

Child Welfare Supervision During Physical Distancing: Tools and Guidance

With physical distancing in effect, child welfare supervision takes on an added level of importance. Day-to-day child welfare work needs to be done, and workers need structure and support more than ever. New problems and challenges will present themselves as supervisees begin to adjust to the changing landscape of their work. Supervisors can provide a calm moment in chaotic and stressful times that lets workers continue to do the important work they have to do.

This resource on supervision best practices offers tools for the changing circumstances. It should not supplant local policy or protocols.

Before Supervision

- **Check in with yourself and/or a colleague.** How are you feeling? What are you finding most challenging in your work right now? How might this affect your supervision? Identify what kind of help you might need and who could provide it.
- **Get organized.** If you are home, set up a workspace where you can take notes. Start a file, on computer or on paper, for each of your supervisees and their clients. Write using de-identified information if you can, and lock client information in a drawer or filing cabinet if possible. Make sure you have all of your supervisees' phone numbers and the basic information on all of their clients in case they become unable to continue working. Ensure, to the best of your ability, that you can obtain regular and reliable access to phone, computer, and internet.
- **Clarify current expectations.** Has your agency specified any different expectations or procedures to be followed given the public health emergency? Make sure you are clear on your manager's guidance for expectations under the current conditions.
- **Schedule meeting times with each supervisee.** During a time of heightened stress and changing expectations, more contact with supervisees is likely to be better, even just for a short period of time. Be aware that many of your supervisees may be balancing competing commitments (e.g., childcare) if they are home. Make a plan for the best way to meet: in person, with appropriate distancing? By video conference or phone?





- **Take inventory.** Will your supervisee have reliable access to phone, internet, computer, key documents, case lists, the case management system, etc.? Are they able to set aside uninterrupted time?
- **Reflect.** Were you addressing performance concerns with particular supervisees before the COVID-19 pandemic? How have your supervisees responded to stress or uncertainty in the past? Identify the workers who may be struggling more and could benefit from more structure and support.
- **Remind yourself of purpose.** Right before your meeting with your supervisee, make a quick plan with yourself: What is the purpose of this meeting? Is this a regular supervision session? A focus on supervisee safety? What needs to be accomplished in this time?

During Supervision

- **Check in.** How is your supervisee doing? Are they and their family safe? Do they have

questions that you can answer, either about the current health crisis or about agency expectations during this time? Ask them: What do they know, and what are they learning about working during this crisis?

- **Set the stage.** Before moving into the content, develop a joint agenda for the session. What needs to be accomplished during this supervision conversation? What are your joint agreements about this time together? What do you feel like is most important to talk about, and what does your supervisee feel is most important to talk about?
- **Address the content.** Review client lists. Identify clients at higher risk. Remember that under the current circumstances, certain problems related to mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence are likely to be exacerbated.
- **Address needs for client contact.** Does your supervisee have access to their clients? To technology to complete visits with families? Have they spoken with them, been able to do video conferencing, and taken appropriate physical distancing steps if they had to meet in person? Are they aware of best practices in [safety assessment](#) and [working with children](#) during this time?
- **Identify action steps.** What are the short-term, midrange, and long-term tasks your supervisee needs to accomplish with each client? What are the priorities? Identify the logistical challenges your supervisee faces in accomplishing tasks (e.g., court date holdups, inability to observe visitation or access appointments in person) and brainstorm together about how they will accomplish these tasks.

After Supervision

- **Document.** Write down action steps you and your supervisee agreed to take for each client you discussed. If you have access to technology, send your notes to your supervisee so you stay on the same page.
- **Plan for the next meeting.** Determine when you are going to meet next and the plan for follow-up. Ensure that your supervisee can contact you if an emergency develops.
- **Share with others.** If you or your supervisees have identified any particular skills, tricks, or ideas that should be shared, do that. Circulate the good ideas (making sure the worker gets credit) so others can take advantage of them too.
- **Continue professional development.** Lastly, keep an eye on overall professional development. Are there new skills your supervisee may need to develop to perform well at this moment? Are there some short-term goals that can be adapted to the present moment that will help your supervisee rise to the occasion?

More than ever, supervisors hold a critical role in ensuring that clients continue to receive the services and attention they need. Your support



and guidance are very important. You can help empower your workers, remind them of their skills and commitment to serving families, and provide the accountability required for them to meet expectations.

The NCCD Children's Research Center is here to support your perseverance and leadership during these challenging times. Please contact us if we can help.

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