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PSDP - Resources and Tools: Practising relationship-based social work


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Introduction

The primary resources social workers have when working with children and families, social work colleagues and other professionals are *themselves* and *the relationships* they establish with each other. Over the past few years the term ‘relationship-based practice’ has become widely used and influential across the social work sector.

Despite it being rooted in a well-established knowledge base, it is not uncommon to hear social workers and managers referring to practicing in a ‘relationship-based way’, but if asked to explain what this means there is often an embarrassed silence. The danger of this state of affairs is that relationship-based practice remains elusive and aspirational, as opposed to tangible and deliverable.

Whilst it remains insufficiently defined, it is impossible for professionals to know how to be relationship-based in their practice, what skills and knowledge they need to practice in this way, and what support they require to develop and sustain it.

To address this knowledge gap, this briefing begins by setting out the theory underpinning relationship-based practice, moves on to identify the core features of relationship-based practice, and concludes by exploring the roles and responsibilities of supervisors and organisations to create the necessary conditions for it to flourish.

Given the challenges associated with articulating what relationship-based practice exactly is, this briefing uses reflective prompts to help you apply the ideas to your own practice and practice scenarios to highlight what it might look or, more importantly, *feel* like in everyday practice.

What do we mean by relationship-based practice?

Recognising and responding to emotions

For social workers, relationships are the means through which they work collaboratively with individuals and families to establish a shared understanding of what needs to be done, and by whom, in order for the concerns about a child's wellbeing to be resolved.

In emotionally heightened situations, however, the behaviour of individuals can create considerable challenges for establishing constructive relationships. Above all else, social work practitioners and practice supervisors need to understand the impact of anxiety on responses to social work interventions. Anxiety, a foundational emotional response from which other responses come, can trigger powerful feelings, particularly of shame and guilt. These affective responses are then manifested in behaviours ranging from violent hostility and passive aggression through to depression, avoidance, and withdrawal from engagement.

Whilst such responses are common to everyone, the extent to which different cultural contexts permit the expression of emotions does vary. The skill of the relationship-based practitioner, when relating to individuals (children and adults) and families who are displaying such behaviours is, firstly, to be alert to the impact of these anxiety-ridden

behaviours on their own professional conduct and responses and, secondly, to think about how cultural factors might be impacting on an individual's behaviour, as well as the responses of professionals. An understanding of the theories informing relationship-based practice can assist this learning process.



Reflective questions:

- > Does the description above around powerful feelings being triggered seem familiar to you? Can you think of an example?
- > In your role as a practice supervisor, how do you think about the impact of anxiety on both practitioners and yourself?
- > Are you ever left with feelings at the end of supervision sessions which you did not have before the session began?

Theoretical underpinnings: psychoanalytic insights

Central to relationship-based practice are concepts derived from psychoanalytic theory (Bower and Solomon, 2018). The concepts referred to below are associated with Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein. The essence of their work and ideas focuses on how unconscious experiences are expressed in everyday relationships.

Three pivotal psychoanalytic concepts that are present in all relationships, and which are often more pronounced in the anxiety-provoking contexts that social workers find themselves in with parents and children, are:

- > **Transference** - the re-enactment in a contemporary context of behaviours associated with earlier significant, usually parental, relationships. An example of this dynamic could be in the context of a single parent, Mandy, who has had personal experience of disapproving and punitive parents. The way Mandy behaves towards her social worker, Shabana, provokes a disapproving and punitive response. Shabana is surprised by her own response as she does not normally associate herself with such behaviour. Being aware of the emotional responses being triggered by such interactions, as opposed to acting on them, is a core professional skill that social workers need to acquire.
- > **Splitting** - arises from the infant's earliest developmental task of reconciling oppositional feelings of love and hate, good and bad towards their primary carers. If the infant has carers who help them to manage these powerful feelings they will develop their capacity to accept that everyone has elements that are good and bad. In situations where this developmental experience has not been so fully resolved a more primitive 'split' response will prevail. For example, in social work contexts parents might only see their social worker as interfering and 'bad', unable to acknowledge that she is in some respects 'good' and endeavouring to offer support to improve their parenting.
- > **Projection** - as outlined below in the practice study, difficult, unbearable feelings - anger, fear, depression, hate - can be unconsciously relocated into another person, who may not always recognise them and can find themselves unexpectedly experiencing them or acting them out.
- > **Containment** - is a psychoanalytic idea that refers to the need we all have for someone to help us process and manage difficult emotions. When social workers speak of being 'full up' at the end of a challenging encounter they are referring to unprocessed emotional experience. The notion of having a 'head too full' of emotional stuff is a good everyday metaphor for feeling 'overwhelmed and uncontained' and the idea of a container refers to someone who

