

Case Study: Exploring the Importance and the impact of having an effective supervision process within the early years

A case study by Gillian Isaac-Lovett



Gillian Isaac-Lovett has worked within early years for nearly 30 years with many of these being in a leadership role. She currently works as an Operations Manager for the Charnwood Nursery & Pre-school group and is also supporting settings through the Covid -19 Recovery Expert and Mentor Programme. She has recently completed a MA in Integrated Working with Children and their Families in the Early Years and has undertaken training in the Solihull Approach which is where her interest and deeper understanding of supervision began, having a greater understanding of theories has enabled her support other practitioners within her roles.

BACKGROUND

Whilst studying for a Master's Degree I became interested in the impact of supervision on the practitioner. As I reflected on my experience of supervision, I felt that as a manager I naturally adopted the responsibility of 'supervisor,' a term that originally derived from clinical and social care professions and has been described as a reflective and supportive space between professionals and individuals centring on the welfare of the client (Scaife 2001). I became responsible for conducting supervisions as a supervisor for a large team of practitioners along with domestic staff and administrative staff. When I adopted this role, I had little understanding of what was required for an effective supervision and little training with the process which was used primarily as a managerial tool, used to monitor performance.

As my role progressed to Operations Manager, I became interested in the process and impact of an effective supervision which has led me to my research in this area. Completing the research has enabled me to have a deeper understanding of the importance of the process, the skills needed and how this impacts the quality of the experience for the practitioners, which in turn has a positive impact on the children and their families.

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SUPERVISION IN THE EARLY YEARS

Supervisions were highlighted as a recommendation following The Early Years: Foundations for life, health and learning independent report.

It recommended that 'The EYFS is clear what supervision means in practice, including some good practice examples, and that settings should agree their own procedures for supervision' (Tickell 2011:60).

Following this The Department for Education 2012 Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage stated that 'Providers must put appropriate arrangements in place for the supervision of staff who have contact with children and families' (Department for Education 2012:17), this remains a statutory requirement today stating that supervision should 'provide opportunities for staff to:

Discuss any issues – particularly concerning children's development or well-being, including child protection concerns

Identify solutions to address issues as they arise

Receive coaching to improve their personal effectiveness' (Department for Education:2021:26



The Statutory framework highlights the minimum requirement and is open to interpretation. Whilst supervision can support and develop practice it can also cause misunderstanding as it is not always fully understood by those who work within early years settings. It has the ability to be used as a reflective space to support all staff including managers and leaders who can often be overlooked (Soni 2019).

I will use the following case study of 'Beth' to illustrate key findings from my research looking at the supervision process carried out within my setting, extracts of data have been reviewed exploring the relationship between the findings and the impact of supervision on the practitioner. Extracts shared are taken from journals and focus group discussions; these are written in italics.

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'BETH'

'I prefer to have my supervision with someone who knows me, I was supposed to have mine with someone else who doesn't know me or know what was going on in my life. Now I am having my supervision with G I am happy and no longer anxious'.



'To make the deepest changes the relationship between supervisee and supervisor needs to be based on a high level of mutual trust and confidence (Owen 2008:63).

Owen (2008) suggests that supervisor and supervisee develop together as they embark on a connected journey although separately. He believes long standing supervision relationships have the ability to move through conflict and challenge as they build a deep level of trust. However, he argues this may be due to the conditional context of the supervision space being safe and confidential rather than mutual trust, a long-standing supervisor/supervisee relationship may also enter times of immovability. Where this occurs, it is important that it is recognised by either party and changes made to enable the supervision process to continue to be effective.

I have acted as Beth's supervisor for over two years and initially found her resistant and less open in earlier supervisions. As our supervision relationship has grown, I feel that we have experienced mutual learning which has enabled creativity and an opportunity to explore concepts and their purpose.

