

The Protective Service Supervisor's Role

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The Supervisor's role can be broadly divided into two major areas: (1) administrative responsibilities and (2) direct supervisory responsibilities. The myriad of administrative responsibilities will not be covered, other than to say that administrative duties are realistically a part of the supervisor's duties. However, it is our premise that they should not preclude or take precedence over the direct supervisory responsibilities discussed in this chapter.

Supervision in a Social Service Department

A Social Service Department has traditionally been a one-to-one, hierarchic structure, which has perpetuated bureaucracy, lack of creative problem-solving, low morale, and a lack of autonomy.¹ In proposing guidelines for supervision in protective services, we will discuss this structure of supervision, partly because it is seemingly ubiquitous,² and partly because our experience has been that it can be advantageous to the maintenance of certain job performance requirements and an intra-agency support system for workers. Despite difficulties, we have found that this structure can become a means of helping workers attain and maintain the skills and knowledge necessary for protective service work. The ever increasing caseloads in protective service units are certainly not optimal; however, the

supervisory process can help to make them more manageable. We suggest that the focus of County Departments of Social Services, at least for the present, be directed towards expanding the parameters of traditional supervision in social services. The model proposed here is one means of accomplishing this. It views supervision as a process of: (1) defining areas of knowledge and skills, (2) defining methods of acquisition and maintenance of knowledge and skills, (3) deciding where each worker is in terms of knowledge and skills, and (4) helping workers maintain their present skills and develop new ones necessary to effective child protective services work. The effectiveness of this process depends in great part on the supervisor's qualifications and his or her skill in carrying out the tasks inherent in this model.

QUALIFICATIONS OF THE SUPERVISOR

Recent Protective Service Experience

It is extremely important that the supervisor have recent or ongoing experience in direct work with abusing or neglecting families or both. This is necessary for one's own self-awareness, credibility with the workers, skill maintenance and development, and reality-based approach to protective services. Treatment with even one family on an ongoing basis can help in these areas.

Organizational Skills

In a county Department of Social Services it seems as if there is a never-ending number of crises which must be addressed, a new morass of forms to be completed, and reports due. It is essential that the supervisor have the ability to set priorities in order to meet goals, as well as to maintain a sense of fulfillment. Further, the supervisor serves as a "buffer" for the workers, communicating that information which is relevant and important to them, and screening out that information which is not.

Good Background in the Principles of Psychotherapy

To be of assistance to the social workers who are dealing daily with very difficult clients, it is important that the supervisor bring a working knowledge of treatment and the issues of therapy. This knowledge helps the worker set realistic goals and be aware of what is operating in a family.

Personal Characteristics

Finally, there are personal characteristics which augment being able to do the job.

Good listener. The supervisee needs somewhere to go to vent frustrations and feel comfortable that these frustrations will generally be responded to in a supportive way.

Low anxiety level. If the supervisor generally functions in an anxious state, this will undoubtedly carry over to the workers and the general climate of the unit. We have heard supervisors, in assigning a family, say, "This could be the next dead child in the county," which, of course, immediately immobilizes the worker.

Flexibility. To encourage and allow growth, the supervisor needs to be sensitive to each individual worker's needs in supervision and his strengths and weaknesses. The supervisor must relinquish control, as the worker exhibits increased skill. The supervisor must be flexible, encouraging, and allowing for the worker's professional growth.

Decisiveness. There are times in protective services when a worker is having great difficulty sorting out what is happening in a family, establishing alternatives, and making a plan. In these situations, it is necessary for the supervisor to help the worker gain perspective on the case, look at additional areas of concern, arrive at mutual decisions, and establish a treatment plan. Discussing a family and not making any clearcut decisions only leaves the worker more frustrated.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF SUPERVISION IN PROTECTIVE SERVICES

In our experience, the most important tasks of the supervisor are the following:

Discuss and Share Decision Making

In attempting to delineate categories of skills and knowledge which the worker will need, as well as methods of their acquisition and maintenance, it is imperative that the process involve the workers. The supervisory process mutually engages both the supervisor and the supervisee. As Kadushin and Hawthorne have pointed out, supervision is highly susceptible to game-playing,³ especially if the power disparity is viewed as arbitrary and unreasonable. In helping the worker assess information and make decisions about families with whom he is working, the role of the supervisor is to help the worker look at the situation in an enabling, rather than therapeutic way. It is not the role of the supervisor to become the worker's therapist; rather he encourages and promotes self-awareness in the worker, so that, in turn, the worker becomes more effective with families.