can help an individual process these difficult experiences. The concept of containment comes from Wilfrid Bion (1962) who developed it from his experiences of working with infants and their carers. The diagram below (figure 1) illustrates the dynamics of containment for a child whose family has professional involvement. In the first scenario, the parent's head is too full to be able to receive, understand and respond sensitively to the baby, and the professional's head is equally too 'full' to function reflectively for the parent. In the second diagram, the contained practitioner has the thinking space - perhaps because of a containing supervisory experience - to be able to effectively contain the parent, enabling the parent to respond sensitively to the child.

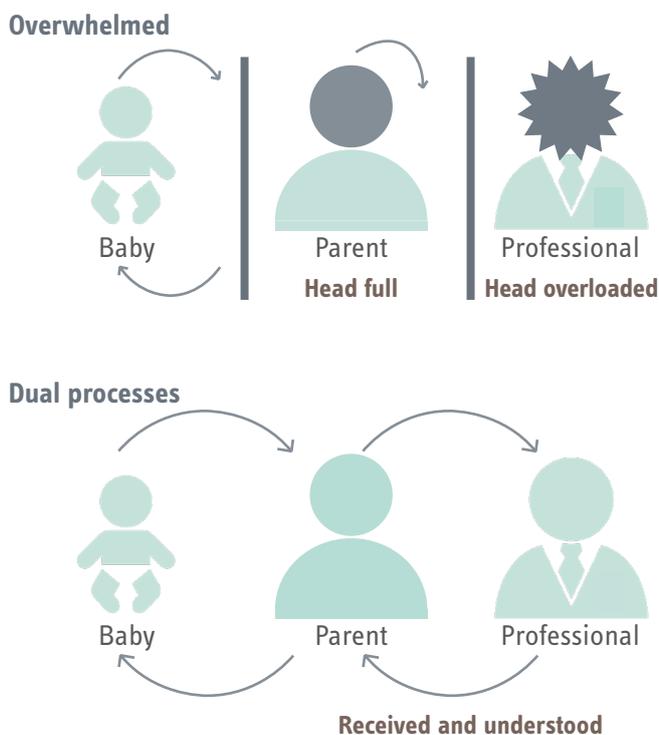


Figure 1 - received, understood, held in mind: sensitive response to babies cues. Reflective functioning: mind-mindedness (Earle et al, 2017)



Practice study 1: understanding and recognising psychoanalytic processes

Keisha is the social worker for Karen and Amy, a same-sex couple with two children aged three and five, where there are concerns about neglect. Keisha is Nigerian by birth, Karen is British-born of African-Caribbean heritage and Amy is White British. Following a routine home visit, Keisha comes away believing she has undertaken everything that was required. On further reflection, however, Keisha realises that despite arriving for the visit feeling quite energised, and initially leaving feeling quite satisfied with how it had gone, she now feels overwhelmingly tired and despondent, feelings she had not been aware of before the visit took place. This realisation might be a reflection of how Keisha has been left experiencing what the parents, Karen and Amy, feel and are unable to acknowledge – in this instance exhausted, demoralised, defeated and depressed. Known in psychoanalytic terms as ‘projection’ – the unconscious displacement of difficult emotions and feelings from one person to another – understanding and recognising this process will enable Keisha to empathise more accurately with how Karen and Amy are coping with the situation.

A common response to families where there is concern about neglect can be an attempt to energise parents by formatting action plans for change and improvement. A key shortcoming of such a response, however, is that it insufficiently acknowledges the emotional challenges parents are facing. In Keisha’s practice, her empathic insight can ensure that how Karen and Amy are feeling is acknowledged. So on a subsequent visit, for example, Keisha can bring the understanding she has gained about the parents’ emotional states into the conversation. This acknowledgment may help Karen and Amy to feel better understood and able to work collaboratively with Keisha to co-produce a more sensitive and accurate action plan.

