



## The pivotal role of child welfare supervisors in implementing an agency's practice model

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### ABSTRACT

This article describes the essential role of supervision in the implementation of child welfare practice models with a focus on one agency's permanency practice model. The authors outline the essential components of child welfare supervision and related supervisory activities that promote a practice model designed to ensure that children and youth in foster care achieve safety, permanency and well-being.

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### 1. Introduction

Increasingly, child welfare systems in states and counties across the United States are implementing practice models based on coherent sets of principles and values that undergird their practice with children and families and that specify outcomes to be achieved around the goals of safety, permanence and well-being. Given their essential role in educating and supporting social workers and assuring that the needs of children, youth and families are met, supervisors play a pivotal role in the complex tasks that are involved in implementing and embedding their agency's practice model. In this article, we synthesize the literature around child welfare supervision and practice model implementation and explore the fundamental role of the supervisor in child welfare generally and practice model implementation in particular. We draw on the permanency practice model developed by Casey Family Services, a private foster care agency in New England and Baltimore, and the supervisory model that that agency developed to implement its permanency practice model. We make the case that the supervision model and the practice model should parallel each other with the values and principles that

inform the practice model applying to supervision. We argue that practice model implementation is facilitated when the agency supervision model is aligned with its practice model (see [Liddle, 1988](#)). Throughout this article, permanency refers to a child's exit from foster care to a safe and legal permanent parent(s) who provides for the child's well-being. As such, permanency incorporates the concepts of safety and well-being.

### 2. Literature review

The importance of supervision in child welfare social work practice has long been recognized. The realities of child welfare practice – delivery of services mandated and funded by external resources, problems involving high risk, involuntary clients, and a high number of inexperienced caseworkers with limited related education – require skilled supervisors to prepare caseworkers to assume their responsibilities and ensure the provision of quality services to vulnerable children, youth and families ([Hess, Kanak, & Atkins, 2009](#); [Landsman, 2007](#); [Shireman, 2003](#)). While training of child welfare staff can introduce new information and present the agency practice model, supervision provides the base from which front line practitioners apply knowledge and refine their skills in working with children, youth and families; put the agency's practice model's policies and procedures into actual practice; receive guidance and feedback on their implementation of the agency's case practice model; remain motivated in performing their jobs well; and develop critical

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thinking skills in child welfare decision-making (Fisher, 2009; Lietz, 2010; Rzepnicki & Johnston, 2005).

Research demonstrates the central role of supervisors in aligning social workers' direct practice with the agency's practice model. It is the agency's practice model that provides staff with explicit guidance on how they are expected to work to achieve improved outcomes for children, youth and families (National Resource Center for Organizational Improvement, 2009, 2011). Because child welfare supervisors play a key role in promoting a focus on client outcomes as defined by the agency's practice model (Southern Regional Quality Improvement Center, n.d.a.), they have been described as the "standard bearers for good practice" (Spigner, 2010) and the lynchpin to improving child welfare practice (Collins-Camargo, 2005). Child welfare supervisors play a critical role in meeting organizational demands for accountability and effectiveness (Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, 2009; National Resource Center for Organizational Improvement, 2009).

A number of studies clearly document the connection between supervision and client outcomes. A recent study by the University of Kentucky found that 81% of the child welfare staff from the six states surveyed believed that supervision was very important to the provision of effective casework (Southern Regional Quality Improvement Center, n.d.b.). Studies have found a relationship between quality supervision and front line practitioners' ability to define next steps in their cases and set limits (Banuch, 1999); provision of increased services to vulnerable clients (McGrew & Bond, 1997); improved analytic and assessment skills (Berkman & Press, 1993); stronger skills in client engagement, particularly with involuntary clients (Bibus, 1993); and improved client goal attainment (Harkness, 1995).

