



Analysis and Critical Thinking in Assessment

A briefing for supervisors

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This briefing is one of the pilot materials developed as part of the **research in practice** Change Project 'Analysis and Critical Thinking in Assessment'. The briefing, which is aimed at busy managers with little time on their hands, draws out and summarises the key messages and recommendations for practice around supervising effective analytical assessments. It can be read on its own or alongside the other resources produced by the Change Project Development Group.

For more information about the Change Project and to see the other pilot materials, go to:

www.rip.org.uk/analysis

The issue of analysis and critical thinking in assessment has been a recurrent concern in inquiries into child deaths and serious case reviews. Good-quality assessment is important in planning for children, whether you are at the early stages of considering if a child has additional needs, or proceeding with a complex child protection inquiry. Supervisors have a key influence on the development of analytical approaches to assessment within their team or service. Through reflective supervision and team meetings, they can help to support practitioners by asking them challenging questions about their cases, and encouraging them to take time out to reflect on their practice.

What is supervision for?



Supervision is one of the hallmarks of professional social work providing as it does an opportunity for reflective practice and a format for the containment of the anxieties of everyday work, in the pursuit of better practice Karvinen-Niinikoski, cited in Bradley and Höjer, 2009

Conducting an assessment is a complex process that involves making sense of a large amount of often very sensitive information about a particular family. A lack of effective supervision has been linked to a number of negative outcomes for practitioners, including stress, absence and high caseloads. The quality of the supervision you offer will be directly affected by the quality of the relationship you are able to establish with your supervisees. Analysing cases together and sharing your experience and knowledge with them will strengthen productive relationships, increase the confidence of individual practitioners and instill a culture of good practice across your team.

There are a range of possible functions for supervision. Supervision should:

- > offer guidance and support
- > challenge
- > motivate
- > identify gaps in learning
- > provide space for case discussion
- > encourage reflection
- > facilitate performance management
- > cover administrative functions.

There can often be tension between the performance management and the learning and development functions of supervision. In her interim report, Eileen Munro suggests that in recent years, the balance between the two functions has shifted unhelpfully towards that of performance management. As a result, there has been less focus on supervision as an opportunity to reflect.

What are the key elements of effective supervision?

Reflective supervision helps to develop more positive and open working relationships, as it involves tailoring supervision towards the practitioner as an individual. This could involve looking at their learning and development needs, how they could use the learning from past mistakes in a constructive way, or emphasising the value of their individual knowledge and skills base.

Do not underestimate the importance of informal supervision. Supervision does not necessarily always have to consist of a one-to-one meeting between you and your supervisee. Peer supervision, or group sessions can also be used to share learning and develop effective assessment practice. These should not replace more formal structures, however, but should be used to disseminate learning within a team. Team meetings are a key format that you could use to encourage your team to look at their cases in more detail as a group.



Instructions for running a case study session can be found as part of Exercise 9 at www.rip.org.uk/analysis

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What can supervision bring to the assessment process?

Supervision can help to encourage analysis and critical thinking among practitioners in four key ways:

> **Opportunity for reflection**

You do not necessarily need to have all of the answers, but supervision is a good way to encourage your staff to reflect upon individual cases.

A key way of doing this is to use your 'outsider' perspective to pose questions that can help the practitioner to reflect critically on the case. This involves asking questions such as 'How do you feel about...?' or 'What do you think ... means?' By doing this, you are also providing a space away from the pressures of a busy work environment to explore issues relating to an individual case.

> **Opportunity to be challenged**

This is not necessarily saying that the practitioner's original decision or judgement is wrong. However, by questioning their decisions and posing alternative ways of understanding the situation, you are inviting them to consider different ways of approaching the case. This may prompt them to rethink their decision, or simply confirm their original decision, but this process will help to give practitioners more confidence in their judgement and ensure that they can clearly articulate the reasons behind that judgement.

> **Opportunity to test out ideas**

It is important that social workers are not afraid of developing creative solutions to the problems faced in a particular case. As a supervisor, you can provide a safe space for practitioners to be more experimental and to test out more innovative ideas about how the case could progress.