Integral to relationship-based practice is the capacity to reflect. If social work practitioners have developed their relationship-based practice, they will, by definition, have acquired the skill of 'reflection in action' (Schön, 1983). In Keisha's situation, for example, reflection in action would enable her to recognize and name in the moment her feelings of hopelessness and lack of energy. Known in psychoanalytic contexts as working with 'the process', being reflective requires practitioners and supervisors to be sensitively attuned to their own responses to the behaviours of others, and it takes time to acquire the skill. Recognising and naming these processes can then help everyone involved to more accurately identify focused practice interventions.



Reflective prompts:

- > In your experience, do different cultures express emotions differently and how might you develop your cultural competence in this regard?
- > How might socioeconomic factors such as immigration, employment and family status impact on an individual's anxiety and professional responses?
- > As a practice supervisor, how do you enable social workers to understand the impact of diversity and equality issues on their relationships with children and families?

Theoretical underpinnings: parallel processes

Alongside developing a familiarity with the psychoanalytic dynamics referred to above, practitioners and supervisors need to understand the systemic concept of parallel processes (Dryden and Thorne, 1991). Parallel processes refers to dynamics located in one interpersonal space being re-enacted in another, as illustrated in the practice example below.



Practice study 2: understanding and recognising systemic processes

In the course of supervision, Mark, Keisha's supervisor, notices that whilst Keisha has spoken openly about her work with Karen and Amy (see above), she seems less able to talk about where she's at with Callum, a four-year-old boy whose teacher has expressed concern about his inappropriate sexual behaviour.

Mark feels he is having to push Keisha to open up about Callum's family's circumstances, and is concerned he is being overly forceful and directive towards Keisha. When Mark realises this and acknowledges it with Keisha, he notices she physically relaxes as she responds to Mark, because she had experienced similar feelings when talking with Callum, who was reluctant to speak to her.

Discussing it further, Keisha and Mark were able to see how they had been affected by a parallel process i.e. the dynamics of their supervisory relationship, which had replicated what had happened in the home visit. Callum had managed to project into Keisha his feelings of being 'pushed', making Keisha feel as if she was somehow repeating this intrusive behaviour towards Callum. Mark then further replicated this dynamic with Keisha in supervision by asking a barrage of questions.

Callum's feeling of being pushed and forced may have come from an abusive experience. More information would be required to confirm such a hypothesis, but it is not unreasonable to suggest that Callum may not have felt able to express his feelings verbally and so communicated them in another way. Had Keisha been able to recognise and articulate her experience in the moment - reflect in action - Callum may have felt more understood and able to talk about his feelings and experiences.

Nonetheless, Mark's ability to identify and name the dynamic in supervision provides Keisha with an experience of being contained, as well as additional information to inform her next encounter with Callum.

An awareness of how parallel processes can reproduce dynamics across hierarchical relationships is of critical importance for embedding relationship-based practice within organisations.

For example, social workers who receive predominantly practice management-style supervision, with little attention paid to reflection or the emotional dimensions of practice, are more likely to adopt a more bureaucratic, *authoritarian* style in their relationships with families, compared to social workers receiving reflective supervision.

For this latter group, the experience of having difficult feelings listened to and contained provides them with tools that enable them to adopt a more therapeutic, *authoritative* approach with individuals and families. As a consequence, their capacity to manage challenging behaviours, bear difficult emotions and offer emotional containment is enhanced.

The significance of both practitioners and practice supervisors having an understanding of *parallel processes* is that they can be triggered in all sorts of contexts. It is not uncommon, for example, for professionals to re-enact in the context of a child protection conference the dynamics of the family concerned, with each professional's behaviour replicating the family member they are most closely engaged with.

This can culminate in what is referred to as *conflict by proxy* (Bentovim et al, 2009), with the subsequent dysfunctional and inappropriate conference dynamics making the likelihood of reaching an effective outcome more difficult, unless the conference chair has well-honed insight into what is occurring.

Parallel process can act to both positively enhance, or negatively disrupt, relationships. For practice supervisors to be able to develop and sustain relationship-based supervisory practice, as described above, it is vital that they themselves receive relationship-based supervision. If supervisors receive relationship-based supervision it is more likely they will provide it for their supervisees, who will in turn be better equipped to engage in relationship-based ways with families. In this way a virtuous, as opposed to a vicious, practice circle is established.



