



Group supervision in child protection practice

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Introduction

Supervision is a key mechanism through which social work practice with children, young people and their families, in the context of child protection work, can be strengthened. Over many years, supervision practice in child welfare systems has tended to follow a traditional pattern of individual, regular supervision. Group supervision, based on a variation of the individual model, has been used to supplement this approach. Shulman (1993) describes staff groups as being more significant resources when effective leadership is employed to help social workers join together to service the group's purpose. The supervisor as facilitator provides such leadership, and the use of a specified framework for structuring the primary function of case consultation begins with a statement of focus and purpose. Group supervision provides the opportunity for mutual aid and mutual demand for work. This aid is evident within the description of culture where information is shared, different views are discussed, and space is available for the discussion and exploration of controversial topics.

Kadushin (1992) has described the importance of supervision and its role in job satisfaction and morale building. An agency demonstrates its value of supervision, support and case consultation by providing consistent and substantial time and resources separate from procedural oversight of cases. The process includes an opportunity for shared experiences, emotional support, solution building to same or similar challenges, prevention of stress and

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reduction of the impact of stress by direct discussions, and remedies provided for social worker safety. Kadushin's (1992) description of culture includes opportunities for shared risk and accountability and aids in the move away from individual social worker liability. Group supervision can raise awareness of

workload issues and remedies may be more effectively, efficiently, and creatively crafted in an effort to reduce stress and tension.

Building competency, practice confidence and sound critical decision-making is a key function of supervision. Group supervision, particularly when it involves the use of a specified framework for organising and analysing

information in case consultation (Lohrbach & Sawyer, 2004; Turnell & Edwards, 1999), has the potential to build competency and confidence as practitioners share and critique social work pathways, decision-making and practice responses. Klein (2000) describes how practitioners move from novice to advanced competency in work environments where there is the opportunity to learn from experience. The description of process and the use of a specified framework illustrate social worker engagement in deliberate and purposeful practice where goals are evidenced and criteria can be developed for evaluation. A practice culture develops which allows for honest discussion and open-mindedness regarding insights gained and lessons learned from previous family case presentations.

Munro (2002) describes the necessity for sound critical thinking and reasoning skills in decision-making in child protection practice and asserts that it is the agency's fundamental responsibility to provide such an environment. Case consultation within the context of group supervision provides a regular and consistent immersion in thinking through the practice experiences and the application of research findings to each case.

This article describes a model of group supervision within the context of child protection practice, using a specified framework for organising and analysing information in case consultation (Lohrbach & Sawyer, 2004; Turnell & Edwards, 1999). Shifting from a reliance on tradition individual supervision, it extends the group supervision model by using case consultations as the primary means through

which practice is developed and strengthened. This case consult model of group supervision has been implemented as the preferred method of supervision for all teams in Olmsted County (Minnesota), including intake/screening, family assessment/investigation, ongoing field service teams, and all early intervention and resource teams within the child protection practice. Whilst the case consult model provides the primary means of strengthening practice, individual supervision remains accessible. It is available for staff performance evaluation, specific requests regarding sensitive personal issues, any need for corrective action, and upon request in situations requiring immediate and/or crisis response.



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Description of the Olmsted County physical environment

Social work practitioners are members of primary teams who share the same or similar functions. Each team is organised into group supervision forums consisting of eight to ten social workers.

They meet weekly for two to three hours; attendance is

expected and required. The groups are facilitated by one or two supervisors. The meeting space includes chairs, a large whiteboard with the consultation template permanently inscribed, whiteboard markers, an eraser, and paper sheets also with the consultation framework template (see Lohrbach & Sawyer, 2004, for the template used in Olmsted County; see also the templates, modified for New Zealand, on page 15 and 16 of this issue). The chairs are clustered around the whiteboard, the whiteboard is utilised in all case consultations, and the paper sheets are for recording the whiteboard information for the

presenting social worker to have for their case record and further review with the family if desired.

Description of content

Social workers are expected to briefly describe the family history and presenting issues in full case consultation format, ensuring that team members and supervisors are knowledgeable of all beginning information. Family case information is subsequently presented for consultation at any decision point, safety plan development or refined development, consideration of court involvement, alternative care arrangements for children, and closure.

Social workers also typically present when:

- seeking additional input regarding specific strategies for family/family member engagement
- seeking involvement of extended kin and support
- seeking collaboration among service providers
- seeking requests for community service provision (e.g. evaluations regarding parenting, psychological issues, psychosexual issues, chemical addiction or other treatment)
- seeking feedback on transference/counter transference or otherwise perceived complications/impasses
- eliciting strengths/protective capacity, cross-cultural considerations, sharing of constructive work, creative solution building
- occasionally, at the family's request, for team views on specific questions.

At the beginning of any consult an agenda is usually developed; social workers typically write on the whiteboard the family case they are seeking consultation on or any questions they have. Supervisors will routinely add any specific

family case update request, information to be shared that is more immediate than can wait for a more business-oriented meeting, and any topic area for further discussion regarding practice approaches, ethics, philosophy, research, and behavioral support and management (e.g. practitioner safety, de-escalation skill building).

Description of process

In the Olmsted County model, each consultation begins with the supervisor as facilitator asking the social worker what the purpose/focus of the consultation is – what are they looking for/hoping for in this consultation?