Support the Workers

Social workers in this field must be tied in with ongoing support systems, and one of the strongest of these should be with the direct super-

visor. Given the draining nature of this work, the social worker must feel that his work is appreciated and understood as, unquestionably, he will not be getting this reinforcement from the families or the community in general. Frequently, parents displace inappropriate anger at the social worker. This is often coupled by slow progress in treatment. If the social workers feel support from their supervisor, they, in turn, can be supportive to each other. We are not advocating unconditional support, but rather support based on mutual trust and respect between the supervisor and supervisee, and shared problem solving on a direct and open basis. With these two components, critical discussion and honest evaluation of child abuse situations can take place. In large part, the support provided by the supervisor, other social workers, and the agency as a whole dictates the worker's effectiveness.

Influence the Agency's Administrative Structure

With the current public recognition of the immensity of the problem of child abuse and neglect, more and more cases are being identified. However, this is often just the "tip of the iceberg." Any supervisor in a county department must be a moving force in identifying child protective services as a priority social service of the department. These families require extensive manpower and resources and, thus, must be seen as a priority by the agency management. (It may be necessary for the supervisor to do considerable work outside of the agency educating the public as to the needs and, thus, generating support by the community to protective services for children.) The supervisor needs open lines of communication to the administration, so that current needs and problems identified by the workers are addressed, as well as insuring that communication occurs from the administration back to the workers. In addition, it is important that there be sanction by the administration for protective service workers to develop needed programs (within budget constraints), through such means as writing grants and cooperative work with other agencies and community groups.

Hire Protective Service Workers

The supervisor should be involved in the direct hiring of potential employees. To have a personnel officer without direct protective service knowledge making the decisions regarding hiring precludes looking at the unique characteristics which should be screened in hiring. (Refer to pages 200-201 regarding further discussion of these characteristics.) Before hiring, current protective service workers should talk with applicants to present, as realistically as possible, what it is like to do this work. Also, a probationary period in which the new worker's performance is evaluated for permanent status is helpful, since not every social worker has the ability to do protective service work.

Provide Case Back-Up for Workers

The protective service worker needs to feel that he can "get away" from the job from time to time. The supervisor plays an important role in back-up to the worker, being available to handle urgent matters, yet not usurping major decisions in the worker's absence.

Identify Specific Needs of Each Social Worker

We have identified the following fifteen knowledge and skill areas of the social worker in protective service work, and the supervisor should be aware of the worker's "cutting edge" or level in each (These skills are discussed in more detail in chapters 8 and 19.)

1. Knowledge of child development.
2. Understanding of abuse and neglect dynamics.
3. Knowledge of legal and court procedures.
4. Understanding of hierarchy of Department of Social Services.
5. Skill in using agency's policies and programs.
6. Knowledge of the community.
7. Knowledge and skill in use of resources.
8. Ability to take referral information.
9. Ability to communicate through writing.
10. Skill in interviewing techniques.
11. Skill in educating other professionals and the general community.
12. Knowledge and skill in treatment.
13. Ability to manage caseload.
14. Ability to integrate diverse knowledge and skill areas.
15. Self awareness of the worker.

Arrange Access to the Various Means of Skill Acquisition

Acquiring the knowledge and skills just identified can be accomplished through a variety of methods. The choice of methods depends on the (1) skill area, (2) level of worker functioning, and (3) availability of resources and constraints of the Department of Social Services.

It is the responsibility of the supervisor to arrange access to these fifteen skill areas. In a sense, the supervisor becomes a coordinator of continuing education for the worker. It is important to note that the supervisor need not always do all the leg work in providing the means of skill acquisition; he can delegate responsibilities to interested workers and coordinate the efforts. The various means of skill acquisition include the following:

1. One-to-one teaching by supervisor.
2. One-to-one consultation with supervisor.
3. Use of consultants (psychiatric, medical, legal, and educational).
4. Reading.