Reflective prompts:

- > What connections do you see between the type of supervision you receive and your own practice with children and families?
- > Does your organisation have a more authoritative or authoritarian practice culture? How is this evident?

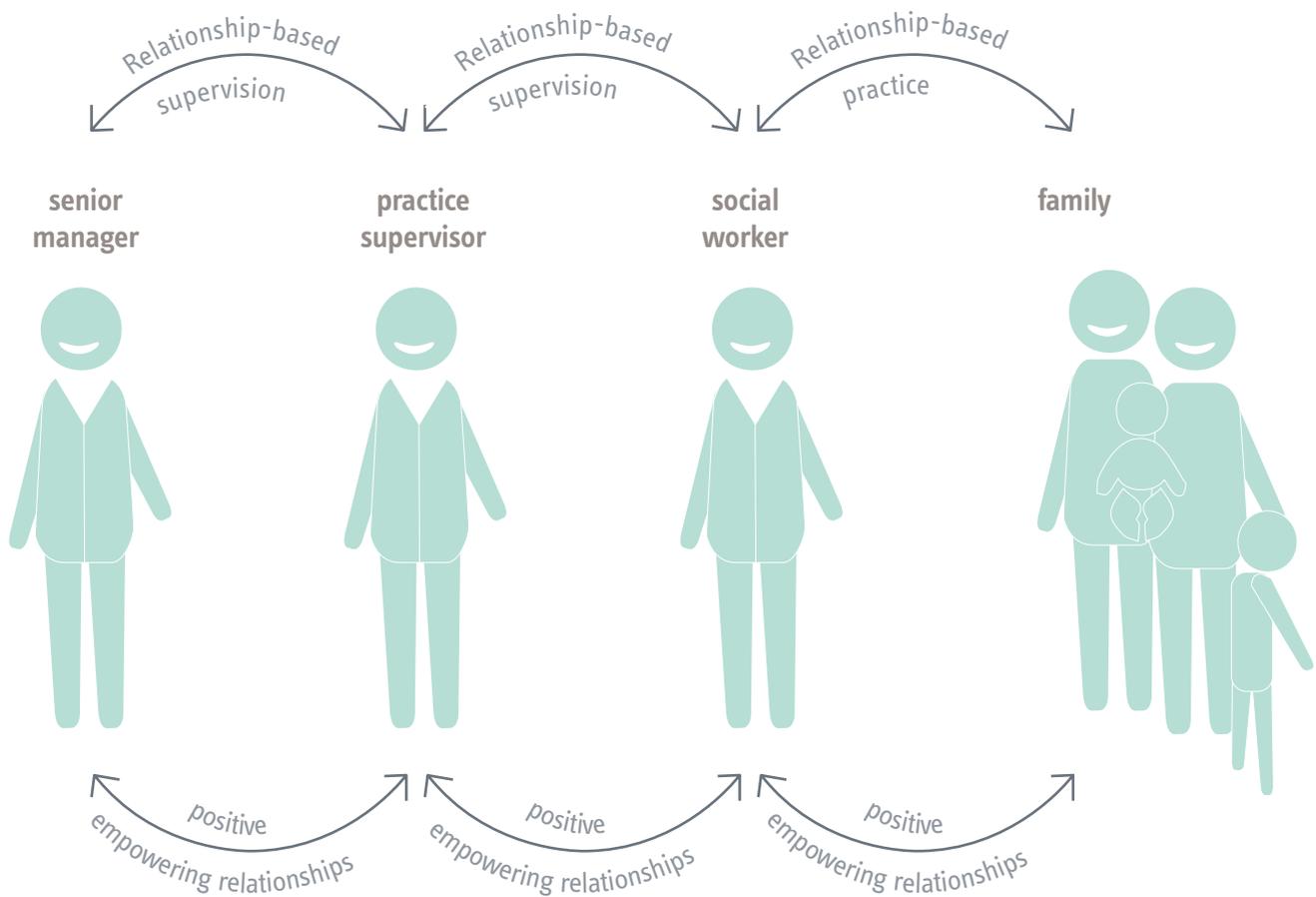


Figure 2 - a model for parallel processes and virtuous circles

This model suggests that for a commitment to relationship-based practice to be effective, it needs to run, like a golden thread, all the way through an organisation.

Developing relationship-based organisations

By paying attention to parallel processes, it becomes clear that relationship-based practice is not restricted to specific areas of an organisation, and should not stop once practitioners become practice supervisors (Ruch, 2012).

