

Reflective Supervision

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Just as Head Start and Early Head Start staff strive to engage parents and families in healthy, trusting, and respectful relationships, it is important that staff have the same kind of relationships with colleagues and supervisors. Supervision is not only about staff accountability. It also involves the commitment to nurture and guide staff so that they have the tools to engage children and families successfully. Effective relationships between supervisors and staff contribute to the 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 Head Start and Early Head Start staff, families, and children. Structured supervision maintains staff productivity and reinforces the goal of caregiving within the program.

Supervision is more than a program requirement. Like the relationship between a Head Start and Early Head Start professional and a family, the supervisory relationship can offer the same qualities of mutual care and respect, as well as opportunities for safety, trust, and positive change. Supervision is an opportunity for leadership to use the strategies of reflection to foster growth, reinforce strengths, and encourage resilience. In addition to giving staff the encouragement and guidance they need, it also keeps leadership in touch with the real issues that the program faces.

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. 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. An effective strategy for establishing safety is using messages like those we use with our families. 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 them know that they are valued partners in the program.

As the supervisory relationship develops over time, supervisors and staff can 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 scheduling regular time for supervision. Preserving this time to build teamwork and brainstorm about how to develop the work is a true gift and should be valued.

Supervisor Strategies: Modeling Positive Goal-Oriented Relationships

When we provide supervision, we also have the opportunity to model effective strategies to build relationships with families. It is a parallel process. How we behave with staff models how we want staff

to interact with families. The strength-based attitudes and relationship-based practices for working with families can be adapted to build relationships with our staff.

Strength-based Attitudes:

- Staff deserve the support and respect we are asking them to give families.
- Staff are our partners with a critical role in achieving outcomes.
- Staff have expertise about their own fields of practice.
- Staff's contributions are valuable and important.

Relationship-based Practices:

1. Reflect on staff's perspective

Have an ongoing dialogue with your staff that allows them to have input 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 goals and needs together. Ask staff to consider with you how you can work together to respond to complex situations. This can provide staff with an opportunity to consider different viewpoints within a system and reinforce teamwork.

2. Support staff's competence

Accentuate the positives among staff members and in the work that they do. Staff need to be reassured about their knowledge and expertise. A non-"top down" approach to supervision helps staff feel that they are a valuable member of a team. Staff may feel encouraged to reflect on their own professional competencies and goals, recognize their contributions, and feel safe to explore their challenges.

3. Focus on the family-staff relationship

As you provide guidance to staff, you can work with them to learn new skills for working with families. Use strategies that focus the conversation on taking apart what's working and what's not, and how they can use that information to determine next steps with the family.

4. Value the staff's passion

Try to listen to what the staff is experiencing without judging. This may include how different situations affect their mood, concentration, motivation, ability to connect with others, and the demands on you. What are their emotional reactions to what they experience? By creating a safe and professional space where staff can talk about their real emotions, you help each other to better understand the roots of problems and strategize about how to address them.

5. Make time for your own reflection

As a supervisor, you often put your staff's needs before your own. Reflection allows us to consider our reactions, responses, and options. Make time to reflect on your own experiences, goals, and challenges. Reflection on a past situation can help us prepare for similar events in the future. This is emotional work, and self-care is essential for you and staff. When you become available to staff in more emotional ways, you will need to take time for yourself to rejuvenate, reflect, and focus on your own professional development. Explore what helps you feel refreshed and inspired to learn and grow. What role can your supervisor play in your growth? How can your supervisor give you the best chance at the success?

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 and Early Head Start staff and supervisors. Reflective

supervision is the primary way in which programs can attend to the growth of staff. The shared experience of supervisor and staff 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 expanding their skills and finding meaning in their work.

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