Rapid Review: Supervision

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Supervision:

How can supervision in child and family social work be managed virtually and what are the implications for social workers, managers, children and families?

Context:

The content, duration, and frequency of supervision is likely to be dependent upon the individual local authority (LA) as well as local considerations such as staff availability and caseloads. The current pandemic has meant that virtual supervision is now increasingly used as social work teams adapt.

Virtual supervision in social work is a relatively new and unfamiliar concept. We do not have an understanding of what works in this specific context. We can learn from research into traditional 'face to face' supervision, and also gain insights from behavioural science literature to consider what works in the context of virtual communication.

Findings

Carpenter, Web, and Bostock's (2013) systematic review on supervision in children's social work found a weak evidence base. The review found that, based on very low strength evidence, supervision tends to have a positive effect on some outcomes for workers and for organisations. A plain english summary of this review can be found here.

WW-CSC have recently conducted a pilot and feasibility study on outcomes-focused supervision. This study shows the potential for training supervisors, and how, with a combination of workshops and monthly action learning sets, it is possible to support supervisors to behave differently in case discussions.

Qualitative insights

Wilkins (2017) has written extensively on social work supervision and conducted several qualitative studies on child and family social work supervision in the UK. His analysis of more than 200 written records of supervision found that supervision records are largely concerned with the 'what and when' and demonstrate managerial oversight and accountability of the practitioner, rather than including the 'how and why' of the decision-making process.

In another study, 34 supervision case discussions were recorded and, similar to the above study, it was found that 'case discussions operated primarily as a mechanism for management oversight and provided limited opportunity for reflection, emotional support or critical thinking' (Wilkins, Forrester, & Grant, 2017).

Virtual communication - what works?

Jaffe and Lordan (2020) document major insights from the behavioural science

literature, some of which are applicable to the context of virtual supervision:

1). **Management style matters** - Transformational leadership is a style where leaders motivate employees to perform through a number of behaviours, including communicating a vision of the future, facilitating group-oriented work, supporting individual needs, and acting as a role model (Rubin, Munz, & Bommer, 2005). When leaders engage with this style, it generates more, better quality creative ideas amongst employees, compared to transactional leadership which produces a greater quantity of idea generation, albeit of a lesser quality (Herrmann & Felfe, 2014; Fan et al., 2014).

2). **Trust is worth paying attention to** - Virtual settings can make trust-building difficult (Fan et al., 2014), however, paying attention to building trust in a virtual setting is worth heeding (Jaffe & Lordon, 2020). Trust mediates a relationship between virtual co-presence and decision-making performance (Altschuller & Benbunan-Fich, 2010).

3). **There may be gains to creative brainstorming** - Ideas and creative responses are generated more frequently in a virtual team setting, perhaps due to the less personal context (Acai, Sonnadara, & O'Neill, 2018). However, this may cause difficulty in the arrival at a solution that integrates differing perspectives (Jaffe & Lordon, 2020).

4). **Confirmation bias can be greater** - Confirmation bias is the idea that people have a tendency to favour information that confirms their own values and beliefs. Team members in a virtual setting spent significantly less time processing information that did not corroborate their pre-discussed findings (Minas et al., 2014).

Discussion

Due to a lack of quantitative or causal evidence, we are unsure what works in the context of social work supervision. However, qualitative research suggests that case discussions act 'primarily as a mechanism for management oversight' (Wilkins, 2017), and there can be 'limited opportunity for reflection and emotional support' (Wilkins, Forrester, & Grant, 2017).

Because confirmation bias can be greater in a virtual context (Minas et al., 2014), social work managers should make increased effort in virtual supervision to 'deliberately encourage the inclusion of preference-challenging information and dissent' (Jaffe & Lordon, 2020).

Also, managers could make greater use of potential aids for decision-making under uncertainty, such as the devil's advocate (DA), to explore the social worker's thought-process and position. Evidence indicates that larger organisations 'operating in uncertain environments benefit from encouraging structured conflict in decision-making' (Cosier & Schwenk, 1990). Also, the use of an 'objective, nonemotional DA approach' is recommended by Cosier and Schwenk (1980).

As Jaffe and Lordon (2020) note, 'in a virtual context, idea generation is high, which may cause difficulty in the arrival at a solution that integrates differing perspectives'. This is relevant to social work meetings, but also in the context of virtual supervision. Idea generation here could relate to hypothesising, creative

problem solving, or the assessment of risk.

Thus, it may be helpful to hold case discussions separate from the action-orientated, decision-making part of supervision. Placing some time in between discussion and decision-making could alleviate some of the emotion in the decision-making process, and thus curb groupthink (Jaffe & Lordon, 2020), which is the idea that when people come together they strive for consensus.

More insights on supervision come from the literature on self-determination theory (SDT) - the study of how social conditions can facilitate or hinder individuals' motivation, functioning, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Studies examining SDT in workplaces show how on average, when supervisors engage in behaviours inconsistent with SDT, such as threats of punishment, surveillance, deadlines and imposed goals, this can undermine employees' intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Conversely, when supervisors are trained to be more autonomy-supportive - a style of supervision which is SDT-consistent and involves providing informational feedback, acknowledging employees' feelings and opinions, and encouraging active decision-making - employees demonstrate higher engagement and motivation (Hardé & Reeve, 2009). In a virtual work setting, it may be even more imperative to ensure that supervisors are adequately trained to supervise employees in a manner consistent with promoting employees' competence, autonomy and relatedness.

Typically, in social work settings, social workers may seek out more informal forms of supervision, e.g. advice and support on a particular case, from their workplace peers. We often underestimate the positive impact of these more casual forms of social interaction - known as 'weak ties' - on our everyday well-being (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). With social workers conducting their work virtually, they may lose out on these opportunities for informal forms of supervision. It could be important to explore how these weaker social ties can be maintained to ensure social workers are feeling supported, particularly if they are not receiving adequate levels of support from formal supervision.

Lastly, because research suggests trust mediates a relationship between virtual co-presence and decision-making performance, managers should direct energy and attention towards fostering a 'co-present virtual environment that promotes trust, and in turn, greater team performance' (Jaffe & Lordon, 2020).

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Resources

https://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/activities/devils_advocate_palmquist.htm

http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson-docs/HowtoPlay_Devils_Advocate.pdf