Ultimately, the extent to which an organisation has a relationship-based culture is contingent on the extent to which it is promoted by its directors at the top of the organisational hierarchy, and supported and promoted all the way down to social workers in direct practice.

In organisations committed to promoting the safety and wellbeing of children and their families, relationship-based practice is of relevance to all professionals across the social work hierarchy (frontline practitioners, team managers, heads of service, directors of children's services etc.) - no one should consider themselves exempt.

An example of how relationship-based practice can be successfully taken up by a whole organisation is summarised below.



The 'team around the relationship' model

In 2015, Brighton and Hove City Council's children's social work department introduced a whole-system change with the intention of creating a new organisational culture based on relationship-based management and leadership, trust and openness.

Importantly, the focus of the change was not on how social workers undertook relationship-based practice, but how being *employed* by a relationship-based organisation impacted on practice. This specific emphasis was important for shifting the focus of responsibility from individual social workers onto the organisation.

The key features of the 'team around the relationship model' are:

- > small 'pods' with workers who stay with families from referral to closure, providing professional consistency and containment
- > regular externally-facilitated reflective group supervision for all employees.



Figure 3 - 'team around the relationship' model

Below are some of the positive outcomes for families and the organisation since the model was introduced, identified by an **independent evaluation**.

How can relationship-based supervision help?



Reflective prompts:

- > To what extent is your organisation relationship-based?
- > How can an organisation achieve a relationship-based profile?
- > What feedback might you offer to your organisation about its profile? What are the mechanisms available for you to do this?

Relationship-based, reflective and action-oriented supervision styles

From the opening practice study, it is clear that, in order to develop relationship-based practice social work, professionals need to have the willingness and capacity to reflect on their experiences. Relationship-based practice goes hand-in-hand with reflective practice (Ruch, 2018). That said, it is important to make clear that responsibility for the development of relationship-based practice and reflective skills does not rest solely on the shoulders of individual social workers and frontline managers. At the risk of being repetitive it requires *everyone* within an organisation to have access to a relationship-based and reflective supervisor.

Two important, distinctive and inter-related features of relationship-based, reflective supervision are, firstly, the opportunity for detailed practice discussion and, secondly, engaging in emotionally intelligent conversations.

Practice discussion

A commitment to relationship-based and reflective supervision should never be at the expense of action. Sound, effective practice requires reflection *and* action to be carefully balanced.

One way to ensure this is achieved is by dedicating a regular portion of supervision time to a more detailed discussion of currently concerning practices. By allowing practitioners time to more fully explore their involvement with families, there is an increased likelihood of practice supervisors being able to pick up on the interpersonal dynamics discussed above.

This minimises the risk of premature decisions or action plans being drawn up that do not fully reflect the specifics of a particular family's circumstances. It also allows for culturally-sensitive issues to be more fully addressed.

In the example above, a practice discussion about Karen and Amy's circumstances might have been curious about whether the couple had experienced homophobia or racism because of their relationship, which might heighten their anxiety about professional interventions. A small, intensive investment of time in a practice discussion has the potential to generate rich insights that will more accurately inform the next steps to be taken with an individual or family.

Emotionally intelligent conversations

Linked to the focus on practice discussions outlined above, is the opportunity such a focus creates for practitioners and supervisors to explore in more detail the emotional dynamics relating to professional involvement with a particular individual or family.

Reflective supervision can be a space where the dynamics of transference, projection and splitting, previously discussed, can be experienced, thought about and named, with a view to offering containment and developing more informed interventions.

One of the biggest obstacles to relationship-based practice is the resistance social workers can understandably exhibit to naming difficult emotions with parents and children, for fear they will not be able to handle the responses such acknowledgments might evoke.

It is not uncommon for social workers to report being hesitant to (for example) ask children, where there have been reports of them experiencing abusive treatment, about their traumatic experiences, for fear of re-traumatising them. How then does a child understand a social worker who explains their job is to help protect children, if the very same person does not seem able to engage in a conversation about it? What does that leave the child feeling about the powerful impact of those experiences on others, let alone on them?

The same applies to supervisors, where not naming the emotional dynamics in the room can impair the effectiveness of the supervisory relationship. Supervisees will get a similar message to the children - my experience and emotional responses are too difficult for others to bear talking about.

