



Practice Tool

Observing child and family social work

Introduction

As a practice supervisor, it is important that you observe the social workers in your team working in practice with children and families. An expectation to do so is set out in the **Post-qualifying standard: knowledge and skills statement for child and family practice supervisors (2018)**.

There are many benefits to regularly observing supervisees in practice.

- > Observations enable you to get a real sense of the way in which a supervisee communicates with children and families, allows you to appraise the quality of their practice skills, and gives you the opportunity to provide specific feedback.
- > The process of preparing for an observation, and reflecting on this in discussion with your supervisee afterwards, enables you to gain a clear picture of both their strengths and areas for development, which can be a highly supportive and motivating process.

This tool has been developed to support you in observing and giving feedback to child and family social workers about their practice. It includes:

- > A summary of research findings to inform your thinking about practice observations.
- > A template (based on these findings) to guide your feedback when observing practice.
- > Points to consider when preparing for observations.

What does skilful child and family social work practice look like?

Observing practice prompts us to engage with two fundamental questions about the nature of social work practice:

1. What does excellent social work look like when demonstrated in practice with children and families?
2. On what basis do we make a judgment about whether a particular piece of work with a family is an example of excellent practice, practice that is good enough but could be improved, or practice which is damaging and dangerous?

Knowledge generated from research studies can usefully inform our thinking here about what to focus on when observing practice.

Identifying key skills in child and family social work

Research studies by Whittaker et al. (2017), in which they carried out over 100 observations of practice, suggest that five key areas of skill are needed for excellent practice in child and family social work.

- > **Purposefulness** – ‘set[ting] out and maintain[ing] a clear purpose for the session whilst maintaining flexibility in response to the client’s agenda’.
- > **Clarity about issues and concerns** – being ‘clear about the reasons for professional involvement and... able to engage in meaningful dialogue with the client about issues or concerns’.
- > **Child focus** – ensuring that ‘the child is meaningfully integrated into the discussion to enhance the parents’ understanding of the child’s needs’.
- > **Relational capacity** – building a positive working relationship with the family which provides high support and high challenge.
- > **Building the intrinsic motivation of parents to make changes** – working collaboratively with families to support their efforts and motivation to change.

Based on these research findings, Whittaker et al. (2017) argue that the core elements of child and family social work practice are:

- > An ability to be transparent about the focus of involvement.
- > Discussing concerns and assessing risk.
- > Building the motivation of families to make desired changes in their lives.

They also make the case that to do this effectively, practitioners need to be empathic and build relationships while avoiding collusion and remaining focused on the needs of the child (Whittaker et al. (2017)).

Later research by Forrester et al. (2019) develops this further and suggests that it is helpful to think about the key components of effective child and family social work practice as clustered around three core dimensions:

1. Relationship building - empathy, collaboration and autonomy: where 'parental choice is recognised and increased' (Forrester et al., 2019, p34).

2. Good authority - clarity about concern, focus on the child, and purposefulness.

3. Evocation - building the intrinsic motivation of parents to make changes.

Making sense of context when observing practice

Whittaker et al. (2017) highlight the need to consider the context of a particular practice interview or visit when undertaking observation.

In other words, what happens during a particular observation or visit will be influenced by what happened at the previous encounter with the social worker, anything the family might have experienced in the interim that might shape the kind of conversations they engage in, and the degree to which all of this is framed by the nature of ongoing social work involvement.

For this reason, Whittaker et al. (2007) suggest that it may be possible that some practice skills (such as purposefulness) might be required throughout all interactions with families. However, others (for example child focus) might only be evidenced in parts of the interview.

Preparing for a practice observation presents you with a key opportunity to talk to your supervisees about the following questions in supervision:

- > What are the key components of effective child and family social work practice? What is the purpose of what we do?
- > What are the overall goals which you and your supervisee are trying to achieve with a particular child and family? What is the long-term plan?
- > What are the specific goals and ways in which your supervisee will communicate with a child and family during a single practice encounter which is to be observed?