> **Empowering the supervisee**

These discussions can provide an opportunity for you and the practitioners in your team to think together, share ideas and develop capacity for analysis. You can do this through individual supervision sessions, or you could set up group supervision sessions with your team to enable constructive sharing of ideas between practitioners. Asking open questions of the supervisee about an individual case, and encouraging them to ask these questions of themselves on a regular basis, will help them to develop their own critical thinking skills, which in turn will lead to increased professional confidence and competence.



A list of open questions for you to use in supervision, along with a list of do's and don'ts for supervision, can be downloaded from www.rip.org.uk/analysis

What does a good assessment look like?

One of your main roles as a supervisor is to encourage the development of good quality assessments among your team. However, there has been very little guidance about what a good assessment looks like. Key qualities that you should be looking out for include that the assessment:

- > shows an understanding of family history and context – this issue of context is key
- > is specific about the individual child's and family's needs
- > states clearly why the assessment is being done, and what it hopes to achieve
- > includes evidence to support the decision (eg research, experience, observations)
- > includes clear statements about what the practitioner thinks should happen rather than using flowery and ambiguous language
- > is logical, focused, concise and jargon-free.



A full list of the characteristics of a good assessment can be found in [chapter 3](#) of the [Change Project core publication](#).

Applying the five Anchor principles to supervision

Five Anchor principles were developed as a framework for thinking about assessment. These are designed to help keep practitioners analysing throughout the assessment process, so you could use them to appraise the quality of assessments in your team. Are all of these questions addressed within an individual assessment? If the purpose of the assessment has not been addressed in the first instance, for example, there is no way of knowing that the information collected is relevant, or whether the plans for the child and family will effectively address their situation. Similarly, if the meaning of the story has not been examined, it is impossible to understand the impact of the situation on the child and family, and therefore to develop effective interventions relevant to the individual case.

These principles can also be applied to supervision. They provide a key framework for supervisors to use when talking to practitioners about their assessments:

> **What is the assessment for?**

Encourage the supervisee to look at why the assessment is being done, initial ideas about what they hope to achieve by doing the assessment, and identify any support they might need, from you or from other agencies.

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> **What is the story?**

Discuss what information the practitioner might need to collect to meet the purpose of the assessment, talk through the influence that their beliefs and values might have on the way they approach the case, identify other possible sources of information (including other agencies) and ensure that the views of the child and family are being collected.

> **What does the story mean?**

Ask the practitioner how they think the story will impact on the individual child and family, identify possible hypotheses about what might be going on with the supervisee, encourage them to think about what they don't know yet, and how they might go about finding this out.

> **What needs to happen?**

Support the supervisee to link their plan back to the original reason behind the assessment, use the hypotheses developed to make a firm and evidence-informed decision about how best to proceed with the child and family, and examine any new evidence that may have emerged.

> **How will we know we are making progress?**

Encourage the supervisee to develop a range of potential outcomes for the individual child and family, ensure that these outcomes are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic and Timely), and support the practitioner in ongoing measurement of progress against these outcomes.

Recommendations for supervisors

- > **Conduct an audit of your practice as a supervisor. What functions of supervision do you use on a regular basis? Which areas could you improve on?**
- > **Record informal supervision as well as more formal structures.**
- > **Develop group supervision sessions to enable staff in your team to talk through their cases and share ideas.**
- > **Conduct an audit of your team's assessments based on the list of characteristics of a good assessment. What are their strengths (both in terms of individuals and as a group)?**
- > **Download the list of open questions from www.rip.org.uk/analysis and use it in supervision. This is also a useful list to send out to staff in your team – encourage them to ask these questions of themselves for each individual case.**
- > **Encourage supervisees to be more creative with their responses to a child's needs. Ask them to list all possible ways of working with the family, however unlikely, and then use this as a basis for a more practical discussion. Sometimes it is possible to put more creative responses into action.**
- > **Use the Anchor principles as a framework for case discussion in supervision.**

References

Bradley G and Höjer S (2009) 'Supervision Reviewed: Reflections on two different social work models in England and Sweden' *European Journal of Social Work* 12 (1)



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This briefing is part of a series of materials that make up the Analysis and Critical Thinking in Assessment pilot resources.

These resources will all be published at www.rip.org.uk/analysis from January 2011 for Partner agencies to download. From February 2011, we will be inviting a group of agencies to pilot these materials in their own organisations, and use the learning from these pilots to feed into the final resource.

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