5. Unit meetings (organized discussion with peers). This is an opportunity to disseminate and discuss procedural information and treatment issues, as well as to increase group cohesiveness, openness, and trust.

6. Informal and spontaneous discussion with peers. Discussion is an extremely important vehicle for learning, decision-making, problem solving, and maintaining morale. It offers the worker an opportunity for feedback, encouragement, advice, reflection, sorting out, and setting priorities—all of which can be critical in decision making and problem solving.

7. Inservice training, conferences, workshops. This becomes a means of sensitizing and informing workers to issues, research findings, treatment modalities, and the like. This can also be a time to become "refueled." Workers should be involved in planning the training agenda, so that it is relevant to their needs.

8. Observation. Examples of observation would be watching video material and observing court hearings.

9. Participant-observation. Accompanying another social worker on activities such as an intake interview and placement and case conferences is an excellent form of learning.

10. Tandem supervision. This is a method of two workers "sharing" responsibility for a family, usually with one having primary responsibility and the other secondary responsibility. Discussions and decisions are made between the two workers.

11. Interagency team treatment. Treatment for the entire family often involves, in addition to the social workers, one or more of the following: public health nurse, pediatrician, psychologist, psychiatrist, teacher, home-maker, lay therapist, therapist for the child, and the like. This approach becomes an invaluable opportunity to develop knowledge of a wide spectrum of areas relating to abuse and neglect, as well as skill in working on a team. Its usefulness is based on the premise that the social worker alone cannot meet all the needs of one family—child abuse and neglect require shared responsibility and the concerted efforts of many people.

12. Multidisciplinary review team. Comprised of other service providers and consultants, this is a check and balance system of reviewing what action has or may be taken on a case. There is a delicate balance between the legal mandate of the Department of Social Services (and the worker) to be responsible for the case, yet accountable to such a review team which often carries certain powers to action. The social worker needs to be able to function autonomously, however, within certain parameters of review or action by others or both. For example, it is unacceptable for a social worker doing an intake evaluation to function under the constraints of having to ask the supervisor or multidisciplinary review team for sanction to initiate removal of a child from his home. He must have the ability and sanction to take this action quickly for the child's protection.

13. Community education. In conducting educational programs for con-

cerned community groups, the worker is sensitized to community awareness and understanding of the phenomenon of abuse and neglect and the perception of the Department of Social Services, as well as the means of creating more cooperation within the community.

14. Direct experience. Direct experience characterized by an adequate knowledge base, flexible supervision, and a gradation of increased responsibility is perhaps the most essential means of skill acquisition. There is a certain illumination which takes place when one has had direct experience and can critically look at what has worked and what has not. Reflection is a means of knowing "where to go from here." A year of direct experience appears to be an average amount of time for a social worker to go through the process of reflection, to gain confidence in his abilities, and to assimilate the necessary knowledge and skills.

Encourage Personal Development and Self-Awareness

Inherent to protective services are certain "loaded" issues with which the social worker must feel comfortable to effectively work with abusing/neglecting families. We will discuss six key issues, which we see to be essential in the positive use of self-awareness by the social worker, and which should be fostered by the supervisor.

1. Appropriate use of power.
2. Ability to make decisions.
3. Objectivity.
4. Limit setting (for self and client).
5. "Refueling" (for example, academically and compensatory time).
6. Personal identity.

1. *Appropriate use of power.* The legal mandate of protective services carries with it an enormous amount of power (for example, initiation of action to remove a child from the parental home). The social worker is frequently seen by the parents and the community as an authority figure. The protective service worker must feel comfortable in this position and exercise his powers sensitively.

2. *Ability to make decisions.* High on the list of key areas facing the protective services worker are a multitude of varied, and often life-threatening decisions. These decisions include questions regarding: if a court petition should be filed; if a child, for his well-being, must be removed from his home; if it is safe for the child to be placed back in the parental home; and if a case can be closed. The ability to make decisions can be broken down in the following way:

- (a) Gathering all the relevant data. (Poor decisions are often the result of an insufficient data base.)
- (b) Assimilating and organizing the data.
- (c) Arriving at the decision.
- (d) Being prepared to state the rationale for the decision.