Using these research findings to inform your practice observations we have developed a template to support you in giving feedback when observing practice based on these research findings. Key questions for you to consider when observing practice are provided for each of the three core dimensions:

- > relationship building
- > use of good authority
- > evocation.

Feedback template for observing practice

Name:	
Date:	
Practice observer:	

Key questions to consider:

- > How does the social worker invite collaboration and joint agenda setting at the start of the interview and throughout?
- > Is the social worker able to show warmth and convey respect to the family?
- > Does the social worker share the airspace, engage the family in the discussion and actively listen to their responses?
- > Does the social worker acknowledge and explore any emotional responses of family members?
- > Does the social worker adapt communication strategies to meet the specific needs of the children and different family members?
- > Is the social worker able to take account of difference, diversity and power in the way they interact with the family?

Relationship building - empathy, collaboration and autonomy

What did the social worker do well?

1 Capabilities require development and are not yet of an acceptable standard

2 Capabilities with a large number of areas for development

3 Good use of capabilities with areas for development

4 Very good demonstration of capabilities

5 Excellent demonstration of capabilities

What could be improved?

1

Capabilities require development and are not yet of an acceptable standard

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Good use of capabilities with areas for development

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Very good demonstration of capabilities

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Key questions to consider:

- > Is the social worker able to explain what they hope to achieve from the interaction with the family?
- > Is there a clear structure to the interaction? Is this transparent to the family?
- > Is the social worker clear about the issues they are worried about and do they explain why?
- > Is the social worker able to maintain a focus on the needs and lived experience of the child(ren) throughout the interaction?
- > Is the social worker able to respond flexibly if new information emerges that needs to take priority, or suggests that the interaction needs to take a different course?
- > How does the social worker communicate verbally and non-verbally with children / young people if they are present?
- > Does the social worker summarise their thinking and response to the discussion at the end of the visit?

Good authority - clarity about concern, focus on the child, and purposefulness

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Key questions to consider:

- > Does the social worker seek to understand the family's perspective and circumstances?
- > Does the social worker invite the family to share their views and ideas about what needs to change and build on these?
- > Is the social worker able to give feedback to the family about changes they have made and areas of strength and resilience?
- > Does the social worker explore what is going well for the family and learn more about how this has been achieved?
- > Does the social worker communicate to the parents that change is possible and a belief that change can be achieved?

Evocation - building the intrinsic motivation of parents to make changes

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Debriefing after the observation

After observation, you can use the following template to guide your discussion.

Points to consider when preparing for a practice observation:

It is important to ensure that you have space and time to discuss a practice observation with your supervisee before undertaking this and after it has occurred.

To be most helpful, observations should draw on evidence from three sources:

- > Specific, constructive and developmental feedback from you as practice supervisor .
- > Your supervisee's reflection and learning from the observed practice encounter
- > Feedback from the family. This needs to be carefully thought through given the power imbalance that family members are likely to feel.

Prior to the observation consider:

- > Which family will you observe?
- > Is it appropriate to observe this family and are they able to give informed consent?
- > How will your presence be explained to the family?
- > How will you get feedback from the family after the observation?

If you take a collaborative approach, in which you work 'with' your supervisee to model critical reflection and learning from practice, they are more likely to be able to use this opportunity for professional development.

The views of the child,
young person and
their family

Your supervisee's
reflection and learning

Your feedback on
strengths and areas
of development

References

Forrester, D., Westlake, D., Killian, M., Antonopoulou, V., McCann, M., Thurnham, A., Thomas, R., Waits, C., Whittaker, C. and Hutchison, D. (2019). What is the Relationship between Worker Skills and outcomes for Families in Child and Family Social Work? *British Journal of Social Work*. 49(8), 2148-2167

Whittaker, C. E., Forrester, D., Killian, M. and Jones, R. K. (2017). Can we reliably measure social work communication skills? Development of a scale to measure child and family social work direct practice. *International Journal of Child and Family Welfare, special issue (1-2)* 47-63.

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