Developing relationship-based, reflective supervisory skills

In figure 4 on p16, Anderson (1988) illustrates the importance of practice supervisors having a skillset that ranges from being directive, task-focused and action-orientated on the right-hand 'expert' end of the supervisory continuum, to being non-directive, relationship-based and reflective at the other 'process' end.

This skills continuum reiterates the earlier important point that supervision and practice need to be both reflective and active. The adoption of the skills on this continuum should not be seen as an 'either-or' scenario. In any one supervision session, directive and non-directive skills, and a task and process focus, may be present. In many respects this skills continuum complements the 4 x 4 x 4 model (Morrison and Wonnacot, 2010). Both models underline the importance of a balanced approach that is both reflective and active.

Caution is needed, however, to ensure that a stronger orientation towards a 'directive and task' approach does not inadvertently occur. The risk of this is heightened by, firstly, current organisational expectations and workload pressures and, secondly, the professional inclination toward a more familiar directive, task-focused approach (compared to the less familiar and more demanding nature of relationship-based, process-focused approaches).

This imbalance is reflected by the experiences of many social workers, who report that there remains a disproportionate amount of practice management-focused supervision, with the supportive and developmental aspects of supervision, that are relationship-based and reflective, remaining an aspiration and not a reality.

It is therefore important to safeguard supportive, developmental, reflective and relationship-based supervision practices where they do happen. This state of affairs underlines the urgent need to promote a better understanding of what these practices look like, and how they can be delivered and sustained.



Reflective prompts:

- > With reference to the skills continuum, where do you see your strengths?
- > Where do you feel more confident? Towards the action or process end of the continuum? Which skills do you need to develop further?
- > If you identify your process / emotionally intelligent supervisory skills as needing to be developed, what would help you to achieve this?

Continuum of supervision styles

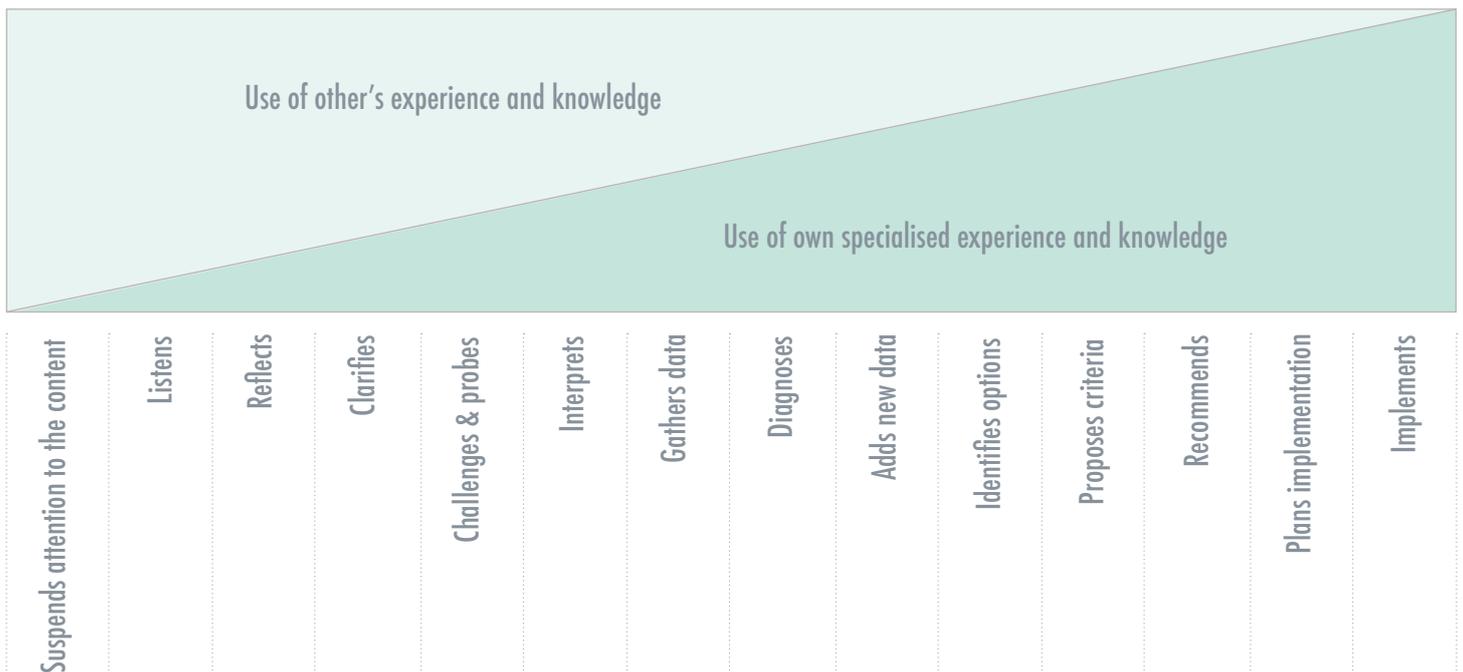
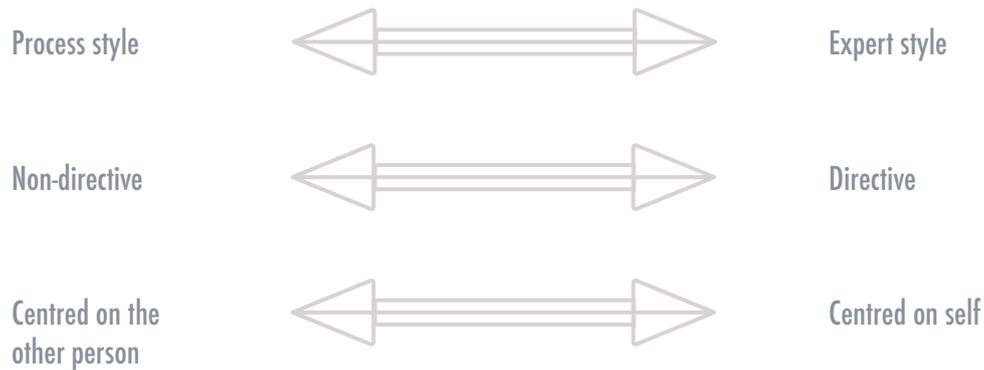