Owen (2008:50) suggests 'Supervision should be used as a means of inquiry and not a tool for control' making a mindful supervision a 'potent agent for change' (Ryan 2008:70). I feel that mindful supervision is enabled through a developing relationship of the supervisor and supervisee. I believe that Winnicott's (1965) concept of 'holding' has allowed Beth's relationship as a supervisee to evolve with me as her supervisor.

Winnicott describes the 'holding environment as a developmental stage in which the child and their mother are as one. The unaware child relies upon the good enough mother to hold them in safe place from birth to survive imagined dangers to their existence. The mother remains calm understanding the child's rage creating a space to survive the child's aggression and rage as the child uses this space to think, learn, trust, and play. From this the child can progress from unity with their mother to individual existence.

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For this to occur the caregiver must have empathy, imagination and love, lack of holding on the mothers' part can result in lack of harmony and a distant attitude within the relationship. I feel I have been able to create a holding environment as I have built an understanding of Beth, being aware of the concerns and issues she has raised in the past allows me to recognise and understand what she is feeling in following supervisions 'holding her in mind'. Recognising these feelings provides a reliable and consistent space for feeling and thinking.

I feel that where the supervisor has empathetic qualities and cares about the practitioners, respecting and valuing their supervision as vital time for reflection needed to prevent burnout. The early years workforce continually deals with daily routine stresses and emotionally fuelled situations which Hochschild (1983) refers to as emotional labour. Without the opportunity for individuals to share these experiences, be understood and contained, contributes to practitioners experiencing anxiety, placing them at risk of burnout. I believe that the supervisor needs to have the commitment to understand the whole person and for me wellbeing is a priority that should be discussed at the beginning of a supervision. Establishing wellbeing at the beginning of the supervision enables the supervisor and the supervisee to reflect upon why experiences have been responded to in a certain way.



Recognising wellbeing builds resilience not only in children but also in adults and can be significant for learning. Where wellbeing is recognised, and work life balance is understood, enables the person to reflect upon challenges and manage these successfully. Supervision is an opportunity to engage in this form of reflection and has shown to enhance an individual's wellbeing (Parker 2019).

Gauging and acknowledging wellbeing at the start of a supervision enables me as a supervisor to understand where containment is needed throughout and respond appropriately, which in turn provides the practitioner the ability to think, making the process a productive reflective space for the practitioner to discuss their workload. By understanding the practitioners work life balance and other issues affecting their wellbeing can support them in fulfilling their role successfully (John 2019).

Beth shares that she is no longer anxious now that she is able to have her supervision with someone who knows her. Elfer et al (2021) suggest practitioners need to feel that they can talk to someone who will understand and manage their anxieties and what they need to talk about. Talking through threatening or anxiety provoking issues and ideas requires not only a supportive ear but requires the supervisor who can listen, think about them, and return the anxiety back to the supervisee in a more manageable way, a concept called containment (Bion 1962).

Beth is conscious of what she needs from her supervisor and is she no longer anxious as she knows that her fundamental psychological needs will be met based upon her previous supervisions.

'Supervisions for me are a reset and allow me to regain focus for what I need to do. It is also a mental containment and a chance to vent. I was given targets to obtain which were decided by both of us. I felt they were achievable'.

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The concept 'Containment' (Bion 1962) was introduced to me and my setting through The Solihull Approach (Heart Of England 2020). Initially introduced as a parenting intervention programme it presents three areas/theories; containment, reciprocity, and behaviour management as tools to support 'good' parenting. The fundamental elements have developed and are now incorporated to promote practitioners' wellbeing and effectiveness. Beth is aware of the term 'containment' as my setting is passionate about the approach, embedding the concept with practitioners over the last few years as a tool to support them as well as children and parents.

It is clear Beth needs her supervision to offload her emotional state and uses this to create space for her to think. Klein (1959), suggests when an individual feels a certain way, such as displeased, they will subconsciously project their state of mind onto others. Unconsciously needing someone to contain and reflect these anxieties back in a way that is more manageable (Bion 1962), this can enable an individual to offload when they feel hurt, preventing them from hurting back (John 2019).

