



What Works for
**Children's
Social Care**



CASCADE

SUPERVISION IN CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE





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This evidence summary is based on the following systematic review

Carpenter, J., Webb, C.M. and Bostock, L. (2013). The surprisingly weak evidence base for supervision: Findings from a systematic review of research in child welfare practice (2000–2012). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35(11), 1843-1853.

About the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care

The What Works Centre for Children's Social Care seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector. We generate, collate and

make accessible the best evidence for practitioners, policy makers and practice leaders to improve children's social care and the outcomes it generates for children and families.

About CASCADE

CASCADE is concerned with all aspects of community-based responses to social need in children and families, including family support services, children in need services, child protection,

looked after children and adoption. It is the only centre of its kind in Wales and has strong links with policy and practice.

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SUPERVISION IN CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE

What is the intervention?

Supervision has been described as the cornerstone of good social work practice (Laming, 2009). It is widely believed to add value to a range of functions including administrative case management, practice reflection, professional development, personal and emotional support, and mediation between the worker and the wider organisation (Carpenter et al 2013). In the UK, supervision is often delivered by the line manager on a one-to-one basis, but it can also be delivered by others including senior practitioners or external consultants. It may also be organised in a variety of group formats.

This summary is based on the systematic review carried out by Carpenter and colleagues in 2013. The review sought to ascertain what is known about the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of supervision in children's social work based on 22 research studies. The reviewers highlight the paucity of research evidence of supervision effectiveness and the limitations of existing research studies. Most of these studies were not designed to evaluate supervision but happened to find correlations, or associations between supervision and a range of outcomes. Such correlational research does not allow causal relationships to be determined.

Which outcomes were studied?

The review focused on a range of outcomes grouped under two main categories:

- Outcomes for workers
- Outcomes for organisations

No outcomes were reported for service users as none of the research studies reporting these data fulfilled the review's quality appraisal criteria.

Effectiveness: how effective are the interventions examined?

Outcome 1: Outcomes for workers

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Effect rating | 1 |
| Strength of Evidence rating | 0 |

Outcome 1: Outcomes for organisations

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Effect rating | 1 |
| Strength of Evidence rating | 0 |

Eighteen of the 22 studies adopted a cross-sectional design and three studies provided longitudinal data. As noted, such studies highlight an association between supervision and an outcome, but they do not allow any overall conclusions to be made as to whether supervision directly leads to an outcome.

Five studies found an association between supervision and worker job satisfaction. Specifically,

three main elements of supervision emerged in relation to job satisfaction: structure, focus and frequency of supervision; supervisory task assistance; and supervisor support in accessing resources for service users. In addition, job satisfaction was related to the worker's sense of rapport with the supervisor, with low levels of rapport associated with social worker burnout.

Three studies looked at the association between supervision and intention to leave. Findings were mixed, with one study suggesting that perceived supervisor support was a predictor of intention to leave whereas two studies found no association. When intention to stay was considered, two aspects of supervision were reported: the supervisor's willingness to support workers to do their jobs effectively and help in stressful situations, and worker perceptions of emotional support. The extent to which workers felt supported was also associated with emotional satisfaction and feelings of being valued and supported by the organisation.

Mixed findings were reported in relation to supervision frequency. Higher supervision frequency was associated with higher levels of job satisfaction, with one study showing that a minimum of two hours per week supervision was required for job satisfaction (Barth et al, 2008). Conversely, one study (Boyas and Wind, 2010) found that higher supervision frequency was associated with emotional exhaustion. The reviewers noted that whilst this finding appears counterintuitive, further analysis showed that higher levels of emotional exhaustion were experienced by workers involved in more complex child protection cases, who might partake in more supervision as a result of this complexity.

Nine studies examined the relationship between supervision and staff retention. Generally, good supervision was related to staff retention with 'stayers' more likely to report that supervisors were competent, more supportive, and praised good work. Another study (Morazes et al, 2012) found that a quarter of 'leavers' reported a lack of support and respect from their supervisor. The provision of useful information and help with new tasks were not related to staff retention. The reviewers conclude that the association between supervision and retention may depend on the type of

supervision provided and how supportive the relationship is between worker and supervisor. No studies reported findings for supervision and job performance.

Only one study assessed group supervision (Lietz, 2008). In this study, supervisors received five training sessions and workers received five to seven group supervision sessions. The aim of the one-year study was to focus on peer case review and critical thinking exercises. The study provides tentative support for an increase in critical thinking skills and a relationship between quality of the supervision relationship and level of participation. However, supervision frequency did not predict level of critical thinking. The reviewers suggest that it is the quality of supervision rather than the quantity that is important.

Five studies considered the relationship between supervision and workers' perceptions of organisational support. One study (Maertz et al, 2007) concluded that workers need support, but this may be provided by the supervisor, organisation or both. The degree to which workers feel supported by supervisors contributes to perceptions of the organisation and the extent to which they are valued. Where workers do not feel supported by supervisors, perceived organisational support becomes more important to the worker.

Mechanisms: When, where and how does it work?

