. Teleworking is available for frontline caseworkers and supervisors who have worked in child welfare field operations for at least 18 months and have been in their current position for at least 3 months (Washington State DCYF & QIC-WD, 2020). Interested staff are required to complete a [self-assessment](#), obtain supervisory approval, complete an application, and sign an agreement prior to beginning telework. DCYF and the QIC-WD developed a [telework handbook](#) that includes a chapter on supervision. Supervisors and staff have reported an increase in productivity and that they are accomplishing more at home than they did in the office (QIC-WD, 2020). Staff also reported they value the flexibility and that this option allows for more work-life balance.

RACIAL EQUITY IN SUPERVISION

Culturally competent supervision requires an acute awareness of the culture of each of the supervisor's staff members, respect for their values, and working to eliminate oppression and discrimination (Lusk et al., 2017). When child welfare staff have strong feelings of inclusion and when there is a positive organizational diversity climate, they have less intent to leave and are more committed to and more satisfied with their work (Brimhall et al., 2014).

It is important for supervisors and managers to learn about implicit bias (i.e., biases a person has that they are unaware of) and participate in analyzing policies, practices, and the informal rules of the organizational culture to root out systemic racism (Barbee & Antle, in press). Supervisors are responsible for promoting positive, culturally competent approaches to working with families and helping address racial or cultural biases they or their staff may have. The Center for the Study of Social Policy and the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity developed the "[Implicit Racial Bias 101: Exploring Implicit Bias in Child Protection](#)" curriculum to provide caseworkers, supervisors, and managers with the knowledge and skills to address implicit racial bias in investigation and decision-making processes. Additionally, the [Undoing Racism](#) training by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond addresses how to reduce disproportionality and disparity in child welfare.

For additional information, refer to the following resources:

- [Cultural Responsiveness](#) [web section] (Information Gateway)
- [Diverse Populations and Communities](#) [web section] (Information Gateway)
- [Racial Equity Resources](#) [web section] (NCWWI)
- [Standards and Indicators for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice](#) (NASW)

PROMOTING INNOVATION AND ASSESSMENT

As agencies implement new practices and policies, supervisors can play a critical role in implementation by disseminating and synthesizing information and promoting implementation to frontline caseworkers (Bunger et al., 2019). They also can work with caseworkers on how to adapt to changing job responsibilities. Caseworkers may experience stress during transitional periods, and supervisors can help relieve this by clearly communicating their expectations and providing support (Cooksey-Campbell et al., 2013).

As changes are being implemented within an agency, supervisors should play an active role in the CQI process. This involves creating an organizational climate where CQI is expected and valued, evaluating workers' abilities to implement new techniques, and working with agency evaluators to gather and evaluate metrics connected to implementation success and child and family outcomes.

The following are additional resources to assist with agency change and continuous quality improvement:

- [Role of Supervision in Quality Improvement](#) [webpage] (Information Gateway)
- [Resource Library: System Reform](#) [webpage] (NCWWI)
- ["Evidence Building Strategies in Child Welfare"](#) [e-learning course; free registration required] (CBC for States)
- [Change and Implementation in Practice](#) [webpage] (CBC for States)
- [Resource Library: Continuous Quality Improvement](#) [webpage] (NCCWI)

SUPPORTING AND DEVELOPING CHILD WELFARE SUPERVISORS

Given the crucial role supervisors play in supporting frontline staff and ensuring effective practice with families, agencies need to invest in recruiting and training strong candidates who are prepared to meet the intense and complex demands of the position and have the requisite skills, knowledge, and capacity to supervise. They also need to recognize that someone may be an effective caseworker but not have the desire or competencies—at least at that moment—to supervise. The following qualifications should be considered in identifying potential supervisors (Hess et al., 2009):

- Experienced and expert child welfare practitioner
- Knowledgeable about current child welfare research and evidence-informed practices
- High level of motivation to undertake the demands of the position
- Commitment to continue their own professional development through training, supervision, and mentoring

Additionally, effective child welfare supervisors should have people skills; communicate respectfully; be diplomatic, honest, and empathic; and have organizational and time management skills. Supervisors should also have the knowledge and ability to correctly interpret policies and procedures and apply them correctly to specific situations.