Each consultation ends with the supervisor as

facilitator asking the social worker if their goals/hopes were met. This ensures that the direction is clear and agreed upon and provides the opportunity for each social worker to have the time necessary for the support and

guidance they need. This also ensures that each social worker gives thought and attention to their questions prior to the consult, so that the time can be effectively and efficiently utilised – preparation and discipline contribute to a constructive working environment. As illustrated by the template, a specific framework is utilised for structuring the organisation and analysis of information. The framework is outlined on the whiteboard and provides a focal point and collective task for the larger group.

The consultation begins with a **genogram** – a pictorial representation of the family with names and ages where known. The genogram is one way of bringing the family into the room when they are physically absent and contributes to a respectful reference to members. The genogram also exposes gaps in knowledge and provides

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early identification of kin for future inclusion. An **eco-map** or a **simple listing** is compiled of the service providers, community support people and/or others involved with the family. This provides information specific to the social worker's efforts regarding collaboration – bringing all resources to any meeting with the family/extended family.

The information is organised under the appropriate headings. **Danger/harm** captures the information contained in any report to the agency (e.g. "On this date the agency received a report alleging that something happened."). Details are included and are as clear and specific as possible and stated in such a way as to be understood by all. Any past history of child protective service involvement is also located under this heading. Under the heading of **strengths/protective factors** is information specific to the assets, resources, and capacities within the individual, family, and community. This heading is inclusive of research-based protective factors (e.g. social support, emotional expressiveness) and provides the opportunity for the supervisor as facilitator and the group to practice translating research into practice. In the section **complicating factors**, situations or events that contribute to difficulty for family members, the social worker, and/or anyone else who is involved with the family. Research-based **risk factors** (e.g. maternal depression, teen pregnancy) would also be located under this heading. The section on **safety** covers strengths demonstrated as protection over time and captures information specific to a history of exceptions (e.g. times when other methods of discipline were used successfully). Another category is the **grey**

area, which comprises information that is incomplete or speculative and requires a more detailed conversation with family and/or service providers.

The analysis of the information involves the formulation of **risk statements**. Risk statements are developed specific to each individual family situation and are comprised of two components. The first part of the statement articulates the worry (e.g. physical harm, sexual harm, death, illness, emotional harm) and the second articulates the context of the worry (e.g. a parent is using cocaine and their judgment and care may be impaired; without supervision or being watched over specific to the child's needs;

when a parent hits or shakes the child). These statements bring focus to the work and clarify the social worker's next steps in talking with the family and building a shared understanding of goals. Risk statements can be linked to national outcomes (e.g. child safety, wellbeing

and stability/security of care) in an effort to make the connections between policy, law and practice. The overarching goal would require that safety be built into the contexts of risk, and there would be, at some point, an adequately safe situation to bring the child protective service intervention to closure. The section on **next steps** captures the presenting social worker's tasks and provides concrete direction in response to the original purpose of the consult.

The role of other group members during a case consultation is dependent on the needs of the presenting social worker. Sometimes clarifying questions are asked and at other times the presenting social worker seeks ideas, feedback, information, or other kinds of help.

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Description of culture

The supervisor is responsible for setting the culture for the group process. They provide for an environment of respect, shared accountability and risk; facilitate responsible use of authority, reciprocity, thoughtfulness, discipline and mutual aid; and ensure that divergent views are presented. The framework provides an opportunity for the supervisor as facilitator to pose questions that elicit detailed information absent of interpretation, embellishment and speculation. For example, a simple line of query might be: *How do you know this? Are these the words that the mother used? What specifically was said? Does it make sense to have another conversation with her to clarify whether you got it right? Descriptions are put in behavioural terms: When you say that the father has mental health problems what do you mean? Is there a formal diagnosis? What have you observed? How has the father described his experiences?* Every conversation within the group is held in such a way that should a family member walk through the door nothing would change. Practicing talking in a respectful, straightforward, interested manner seems to assist social workers to have appropriate skills and words to talk with families at their homes and in any meeting or conference forum.

When the supervisor as facilitator encourages dissenting views and members take on the task of looking critically at any decision, the vulnerability and pressure for the group

to conform can be minimised, thereby strengthening critical thinking skills and guarding against 'group think' (Janis, 1982).

Case consultation in the context of group supervision requires that each social worker expose/make transparent their practice. The supervisor is responsible for creating a safe environment in which to do so. By asking questions of interest and guiding the social worker through the organisation and analysis of information, the supervisor as facilitator models the desired skills in engaging families in respectful

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ways. Social workers are asked for the information and asked where they would like the information to be located within the framework – it is less about bits of information being located in the 'right place' and more about getting the information right. The record on the

whiteboard provides a reference point and a visual account of the work being done and allows for engagement of the larger group.

Conclusion

Child protection practice is often carried out in an anxious and risk-averse environment. Group supervision can provide a sanctuary of sorts where time is allowed for thinking and working through complex practice pathways. It is a place where emotional support is available, questions can be responded to, professional development and leadership skills can be honed and where social work knowledge, research and tools can come alive and have meaning in the field. Stretching the boundaries beyond traditional notions of supervision can provide us with relevant group processes that have synergy with child protection practice, and at the same time build social work capacity and practice depth.

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