Figure 4 - continuum of supervision styles (Anderson 1988)

Containing the container

The concept of containment, referred to earlier, is a key feature of practice supervisors' relationships with their social workers. Containment should also be something supervisors and line managers provide for their practice supervisors (who often tend to focus on the needs of those they support and lose sight of their own).

Given the significant part played by parallel processes, the importance of practice supervisors having access to containing support and space for themselves cannot be overestimated. Without such containment they will find it hard to be in the right state of mind to offer their support to practitioners.

That said, containment is not an easy skill to acquire and no one gets it right all the time. It is an immediate process, but also a long term one - everyone gets better at it eventually. It is all about learning from experience, and gradually becoming more comfortable with hearing, taking in, pondering, and making sense of difficult emotional material.



Reflective prompts:

- > Can you identify your own experiences of 'containing' (or not containing) supervision? What was it that made it (or didn't make it) containing?
- > How might different cultural perspectives influence how you or others respond to ideas about containment?
- > What other channels might provide you with containment? Peer support? Action learning sets?

Concluding thoughts

To establish relationship-based and reflective practice requires vision, understanding, commitment and perseverance from both individuals and organisations. Once the foundations are in place, however, the impact can be swift, significant and positively infectious.

Practice supervisors can begin to make a key contribution to this process by offering relationship-based and reflective supervision. With this professional and organisational commitment in place, children and families facing difficulty and distress will receive the quality of relationship-based intervention they both need and deserve.

Key learning points:

- > social work practitioners need to be alert to the emotional dynamics of their relationships with individuals and families, and practice supervisors need to be alert to the emotional dynamics of supervisory relationships
- > both practice and supervision need to be simultaneously reflective and active undertakings
- > parallel processes are powerful, unconscious dynamics that exist across organisational hierarchies and professional boundaries
- > organisations need to develop cultures in which relationship-based and reflective practice are golden threads running through them, from top to bottom
- > all professionals working with children and families need to feel contained in order for the emotionally distressing experiences they encounter to be effectively processed and addressed.



Reflective questions:

- > What do you need as a practice supervisor to help you develop and sustain your emotional awareness and literacy?
- > What will help you retain a balanced, reflective and active stance as a practice supervisor?
- > How can you develop the necessary alertness to parallel processes?
- > How confident, or not, are you about being able to offer containing supervision – at least some of the time?
- > What might you need to do differently to make sure you are contained?

Further reading

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