

Supportive Supervision:

Promoting Staff and Family Growth Through Positive Relationships



Close personal relationships are key to the health and well-being of people at any age. They may be the single best prevention strategy for depression. Just as Head Start staff seek to engage parents and families in healthy, supportive relationships, it is important that they too have structured support and guidance. Supervision is not only about staff accountability, but also involves the commitment to nurture and guide staff so that they have the tools to engage children and families successfully.

What is Supportive Supervision?

Supportive relationships between supervisors and supervisees contribute to staff's ability to reflect upon and cope with the stresses and demands of their work. It is an important aspect of building a safe and healthy climate for staff, families and children in Head Start. Supervision maintains staff productivity and reinforces the goal of caregiving within the program.

Yet supervision is more than a programmatic mandate. Tending to the needs of caregivers is one ingredient in a larger system of care supporting children and families. Like the relationship between a Head Start professional and a family, the supervisory relationship should offer the same qualities in both caregiving and being cared for, as well as opportunities for safety, trust, and positive change. Supervision is an opportunity for leadership to use the strategies of self-reflection and discussion of growth, strengths and resilience. In addition to giving staff the support they need, it also keeps leadership in touch with the real issues that the program faces.

HOW DOES SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISION HELP CHILDREN AND FAMILIES?

Families struggling with adversities like depression need an open and trusting relationship with their child's caregiver. Part of the role of caregivers is to offer assistance and resources to families. Providing such support to families is not easy or automatic. It is difficult work—and it is best done when the care-

giver also receives support as well. Head Start staff, then, are most effective in their work when there is ongoing, consistent support and guidance from a supervisor. Supervisory relationships that model a trusting, collaborative style of communication (e.g., open, honest, and reflective) can inspire and empower teachers to interact with children and families in the same way. If the supervisory relationship is competitive or judgmental, then the staff may feel comfortable establishing that same sort of relationship with their children and families.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF SUPERVISION?

Perhaps the most difficult position to be in, personally or professionally, is when we must admit we are vulnerable, at risk, in need of help, or unsure what to do. Structured supervision communicates that there *will* be times when staff may not know what to do, but that there is someone—and a time and place—dedicated to helping them express their feelings, problem solve, and strategize.

Supervisors may encounter some resistance in their conversations with staff that will require patience. Individuals may be more comfortable discussing professional needs and demands (e.g., I need more supplies in my room; there should be shorter work hours; the pay should be better) than more personal issues (e.g., maintaining control of emotions and perspective when managing a difficult child; interacting with a threatening





parent; acknowledging one’s own struggles with depression). It is at these times when supportive supervision is most tested, but most needed.

If supervision is a place where staff feel judged or evaluated, then the opportunity for reflection and discussion is lost and meaningful growth is compromised. Confidentiality is essential. It’s important for supervisors to help staff feel safe enough to take risks within the relationship. This may mean a staff person telling the supervisor they disagree, or that they need personal mental health resources. The supervisor may need to share difficult aspects of her own experience in order to establish trust. When the supervisee can truly feel that the supervisor can understand and share her experience, then the two can work together more effectively.

Another strategy to use in establishing supervisory relationships is to use supportive messages like those encouraged for parents dealing with adversity. For example, messages such as—*“You have strengths,” “Reflect on what you need,”* and *“Take care of yourself”*— can build resilience among staff and let supervisees know that they are valued partners in the program.

It Takes Two: Sharing the Responsibility for Supportive Supervision

As the supervisory relationship develops over time, supervisors and supervisees should share the responsibility for the quality and content of the relationship. *How does the relationship feel? How is the time used? What topics require more attention?* Shared responsibility begins with the concrete task of scheduling time for supervision. Time should be regular and ongoing. Preserving this time to build teamwork and brainstorm about how to develop the work is a true gift and should be valued. Being committed, coming prepared, and taking time to reflect on the week’s activities will keep the meeting most productive.

When thinking about how to begin a supervisory relationship—or renewing an existing one— consider:

- Taking time to identify and understand staff’s personal investment in their work. Ask about the challenges and rewards of the work.
- Observing the staff member in action. This provides first hand information to discuss in a supervisory session.
- Encouraging the sharing of experiences and reactions to the work.
- Celebrating examples of professional development.
- Honestly identifying challenges and devising strategies to address them in a way that reinforces staff’s commitment to their personal and professional development.

To create a mutual conversation in supervision, you may want to consider the following topics, exploring each from one’s unique perspective:

- What are your strengths as a staff member? What do you see as your weaknesses or areas for growth?
- What are you bringing to your particular role from your training, and from your life experiences? How do these things help you—or hinder you—in your work?
- What does this work mean to you personally? What are the things about it that you connect to meaningfully?
- What are the aspects that challenge you, or even scare or worry you?
- How do you deal with stress or challenges, like the ones we just talked about?
- What do you need in your role to do the best work you can do, and to grow in your role? How do you see supervision meeting some of these needs? What other resources should we look for?