### 2.1. Roles of the child welfare supervisor

The best known framework for child welfare supervision, developed by Kadushin and Harkness (2002), identifies three key roles for the child welfare supervisor: education, support, and administration (see also Caspe & Reid, 2002; Lietz, 2010; National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2010). Kadushin and Harkness (2002) define *educational supervision* as addressing the knowledge, attitudes and skills required to do the job effectively; *supportive supervision* as improving worker morale and job satisfaction by helping with job-related discouragement and giving staff a sense of worth as professionals, a sense of belonging in the agency, and a sense of security in their performance; and *administrative supervision* as ensuring adherence to agency policy and procedures and provision of oversight to ensure accountability and effectiveness. These roles are inherent in supervisors' role in building a learning culture within the agency and providing support for moving beyond the status quo and acknowledging and addressing conflict (Austin & Hopkins, 2004). Several states have used this framework in developing their child welfare supervisory models, including Maine (Maine Department of Health and Human Resources, 2005) and Iowa (University of Iowa School of Social Work and the Iowa Department of Human Services, 2009).

In a recent study, the National Resource Center on Organizational Improvement (NRCOI) and the National Resource Center on Foster Care and Permanency Planning (NRCFCPP) asked administrators, supervisors and others interested in supervision about the key responsibilities of supervisors in each of these three roles (Collins-Camargo, 2010). Respondents most frequently identified as the "most important" supervisory responsibilities those related to practice model implementation, including case staffing and reviews and developing and monitoring social workers' practice (the education function); anticipating and managing personal safety risks and preventing and addressing secondary traumatic stress and burnout of social workers (the support function), and recruiting and selecting staff (the administrative function) (Collins-Camargo, 2010).

A commonly expressed concern in the literature and among child welfare professionals is that the administrative role of child welfare supervisors is often overemphasized to the detriment of the education and support functions, despite research highlighting the critical roles of education and support of front line practitioners (Strand & Badger, 2005; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). In a recent study involving frontline practitioners, supervisors and administrators/managers about the roles of supervisors, respondents emphasized the critical importance of child welfare supervisors' educational and supportive functions (Hess et al., 2009). They cited the importance of supervision in ensuring that staff with a range of educational backgrounds and prior experience master and apply child welfare knowledge and skills and the agency's practice model in their day-to-day practice with children, youth and families (Hess et al., 2009). A study by the University of Kentucky found that the majority of child welfare staff (45%) believed that the primary responsibility of supervisors was to support the work of front line practitioners. Far smaller percentages stated that the primary responsibility was to monitor practice (25%); ensure policy compliance (10%); make casework decisions (7%); train staff (3%); or perform administrative duties (3%) (Yankeelov, Barbee, Sullivan, & Antel, 2009).

Other studies have found that educational supervision or "task assistance" is associated with front line practitioners' ability to achieve positive outcomes with children, youth and families (Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009; Westbrook et al., 2006). Specifically, this research highlights child welfare supervisors' roles in modeling, coaching, and engaging social workers in discussions relating to ethics and ethical decision making (Lightfoot, 2009). Research also has found that supervisory social and emotional support and supervisory interpersonal interactions play a significant role in reducing levels of social anxiety, stress, depression, and somatic complaints for front line social workers, lessening burn-out and lowering turnover (Juby & Scannapieco, 2007; Mor Barak et al., 2009; Renner, Porter, & Preister, 2009; Westbrook et al., 2006). Further, research suggests that supervisors can be the counter-balancing force in organizational structures that inherently tend toward homeostasis, normalizing the anxiety and discomfort of staff as they take the risks that are inevitable in learning new skills associated with the agency's practice model (Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006). One study found that when supervisors promote constructive organizational cultures – which focus on achievement, client responsiveness, and competency (as opposed to passive defensive cultures that focus on conformity, rule following and blaming) – the probability of clients receiving needed services is almost five times greater (Glisson & Green, 2006).

### 2.2. Challenges to quality child welfare supervision

Recent assessments have identified growing concerns among public child welfare leaders about the quality of child welfare supervision. In one study, child welfare leaders from ten states in the rural South agreed that quality child welfare supervision had the potential to significantly improve the child welfare system as a whole. Nonetheless, they identified a number of problems that undermined the quality of child welfare supervision: difficulty retaining supervisors; an overemphasis on the administrative aspects of supervision; lack of experience on the part of supervisors prior to promotion; the perception that line supervisors are just "another level" of bureaucracy and do not play an important role in service provision; and lack of clarity as to what supervisors should be doing on a daily basis (Collins-Camargo, 2005). The Social Work Policy Institute (2011) identified a number of challenges to the ability of child welfare supervisors to fulfill their education, support, and administrative roles. These challenges fell into two critical areas that are essential to practice model implementation: first, training and knowledge development and second, organizational issues that

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