Agency guidelines regarding the above identified areas concerning the child and his family are extremely helpful. They should be available in writing to workers to assist in thinking through case decisions. These can be especially helpful to a worker during a crisis (see Appendix D-1).

3. *Objectivity.* Maintaining the perspective of neutrality is often very difficult, though critically necessary. The protective services worker should be aware of the "three camps"—the community camp, the parent camp, and the child camp (C. Pollock, *personal communication*, Feb. 1974). Over-identification with any one of these three camps blocks the worker from effective intervention with the family. As a result the stage is set for a lack of clarity in viewing the composite picture. For example, if the social worker over-identifies with the parent this could prevent a lack of awareness regarding the child's safety. Concomitantly, in over-identifying with the child, the social worker could become very angry with the parents, thus, lacking empathy for their situation and problems. Over-identification with the community may cloud seeing both the parents' and the child's situation and, therefore, responding out of frustration to the community demand (for example, agencies being set up against each other or unnecessary removal of a child from his natural home).

4. *Limit setting.* The needs of the abusive/neglecting family are vast, and one of the functions of the social worker is to help the family look to other adults, rather than their children, to have those needs met.⁴ The worker is thrust into the position of being one of the first people the parent looks to for need fulfillment. (The dependency on the worker in the beginning and middle stages of working together are enormous.) Judgment must be keen both in timing and in discriminating areas which would require limit-setting (e.g., availability to the parents, saying "no" when necessary, and knowing how much to do for the family). This limit-setting is necessary to help the parents grow, and, for most parents, it is the first opportunity they have had to learn how to negotiate in a give-and-take relationship.

5. *"Refueling"* Due to the draining nature of this work, it is essential that the protective services worker have the ability to emotionally "get away" from work regularly. This can be accomplished in two ways: (1) academically, theoretical ideas assist in putting into perspective the daily demands of a caseload, as well as in developing better services to families, and (2) a flexible compensatory time policy by which the worker is encouraged to take time off for past periods of overwork. For this physical and emotional time off to succeed, agency sanction is imperative. Additionally, the worker who has interests outside of work is better equipped to maintain a constant "refueling" and, thus, a better perspective of the job.

6. *Personal Identity.* Finally, there are personal characteristics of protective service workers which enhance performance. A strong sense of personal identity is an important characteristic, since the worker is regularly faced with people who are frightened and angry. The protective services

worker must be sensitive to these feelings, yet not internalize them. The parents are usually angry with many people and often these feelings are directed at the worker. If the social worker needs to be liked or appreciated by his clients, he will quickly become immobilized. A person with a tenuous self-image will be faced with increased self-doubts, which could preclude taking decisive action on a case when necessary. Other manifestations of self-doubts in protective service workers may result in over-identification with one of the "camps" (for example, inappropriate anger directed at the parents leads to thoughts of becoming the child's "savior" and rescuing the child from "bad" parents).

Complementing a strong self-identity is the ability to communicate to the parent that he, the worker, is "feeling with" them and is sincerely interested in them as individuals. Client movement can begin once the parent begins to trust the social worker and believes that this person cares. This stage of treatment usually takes time and testing, but it is unquestionably the foundation of all else in protective service social work. This process of moving beyond the initial angry, demanding feelings of the parents is the first step to a trusting, mutual arrangement.

Being aware of one's own feelings and situation is essential, so that one does not project onto the parents what are truly feelings related to self (for example, having a flat tire on the way to work and then displacing these feelings to the parents). This is a process of identifying and compartmentalizing those feelings related to the family and those related to oneself.

Finally, a sense of humor serves to maintain one's own equilibrium, as well as to lighten the morale of other staff. An entire unit of depressed protective service workers produces only more depression, lack of energy, and poor productivity.

Specific Supervision for Different Levels of Worker Functioning

For each level of worker functioning, specific types of supervision are more appropriate than for other levels. Three general levels of worker functioning have been identified.

LEVEL OF WORKER FUNCTIONING

1. *Beginning Functioning.* This level is usually characterized by inexperience and limited knowledge in regard to abuse and neglect, although not necessarily to social work. There is a desire to effectively and humanely

provide services, uncertainty about expectations of performance, and an expectation that a certain creativity or ingenuity will be needed to transcend the gravity of a "welfare bureaucracy."