Sometimes observing the staff member at work provides additional data for a supervisory dialogue. When a supervisor sees a person teaching or communicating with a family, then she has material to work with. She can describe what seems to be working or not, and the supervisee can refer to actual events.

Over time, a supervisor and supervisee should assess their progress together. Three key areas for both parties to explore are: **knowledge**, **skills**, and **meaning**.

- **Knowledge** means, do I have the information I need to do my job well? Does supervision teach, offer guidance or provide material to help me better understand the children and families I work with and my role in their lives? Am I comfortable expressing my questions, feelings of uncertainty or confusion to my supervisor? Do my questions get addressed in a way that is useful?
- Does knowledge translate into **effective skills** in my work? Am I supported in trying new strategies, or refining my current practices to make them more effective? When things aren’t working, do I share these struggles with my supervisor so that we can develop alternatives together? When my supervisor is concerned about something I’ve done, is that concern shared in a way that feels nonthreatening?
- Does supervision bring **meaning** to my work by building my competence and confidence? What are the values, beliefs, and assumptions that I bring to my work—and that my supervisor brings?

Supportive supervision should aim to develop staff in all three of these areas by developing new knowledge, turning that knowledge into actual skills and strategies, and building a meaningful professional presence that provides support to children and families. A supervisor should strive to build her own set of tools for fostering professional growth of staff, learn new things in the process of sharing experience, and provide a safe space for reflection.





Supervisor Strategies: Establishing a Supportive and Healthy Learning Community

1. Establish a regular and protected time for supervision.

Even if it has to happen by telephone or only once a month, finding time communicates to everyone in the system that supervision is critical for our work with children and families. Protecting staff time for reflection encourages individuals to carry the lessons learned through the reflective process into their daily work.

2. Share the power. Have an ongoing dialogue with your supervisees about the structure, content, process, timing, and tone of supervision. This offers an opportunity for staff to reflect on what type of supervisory relationship they would like to have and how to negotiate needs together. Ask staff to consider with you how you can work together to respond to a complex situation. This can provide your staff with an opportunity to consider different viewpoints within a system and reinforce teamwork.

3. Accentuate the positives among your staff and in the work that they do. Staff need to be reassured about their knowledge and expertise. A non-“top down” approach to supervision gives staff the feeling that they are a valuable member of a team. Staff may feel encouraged to reflect on their own professional competencies and goals.

4. Try to listen without judging what your staff is experiencing (e.g., how it is affecting their mood, concentration, motivation, ability to connect with others and the demands on you). What are their emotional reactions to what they experience? Often our own agenda overshadows another’s very real human experience, preventing us from seeing the important pieces of the picture.

5. Model healthy ways to manage conflict. By creating a safe and professional space where staff can talk about conflict, you help each other to understand better the roots of problems and strategize about how to address them.

6. Make time for reflection inside and outside of supervision. Reflection allows us to consider our reactions, responses and options. Taking time to non-judgmentally consider how effective our response was in a past situation can help prepare us for similar situations in the future.

7. Remember that you are not alone. Call on the resources available to you in your agency, community, extended network or your own supervisors. Staff will work more effectively when they have the support that they need, and so will supervisors.

8. Establish healthy boundaries. Know your time and content boundaries. This is emotional work, and self-care is essential for you and your supervisee. When you become available to staff in more emotional ways, you will need to take time for yourself to rejuvenate, reflect, and make time for your own supervision and support.

One of the joys of working with families of young children is that it is an opportunity for everyone’s growth: the child, the parent, and the Head Start staff. Supportive supervision is the primary way in which the growth of the staff is attended to. The shared experience of supervisor and supervisee assures that no one is alone in doing this very important work. Just as staff feel that their work is meaningful when families grow, so supervisors find satisfaction in knowing that staff are cared for and increasingly competent.





For more support on this topic, please see the following Family Connections Materials:

Short Papers:

Encouraging an Expressive Environment: Supportive communication from the inside out
Fostering Resilience in Families Coping with Depression: Practical ways Head Start staff can help families build on their power to cope.
Self-Reflection and Shared Reflection as Professional Tools

Trainings:

Module Three: *Encouraging an Expressive Environment*
Module Four: *Better Communication*

Additional Resources

Campbell, Susan. "Caretaking in a Nurturing Way: Replicating Relationship-Based Reflective Models in Healthy Families Programs." *Zero to Three* 25, no. 5 (2005): 17-22.

Fenichel, Emily, ed. *Learning Through Supervision and Mentorship to Support the Development of Infants, Toddlers, and their Families: A Source Book*. Arlington, VA: Zero to Three, 1992.

Parlakian, Rebecca. *Look, Listen, and Learn: Reflective Supervision and Relationship-Based Work*. Washington, DC: Zero to Three, 2001.

Parlakian, Rebecca. *Reflective Supervision: Stories from the Field*. Arlington, VA: Zero to Three, 2002.

Pitkin, Ann. and Trudi Norman-Murch. "Toward Relational, Reflective, Nurturing Practice in Multisite Programs." *Zero to Three* 25, no. 5 (2005): 23-28.



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