

The Learning Bit: November 2021

Safeguarding Supervision in Schools – The Need and the Purpose

Supervision - The Need

Education is a universal service. Therefore, it is inevitably serving some children and families with complex needs.

The idea that any child is exposed to abuse or trauma is abhorrent. Rightly, safeguarding is elevated and prioritised in order to protect children by seeking to reduce the incidence of these episodes and to provide emotional support to children and families in the unfortunate circumstances where they have occurred. Sadly, traumatic events are a part of life so there will always be a need for mechanisms to support people in the midst of them.

There is tremendous pressure on schools in the UK to have, as part of their safeguarding functions, a well-developed provision that compensates for some of the reductions in public resources that we have seen over the past few years. During my time as a school and trust leader I noticed that as schools became ever more knowledgeable and sophisticated in their safeguarding practices, the expectations around their depth of involvement in safeguarding matters was matched only by the increase in the sheer volume of cases they uncovered and were working on.

It was my privilege to be the Principal of an academy, and then Director of Education for the same trust, that largely operated in city settings in the east midlands. Unfortunately, these communities had a greater than national average incidence of deprivation and, although I have no data to confirm the connection, a similarly high level of incidence of safeguarding concerns.

These experiences made two things clear to me:

- There seems to be a growth in the demands on schools and their safeguarding staff alongside an increase in the volume and complexity of the safeguarding issues they are facing.
- The emotional toll of working closely on complex safeguarding cases is often enormous and it is essential to have a robust and effective support system for those staff involved.

This leads me on to two important questions:

- **How can we keep improving our safeguarding practices?**
- **Who supports those supporting the most vulnerable children?**

My own experience combined with further reading, wider research and engaging with professional learning (such as the NSPCC Supervision Skills training) has led me to the realisation that supervision for our safeguarding staff and leaders is the answer to both of these questions.

Supervision - The Purpose

Tony Morrison, regarded as a leading expert in this field for over 30 years, proposed a model for supervision that can be applied just as successfully in schools as in the social care settings it was initially based in. Often described as the 4x4x4 Model of Supervision, it connects the four functions of supervision with the four beneficiaries via the four elements of an adult learning cycle (Kolb, 1988).

Two of the four functions stated in this model of supervision are 'development' and 'support'. Clearly, these directly address and resolve the questions posed earlier:

- The Development Function: Supervision, when done well within a model and framework, ensures the continuing professional development of those involved in safeguarding. It enables these staff to improve the knowledge, skills and competence to safeguard children.
- The Support Function: Supervision enables those staff directly involved in complex safeguarding cases to safely process their emotional response to this work. There are obvious benefits to them of being able to offload but the consequences of this help the other key stakeholders too. These staff are less likely to be burnt out; are more able to be effective and can therefore better serve the children, families and school. Also, it is reassuring to know that having invested in the knowledge and skills of these staff, the support function will impact on their ongoing motivation and capacity to do the role and have positive impacts on staff retention.

Additional Functions of Supervision:

- The Mediation Function: Develops in the safeguarding staff a deeper understanding of how their role and work contributes to the overall aims of the school and organisation.
- The Managerial Function: Clarifies and reinforces the expectations of the safeguarding staff. It is essential that those working in safeguarding know what is expected of them, how they are expected to perform these tasks (procedurally and attitudinally) and also when they need to do them by.

These functions have connections to the policies and practices in schools and trusts. Supervision creates the space for professional dialogue and discussion to ensure these are better than fit-for-purpose and optimised. Additionally, supervision complements some of the aims of existing performance management processes in clarifying expectations and reflecting on how well actions align with the framework of policy.

In conclusion, supervision of our safeguarding staff enables that key element of our work to be done more successfully for all concerned.

There is clarity on how this aspect of our work fits within the wider school and community context (mediation function); everyone involved knows exactly what is expected of them and how they are expected to do it (managerial function); the staff performing this work are developed and the benefit of this learning and experience is shared across the staff peer group and network (the development function) and everybody involved contributes to and is supported by a culture that promotes their wellbeing and emotional health (the support function).

It bears further repetition, **Safeguarding Supervision helps us safeguard our children more effectively.**

Further reading:

Department for Education (2015, updated December 2020) *Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*. Available at [Working together to safeguard children - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/431224/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_-_2015.pdf) (accessed October 2021)

Department for Education (2015, updated September 2021) *Keeping Children Safe in Education: Statutory Guidance for schools and colleges*. Available at [Keeping children safe in education - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/501674/Keeping-children-safe-in-education-2015.pdf) (accessed October 2021)

Kolb DA (1988) *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. London: Pearson Education

Morrison T (2005) *Staff Supervision in Social Care* (3rd Edition). Brighton: Pavilion Publishing & Media

Sturt P & Rowe J (2018) *Using Supervision in Schools: A guide to building safe cultures and providing emotional support in a range of school settings*. Brighton: Pavilion Publishing & Media