2. *Seasoned Functioning.* This worker has come to grips with those areas discussed pertaining to personal development and self-awareness and has skill in a variety of treatment experiences. The competent protective services worker makes decisions on both an academic and a "gut level" basis, and he communicates with confidence to clients and the community.

3. *Burnt-Out Functioning.* This is the worker who may be overwhelmed by caseload size, is emotionally drained, and cannot cope adequately. Such a worker manifests symptoms in a variety of ways: He becomes immobilized by even the slightest crisis in the caseload, denies or glosses over the severity of a case or important details, or may be insensitive to feelings of the parents or child.

THE SUPERVISORY PROCESS: THE BEGINNING WORKER

In discussing the process of taking a social worker from an inexperienced to competent level of functioning, it is with the assumption that the beginning worker is a reasonably emotionally healthy person and has the capacity to handle the multiple and serious dimensions of the job. Hence, he is a potentially competent person. He must have the ability to grow professionally and personally in relation to the job.

The beginning, inexperienced worker requires a good period of inservice training prior to assuming the responsibilities of the caseload. Minimally, we suggest two weeks of intensive training, using a variety of approaches which will be discussed. Ironically, agencies often provide a more comprehensive inservice orientation period to volunteers and paraprofessionals than to the social work staff. Unless a new worker has had prior protective service experience, it behooves the supervisor to refrain from assigning the "waiting caseload" until the new worker has first had some opportunity for education and training.

The supervisory process with the beginning worker should be a fluid one whereby, initially, the supervisor is involved in most case decisions, moves to a moderate degree of involvement in case planning, and, finally, within a period of a year, moves to a consultative role with the worker. Certainly all the means of skill acquisition identified in this chapter are useful in moving an inexperienced worker to a competent level of functioning. For the new worker, however, the key is utilizing these skills by gradation. Of all the skills necessary to a protective service worker, two of the most essential are knowledge of abuse and neglect theory and self-awareness. The first is a cognitive, didactic process, the latter, an emotional, introspective process. (The other thirteen skills are also important; however, they can be mastered more easily with a good foundation in the two areas just identified.)

Facilitating Understanding of Abuse and Neglect Dynamics

Knowledge about abuse and neglect can be gained through such means as one-to-one teaching by the supervisor and reading pertinent to the subject. Additionally, observation through viewing video material or going to a court hearing with another worker is helpful. Group discussion, either on an organized basis (unit meeting) or informally, with other protective service workers, is extremely relevant during this period of learning. Participant-observation could be the next step used, whereby the worker goes out with a seasoned worker on an intake and participates in the interview and subsequent decision making with the family.

Facilitating Self-awareness of the Worker

A beginning worker in protective services experiences a multitude of mixed feelings ranging from uncertainty, fear, and anger, to the initial stage of feeling comfortable in handling the job responsibilities. In looking at personal development, as well as a better knowledge base, we identify a variety of methods to facilitate growth.

1. Unit meetings. Mutual discussion of difficult case situations in a sharing way is helpful to the worker in identifying his own feelings regarding a family and gaining a better understanding of the family.

2. Use of psychiatric consultant and supervisor. Consultation may be useful in sorting out the worker's feelings which may be getting in the way of moving ahead with the family. Consultation is also helpful in understanding therapeutic plateaus with a family and blockages to treatment.

3. Interagency team treatment. Sharing a case is an excellent way of gaining immediate feedback as to how one is relating positively or negatively to a family.

4. Direct experience. This is, in our opinion, one of the most elucidating methods of coming to a realization of the best use of self with families. This process requires time, the ability to reflect critically, and the ability to recognize where one has succeeded and where one has failed. Insight is gained through introspection, as well as information from peers and clients. It is unlikely that one ever feels entirely comfortable in "going out on their next child abuse intake," since that situation seems to be charged with anxiety. However, we do believe one learns much through personal experience. Only through direct experience does one really gain the appreciation of how the theory of child abuse and neglect fits within the family constellation.

THE SUPERVISORY PROCESS: RESTORING A BURNT-OUT WORKER

With the current fiscal constraints and lack of adequate staff, so may say the task of restoring a burnt-out worker is heroic, impossible, ven