The review provides a brief overview of theoretical perspectives on how supervision contributes to the relationships between workers, supervisors and organisations. It states that the overall aim of supervision is to ensure that service users receive the best support in line with Children's Services responsibilities and in accordance with professional standards. For workers, this means ensuring they are knowledgeable, possess good skills, have clearly defined roles and receive support from a supervisor with whom they have a good relationship with. For the organisation, the worker's primary outcome is job performance, with worker well-being and job satisfaction secondary aims as the organisation has a duty of care for workers in difficult, challenging roles (Carpenter et al, 2013).

Theoretically, according to Eisenberger and colleagues (1986), a worker's appraisal of the quality of organisational support is based on social exchange, where positive exchanges can improve their attitude to work. Additionally, social capital theory (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998) highlights the importance of social networks. For workers involved in child welfare, the quality of the social relationship between the worker and supervisor is important as this relationship influences worker effectiveness.

Regarding the task element of supervision, supervisors can help workers to link different learning episodes across their work together in order to optimise practice learning (Tannenbaum, 1997). The "novice to expert" model of skill acquisition can offer supervisors a structure for developing learning tailored to worker needs (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1988).

The reviewers highlight that there is generally a lack of detail in the studies about the models of supervision being adopted. They state that the majority of studies appeared to include one-to-one supervision. It was not clear whether supervision was delivered by the line manager or another professional. One study reported the use of group supervision and provided detail of the model.

Moderators: who does it work for?

All 22 studies were carried out in the US. The level of generalisability of this review to the UK is therefore unclear. The review included studies of a range of roles including child protection workers, residential social workers, school social workers and children's services. The review did not report demographic information for workers.

Implementation: How do you do it?

Generally, in children's services in England, supervision is delivered in a one-to-one meeting between the worker and the supervisor, who is usually the worker's line manager. However, supervision can be delivered by a senior practitioner or external consultant in a one-to-one setting and may also be provided in group settings.

The reviewers highlight that there is generally a lack of specificity about the models of supervision being used in the studies. They state that findings from the research literature show that the main roles of supervision include case management, practice learning and reflection, personal and emotional support, mediation between the worker and the organisation, and professional development. Further, these roles can be used to distinguish different types of supervision such as case management supervision and reflective supervision (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002). In terms of models of supervision, some models which are used in training and development have been well described, such as the Integrative Supervision Model (Smith et al 2007). This model consists of four stages including case management, education and professional development, clinical skills and reflective problem solving and emotional support, as well as a model of clinical supervision in child welfare by Collins-Camargo and Millar (2010). However, there was not sufficient evidence available for this review to say whether any particular model or approach to supervision is more effective than any other.

Economics: What are the costs and benefits?

The literature review found no studies that reported the cost effectiveness of different models of supervision. The reviewers conclude that future studies of supervision effectiveness should include economic evaluation in order to ensure efficient use of public funds.

What are the strengths and limitations of the review?

The review is a rigorous analysis of research studies of supervision in child welfare practice. The review followed the Social Care Institute for Excellence's (Rutter et al, 2010) guidelines to identify research studies and organise findings. All studies were appraised using the Weight of Evidence approach (Gough, 2007) where studies were rated as 'low', 'medium' or 'high' in relation to trustworthiness, appropriateness and topic relevance. However, the review was limited by the paucity of evidence in this area. As such, the reviewers report their adoption of a 'somewhat generous interpretation' (Carpenter et

al, 2013:1851) of the Weight of Evidence approach to the studies included. They state that had the review been conducted in accordance with the standards of the Cochrane Library (Cochrane EPOC, n.d.) or the Campbell Collaboration (2004), no evidence would have been found to support supervision effectiveness. This is due to the lack of randomised trials and quasi-experimental studies. Of the three longitudinal studies included in this review, all had methodological limitations.

Despite the limitations of existing research, the reviewers state that research evidence shows that workers want supervision (e.g. Manthorpe et al, 2015). Indeed, supervision attracts widespread support and as such this review provides a useful summary of existing evidence on its effectiveness. In doing so, some aspects of supervision appear related to more favourable outcomes for child welfare workers and contribute to the organisation's duty of care for its workers.

The review highlights the lack of evidence for the effectiveness of supervision. They conclude that more research evidence is needed about supervision effectiveness and the mechanisms through which it works.

Summary of key points

- Overall there is a dearth of evidence relating to supervision effectiveness. The evidence that does exist is limited by the use of cross-sectional designs which seek to find associations between supervision and a range of outcomes rather than cause and effect findings.
- The evidence is also limited by the lack of precision about what supervision is, how it works and who for. Even where studies have found positive associations between supervision and different outcomes, it is often not possible to tell what the supervisor is doing that appears to be helpful.
- There appears to be a relationship between supervision and job satisfaction. This relationship is mediated by the focus and frequency of supervision as well as supervisor willingness to assist with tasks and support workers to access resources for service users. Job satisfaction is also linked to the level of rapport workers have with their supervisors.
- Staff retention depends on the type of supervision and how supportive the relationship is between the worker and the supervisor. Training supervisors to deliver group supervision to case review and critical thinking skills can lead to an increase in the use of critical thinking. This is dependent upon the quality of supervision and level of worker engagement.
- The degree to which workers feel supported by supervisors contributes to perceptions of the organisation and the extent to which they are valued.
- More research evidence is needed about supervision effectiveness, its cost-effectiveness and the outcomes for service users.

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