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| Best practice supervision definitions |
| Family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing |
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# Background

This information sheet was written with the family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing sector (the sector). It provides some definitions of supervision for use during initial supervision sessions and when discussing supervision agreements.

It will be best understood alongside the broader guidelines, supervision functions and reflective supervision information sheets.

Supervision is central to developing and sustaining the sector’s workforces. It allows the exploration of:

* roles and responsibilities of sector practitioners, including risk assessment, therapeutic support, engagement, safety planning and collaborative multi-agency responses to family violence
* roles and responsibilities of supervisors
* adult, child and young person victim survivors’ experience and narrative
* how to work in a nuanced way with young people who can be both victim survivors of and use family violence
* respecting victim survivors as experts of their own lives and valuing their assessments of their own safety and needs
* how to practise safe, non-collusive communication with perpetrators
* anti-collusive practices which invite personal accountability for perpetrators’ use of family violence and sexual violence, and their related failure to protect children by using violence
* gendered drivers of family violence such as the beliefs, attitudes and social norms about gender that can lead to condoning of violence against women and rigid gender stereotyping
* both perceived and real risks to supervisee’s safety, including fears practitioners have working directly with perpetrators or providing afterhours outreach services1
* applying an intersectional lens and understanding supervisee/supervisor biases, including how people from First Nations, LGBTIQA+, culturally diverse communities or at-risk age groups may experience barriers, discrimination and inequality
* providing practitioners with lived experience of family violence, sexual assault and diversity with practice support and encouragement to practise self-care
* how to embed cultural safety, in line with the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural safety framework*2
* providing First Nations practitioners with support to carry the cultural load
* how a supervisee's family of origin3 or creation may affect their client assessments and interactions
* how to be more strengths-based and collaborative with clients, colleagues and other professionals
* individual practitioner and organisational power, and structural and systemic privilege and oppressions across the sector4
* the multi-faceted nature of supervision, including reflection, case discussions, support, professional development, clinical and managerial functions.

Supervision supports practitioners to enhance risk assessment, therapeutic support, engagement and safety planning. It also supports supervisors to enhance their leadership skills, understanding of workforce dynamics and needs and the provision of reflective supervision.

The sector has a highly skilled, dedicated, and resilient workforce, who, for decades, have embraced the importance of supervision and reflective practice (active process of witnessing an experience, examining it, and learning from it). The prevalence and severity of family violence have escalated. This, combined with the prescribed responsibilities under the Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) Framework, including a greater focus on collaborative practice and intersectionality, means providing effective supervision has never been more crucial.

*Paying attention to improving supervision quality can have far-reaching effects and be one of the most cost-effective ways of turning around an organisation.*

—Wonnacott, 20125

# Definitions

Defining supervision within the sector is complex. It is difficult to capture the intricate balance required to develop and maintain trusting professional relationships.

Ideally, supervision offers supervisees authenticity by talking openly about emotional responses to processing stories of family violence and sexual harm.

Supervision is an essential support for practitioners who:

* invite engagement and directly (or indirectly) work with adults and young people using family and sexual violence, while applying non-collusive practice
* often work with unpredictable and serious levels of risk related to adults, children and young people experiencing violence
* may feel responsible to stop violence or abuse, and to get justice for clients. Especially for practitioners with lived experience of family or sexual violence.

Supervisors have a complex role. They must balance supporting practitioners, client needs and ethical practice. Supervision creates opportunities to discuss these tensions, and to support and sustain practitioners in their challenging, complex work.

## **Supervision**

Supervision is an interactive, collaborative, ongoing, caring and respectful professional relationship and reflective process. It focuses on the supervisee’s practice and wellbeing. The objectives are to improve, develop, support and provide safety for practitioners and their practice.6 It is ideally strengths-based and supervisee-led, where the supervisor adapts to supervisees’ preferences.

The sector expects supervision to incorporate an intersectional feminist lens. This allows discussion about power differences within the supervisory relationship, practice with clients and the broader system. It helps promote justice-doing, advocacy and community activism on behalf of clients and workforces.

Supervision enables monitoring of supervisee wellbeing and providing tailored support. Using a trauma and violence-informed approach allows supervisors to normalise practitioner reactions to working within an imperfect system and working with people experiencing trauma and significant life events. The emotional toll of the work and vicarious trauma can be acknowledged during supervision in an empathic, understanding way, rather than blaming or pathologising.

Supervision supports a collaborative approach with clients, especially when setting goals, developing care plans and reviewing therapeutic objectives. It also provides a forum to:

* consider the unique professional development needs and preferences of each supervisee
* adopt a variety of supervisory styles (teaching, mentoring, coaching)
* consider child-centred approaches alongside the application of an intersectional feminist lens
* reflect on interpersonal boundaries,7 essential in family violence and sexual violence work.

*Supervision is vital to recognising and valuing the skills and capacity of practitioners.*

—Jess Cadwallader, Principal Strategic Advisor, Central Highlands

The sector often refers to managerial or line management and clinical supervision. The above definition aligns to both, and they are defined in more detail below.

## **Managerial or line management supervision**

This supports organisational requirements and processes for practitioners to do their jobs and achieve positive outcomes for victim survivors.