Example From the Field: Agency Leadership Academy

The Summit County (OH) Children Services executive team developed a Leadership Academy to provide current staff with professional development to prepare them for the next level of their career. They wanted to ensure staff who may be considering [applying](#) for a supervisor or manager position were provided an avenue for advancement, which, in turn, could improve morale and retention of staff. Participants attend classes monthly for 1 year and shadow a member of the executive team. Attending the academy does not guarantee a promotion, but one-half of the first cohort was promoted within the 12-month period they attended the course (V. Nash & M. Serapiglia, personal communication, May 19, 2020). The presentation ["Preparing for Our Future: One County's Solution to Succession Planning & Workforce Development"](#) provides additional information about the academy.

Agencies can foster the growth of supervisors—both those new to the position and veteran staff—with ongoing professional and leadership developmental opportunities. All supervisors and managers should have plans for professional development that identify their goals, the knowledge and skills necessary to reach these goals, and concrete steps toward achieving goals (Hess et al., 2009).

Professional development programs should include clear communication on supervisory responsibilities within the agency, access to mentors, frequent and regularly scheduled supervision, and peer-learning opportunities. Supervisor training should include detailed information on their responsibilities in the administrative, educational, and supportive supervisory domains; Federal legislation that has an impact on their work; and the importance and skills necessary for personnel and program management, including program evaluation using data from various sources. Agencies should also provide supervisors with access to outside resources and tools, such as workshops, conferences, job-related training classes, and advanced degree programs, such as master of social work programs.

The transition from directly serving families to undertaking a supervisory role can be difficult for some staff. As an individual moves into a supervisory or management position, they will begin to spend less time interacting with children and families and more of their time on administrative tasks and staff support activities. Supervisors may need assistance in making this adjustment and in interacting differently with other staff. The Ohio Child Welfare Training Program developed ["Transition to Supervision: Crossing the Divide"](#) to address the common difficulties related to transitioning from caseworker to supervisor.

NCWWI offers a variety of supervisor and manager training—including the free, web-based [NCWWI Leadership Academies](#) (one for supervisors and one for middle managers)—that provide supervisors and managers with resources to become skilled in leading change, fostering collaborations, implementing results-oriented decisions, and leading people. The following are additional resources regarding training child welfare supervisors:

- [Supervisory Development and Well-Being, Training for Supervisors](#), and [Training for Administrators](#) [web sections] (Information Gateway)
- [Learning and Living Leadership](#) [toolkit] (NCWWI)
- [Supervisor Training Series](#) [training] (Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center)

CONCLUSION

A supportive, effective child welfare supervisor is key to the facilitation of effective services for children and families, improved outcomes, increased workforce capacity, and retention of staff. Supervisors can be an invaluable source of information; support the assessment, planning, and implementation of agency initiatives and reforms; and champion agency changes with frontline staff to ensure their success. Transforming child welfare practice is dependent upon professional leadership that guides and coaches caseworkers as they work with families with a focus on both practice and caseworker well-being. Careful attention should be paid to the recruitment and selection of supervisors as well as training and leadership development.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Supervising Child Welfare Services and Management & Supervision](#)

Information Gateway

These two web sections offer a wide array of resources to help supervisors, managers, and administrators provide effective leadership and build a skilled workforce.

[“National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training Initiative \(NTI\) for Child Welfare Supervisors”](#)

Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative
This 25-hour web-based training (free registration required) is designed to help supervisors support their staff in addressing the mental health challenges of children and youth in foster, adoptive, and guardianship families.

[Umbrella Summaries](#)

QIC-WD

These summaries highlight findings regarding child welfare workforce challenges.

[1 Page Summaries and Infographics](#)

NCWWI

This page provides information on various child welfare workforce topics

[Positive Psychology and Well-Being of Child Welfare Workers](#)

Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare
This three-part training series focuses on the application of positive psychology to improve the well-being of child welfare caseworkers.

[Best Practice Standards in Social Work Supervision](#)

NASW and ASWB

This guide provides an in-depth discussion of supervision in social work and provides standards to ensure uniformity.

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SUGGESTED CITATION:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2020).
Supervising for quality child welfare practice.
U.S. Department of Health and Human
Services, Administration for Children and
Families, Children's Bureau. [https://www.
childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/effective-
supervision/](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/effective-supervision/)



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