By using supervision to contain her 'venting' and allowing a space for her to share her emotional labour, prevents her from projecting her feelings and impulses onto others, a concept known as emotional contagion (Hatfield 1993). This concept describes how people mirror the emotion and behaviour that they observe and reflect this onto other practitioners, children, and their families. Where supervision is not conducted effectively and does not acknowledge low wellbeing in a practitioner, in my opinion decreases performance and can create negative energy which can influence others in their work.

The relationship between Beth, the children and their families can be mirrored in the practitioner/supervisor relationship. Beth understands the needs of the children, the supervisor understands the needs of Beth. This is discussed through the supervision enabling Beth to organise her thoughts. It is suggested that any uncomfortable feelings should be used as a starting point for inquiry into a supervision as the more feelings that are brought into our consciousness the more chance, we have of understanding what is going on with the children and their families (Shohet et al 2020).



Beth shares that her targets were decided jointly with the supervisor. The supervisor/supervisee relationship should be collegial, being an equal relationship although the supervisor is more resourced than the practitioner (Hewson 2008). Where supervisors recognise their practitioners to be competent, the authority between the roles is shared.

This can be found especially when creating actions from supervision discussions. Where the supervisor is doubtful about the practitioner's competence and trust worthiness the supervisor asserts their power and authority (Bogo et al 2008).

From the extract it can be suggested that Beth's goals are generated co-operatively with the supervisor. This reflects positive interdependence as Beth and the supervisor work towards co-operation which requires investment in a committed and caring relationship (Johnson and Johnson 2009). Beth's consistent, regular supervision process, being supervised by someone she feels comfortable with has enabled her to identify and create her own targets linked to her work.

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HOW MY RESEARCH HAS INFLUENCED MY SETTING

Prior to my research our supervision process was dominated by performance management and professional development, it was used as a managerial tool to monitor performance and accountability. In contrast I have found that for effective supervision there should be emphasis on the supportive/restorative and educative/development needs of the practitioner, highlighting that having a space for them to communicate the emotional content of their work with young children encourages reflection and problem solving.



I have recognised that practitioners require time and communication enabling them to feel valued, giving them the opportunity to share emotionally fuelled situations and routine stresses that they endure throughout their daily work (Hochschild 1983). Recognising that my values and beliefs are commitment and respect (a set of principles that influence me) has made me appreciate why I feel so strongly about providing regular good quality supervisions to the whole staff team (Stern 2000).

Following my research I implemented my findings at my setting, remodelling, and training supervisors in the supervision process.

supervisors now comment:

- *That they have a better understanding of the importance of supervision.*
- *That they understand their responsibilities as a supervisor and the responsibilities of the supervisee.*
- *They understand that supervisions need to be conducted in safe, reflective space with no interruptions or distractions.*
- *As a supervisor they must be emotionally available to the practitioner.*
- *As practitioners we have professional love for the children, we now reflect that to the practitioner. The practitioners are our key children.*
- *That effective supervisions are required to protect individuals from 'burnout' and promote job satisfaction.*
- *Reflective supervision has better outcomes for children.*
- *We all need the opportunity for supervision regardless of our position and responsibilities.*

Practitioners who have been supervised say:

- *Supervisions are a positive experience that I look forward to.*
- *It allows me to discuss my key children and address concerns or challenges that I am having.*
- *Supervisors always listen and ask me questions that enable me to solve my own problems.*
- *If wellbeing is low, supervisors are supportive.*
- *My supervision acts as my reset and I am clear about what I need to do to support my key children.*
- *Supervision gives me the opportunity to discuss experiences that I am struggling with at work and at home.*

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The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Evidence Store provides evidence informed approaches and practices to support practitioners in the early years.



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The Department for Education Help for Early Years Providers website offers resources, activity ideas and advice for teaching maths to early years children.



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