Usually supervisor-led, this type of supervision is more task-focused and less reflective. When it includes reflection, it’s usually for technical and practical aspects rather than deeper critical or process levels.8 Managerial supervision helps align practices with organisation policies and relevant legislation. It includes discussing future career pathways and learning opportunities, both formal and informal.

## **Clinical supervision**

Clinical supervision aims to develop a supervisee’s clinical awareness and skills to recognise and manage:

* personal responses
* value clashes
* power imbalances
* ethical dilemmas.9

Usually supervisee-led, this type of supervision allows deeper insight to the work using process reflection.10 This is where conscious and unconscious aspects of practice and supervisory relationships are explored.

A clinical supervisor can be from outside of the organisation or be an internal line management supervisor or a supervisor who does not have line management responsibilities.

Having distinct roles for clinical and managerial supervision can help ensure critical and process reflection occurs.

*Supervision is their time, it’s not my time.*

—Ivy Yarram, Yoowinna Wurnalung Aboriginal Healing Service

## Collaborative supervision

Supervision has traditionally been viewed as a relationship and process between one supervisor and one supervisee. This can put the supervisor in an unrealistic ‘expert’ role and one leader is unlikely to have the required skills and knowledge to meet all the needs of each supervisee.

There has been a shift to embracing a more collaborative model of supervision. There can be benefits from using multiple supervisors, as well as peer supervision. For example, The Orange Door networks developed a matrix model of supervision that incorporates home agency supervisors and practice leaders. This offers more expertise and consultation. Supervision agreements can assist in clarifying confidentiality, roles and communication channels in collaborative supervision.

## **Cultural empowerment**

Cultural empowerment11 is a reflective, holistic, validating, non-judgemental, two-way learning process provided by a supervisor who is skilled, experienced, caring, respectful and knowledgeable about their local First Nations community.12 The relationship should empower supervisees by reducing barriers for First Nations supervisees to perform their duties in a culturally safe environment.

Culturally appropriate empowerment is needed by Aboriginal workforces in Victoria.13 It provides cultural context when reflecting on practice. It incorporates a strength-based and person-centred approach which acknowledges a supervisee’s sense of pride and purpose in being able to impart cultural knowledge to others. It is recommended for First Nations supervisees and non-Aboriginal supervisees who work with First Nations people and communities.

To be effective, supervisors and colleagues need to understand why culturally safe empowerment is important. This requires awareness and understanding of the history and subsequent issues and challenges for First Nations supervisees. Such challenges include working closely with their own community and carrying the ‘cultural load’.

Supervisors and colleagues should have appropriate cultural awareness training to be aware of their roles and responsibilities when working alongside First Nations supervisees. Non-Aboriginal services need to also recognise that some aspects of cultural empowerment and connection can only be gained and shared between First Nations people. Cultural meaning and practices will be different from non-Aboriginal norms and belief systems.14

The *Yarn Up Time* and the *CASE model*15 offer guidance on how to provide culturally responsive supervision for First Nations practitioners and non-Aboriginal practitioners working with First Nations communities.

## **Intersectional feminist supervision**

This recognises how different aspects of a person’s identity might affect how they experience the world and the related barriers.16 An intersectional feminist lens encourages supervisors and supervisees and supervisors to question their own experiences and how they might create assumptions about another’s experience. It assists supervisees to:

* better understand how different forms of marginalisation impact others
* reflect on own lived experience of power, privilege and oppression and the impacts on work with clients and other professionals17
* consider the system more broadly
* be more targeted in their advocacy for improving gender and broader equality.

It also helps practitioners appreciate the need for personalised and tailored solutions.

The message that ‘personal is political’18 is critical, as is the role of the supervisor to create this awareness for the supervisee. Supervisors can use supervision to examine the effect of hierarchies and the power differential between the supervisor and supervisee. The aim is to create a more empowering and egalitarian relationship.19 The notion that the ‘personal is professional’ and bringing your whole self to work can also be considered a feminist act.20

# Link with other supports

Although they overlap, supervision is different to formal debriefing, critical incident management, day-to-day management interactions and performance management. These need their own policies and procedures.

Performance management is also separate to supervision but, through early recognition and support, supervision can prevent performance concerns growing.

Supervisors need to use empathy and counselling skills during supervision. How much will depend on the situation and supervisee. The line between supervision and counselling is fluid. It reflects supervisees bringing their ‘whole selves’ to the work. Personal experiences can support the work. This deep reflection provides opportunities to:

* unpack personal experiences that affect practice and vice versa
* allow supervisees to feel supported and maybe seek ongoing external help if required, through Employment Assistance Program (EAP) or therapy
* monitor the safety and wellbeing of supervisees, their levels of vicarious trauma and possible burn out.20

Develop a supervision agreement early in the relationship. This is an opportunity to discuss the fluid nature of supervision and normalise the potential need for EAP or therapy.

*One of our practitioners wasn’t sure why a particular client triggered her. We were able to talk it through in the moment and when we unpacked it, it went right back to her early years. Providing space for in-the-moment supervision meant that she was able to make that link. I then referred her to the EAP, so she had the opportunity to explore it further through ongoing therapeutic work with someone else.*

—Kelly Gannon, Team Leader, Winda-Mara Aboriginal Corporation

# Endnotes

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11 Note that the word supervision can have negative connotations of control and regulation for the First Nations workforce.

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