

# First supervision session – set supervision up for success

Best practice supervision and video discussion guide

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# How to use this discussion guide

This discussion guide accompanies the:

- *Best practice supervision guidelines* ('Guidelines')<sup>1</sup>
- set of 3 *First supervision session* videos.

This guide is designed to strengthen your understanding of key supervision concepts.

This guide includes:

- a summary of the messages in the Guidelines and videos
- discussion questions to deepen understanding of key concepts
- discussion questions to consider how these concepts apply to your supervisory practice or organisation
- links to more resources.

The family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing sectors are diverse. Supervision practices need to reflect the unique challenges and opportunities of each sector. This guide offers options and guidance, rather than a set of instructions to apply in all situations.

The discussion questions can be used and adapted for different contexts.

## Who this guide is for

The guide focuses on the family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing sectors. However, many of the concepts and questions are relevant to broader community service sectors.

## Supervisees and supervisors

Supervisees and supervisors may use this guide (with the Guidelines and videos):

- for self-directed learning
- to inform discussions in scheduled supervision
- in peer supervision.

## Organisations

Organisations may use the videos and this guide in a range of situations, including:

- induction and onboarding programs
- communities of practice
- team meetings
- planning sessions
- leadership meetings.

## Trainers

Trainers may use this guide to:

- facilitate discussions after showing the videos.

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<sup>1</sup> The Guidelines are available on the [Victorian Government's Role of the organisation, supervisor and supervisee page](https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-guidelines/role-organisation-supervisor-and-supervisee).  
<<https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-guidelines/role-organisation-supervisor-and-supervisee>>

## Key messages

- Supervision is an exploration and a discussion. Open, reflective questions are an important part of it.
- Effective supervision depends on a trusting, positive and supportive relationship between supervisor and supervisee.
- The first supervision sessions are crucial in setting up supervision for success.
- It is important to be clear about the purpose of supervision and the outcomes that both parties want.
- Supervision needs to balance both supporting and challenging the supervisee.
- Welcome the expression of emotions during supervision.

## Discussion questions

The discussion questions may include:

- **Context:** framing for you to open the discussion with – lead with this then ask the question.
- **Prompts:** to encourage more reflection and discussion if needed.

## General questions for everyone

Question 1: Why are the first supervision sessions so important?

### Context

Difficulties in supervisory relationships can often be traced back to the first sessions. People may fail to spend time getting to know each other and confirm what each person expects from the relationship (Wonnacott, 2012).

### Prompts

- Beginnings of relationships are powerful moments. First impressions matter – they can set the tone for how the relationship develops.
- The first few sessions set up how power dynamics will play out in the relationship.
- See 'When supervision becomes tricky', Guidelines (pages 48 and 49).

Question 2: How do you include discussions about the 4 functions of supervision early on?

### Context

The 4 functions of supervision are:

- supportive
- managerial
- developmental
- systemic.

### Prompts

- Provide the supervisee a copy of the 4 functions of supervision and discuss, as seen in the video.
- Supervisor checks whether the supervisee is aware of the 4 functions and if not goes over them.
- See 'Supervision models' and 'Four functions of supervision' Guidelines (pages 16 to 18).

### Question 3: Why is it important to discuss the 4 functions of supervision?

#### Prompts

- Helps explain the purpose of supervision.
- Clarifies expectations.

### Question 4: What do you do when (or if) you realise one function is dominating?

#### Context

Sector feedback and related literature show that there is often a lack of balance across the 4 functions. Managerial often dominates the other 3 functions.

#### Prompts

- Remind everyone that a clear separation of the functions is never entirely possible or desirable.
- The 4 functions, including needing to cover all 4, can be discussed during the first few sessions. Balance between the 4 functions can be revisited by either party at any stage.
- See 'Supervision models' and 'Four functions of supervision', Guidelines (pages 16 to 18).

### Question 5: What are the benefits of discussing a supervision history?

#### Prompts

- Helps learn more about the supervisee, including what has worked and not worked in the past.
- Shows an interest in getting to know the supervisee.
- Past negative supervisory experiences can create anxiety and taint the current relationship.
- Can help discussions and insights on:
  - how the supervisee likes to receive feedback or feedforward (focuses on and offers suggestions for future behaviour that is desired).
  - how much autonomy the supervisee likes versus direction.
- Sets the scene for being reflective and having deeper conversations, which aids insight and learning.

### Question 6: Why is it important to discuss intersectional feminism and the supervisor-supervisee power difference early in the relationship?

#### Context

The family violence sector expects supervision to have an intersectional feminist lens. This allows for discussion about power differences in

- the supervisory relationship
- practice with clients
- the broader system.

It helps promote justice-doing, advocacy and community activism on behalf of clients and workforces. See 'Intersectional feminist supervision', Guidelines (page 14).

#### Prompts

- Sets the scene for reflecting on our own experiences of power, privilege and oppression and its effect on work with clients and other professionals.
- Helps set up a more equal and empowering supervisory relationship.
- Can discuss having a 'just' culture (see page 42 of the Guidelines) that embraces lifelong learning and improvement through an intersectional lens.

## Question 7: How important is it to include discussions around systemic issues during supervision?

### Context

Practitioners must respond to family and sexual violence, and work against structural oppression and social injustice. Practitioners may find this brings up challenges or may even be traumatising.

### Prompts

- Systemic issues can increase the risk of burnout and feeling hopeless.
- Supervisors need to be aware of these risks and help practitioners to identify and understand what might be coming up for them in the work.
- Supervisors can inform senior management of systemic issues being discussed during supervision and help advocate for change.
- Encourage supervisees to use external supports (like employee assistance programs) when needed.
- See 'Supervision models; Systemic function of supervision', Guidelines (page 18).

## Question 8: What are the benefits of 2-way feedback-feedforward in supervisory relationships?

### Context

Feedforward: focuses on and offers suggestions for future behaviour that is desired.

### Prompts

- Recognising good practice is an essential part of continuous improvement for supervisors and supervisees.
- Balancing support and challenge is key to good supervision.
- Benefits include the supervisor learning how their supervisory style is experienced by others.
- See 'Inviting feedback from supervisees' tip sheet, Guidelines (page 65).

## Question 9: How realistic is it to have 2-way feedback-feedforward?

### Prompts

- Difficulties can be linked to the power differential and wanting to avoid conflict.
- Two-way feedback-feedforward depends on how power is shared and how receptive each party is to reflect on their behaviour.
- See 'Inviting feedback from supervisees' tip sheet, Guidelines (page 65).

## Question 10: What have you found useful when the relationship becomes awkward and uncomfortable?

### Context

Not all supervision relationships are positive like the one shown in the videos.

### Prompts

- Explore go-to conflict styles early in the relationship.
- Discuss beforehand what each party will do if there is conflict.
- Reflect (using 'I' messages) on how you are experiencing the relationship and what you have noticed.

- Consider the quote: ‘When it’s hard to connect, try being curious’ – Scott Shigeoka.

## Question 11: How can supervisors sustain supervisees in a supportive and empathic way?

### Context

Supervisors play a key role in sustaining supervisees in the work. They can see if supervisees are starting to become enmeshed (the hero) or disengaged (the victim) from clients.

Through sensitive and honest supervision conversations, they can invite supervisees back into the zone of fabulousness.

See ‘Zone of fabulousness’, Guidelines (page 42).

### Prompts

- Practitioners need support and solidarity with one another to do this work and avoid burnout.
- Supervisors can notice changes in the supervisee’s energy level, language and behaviour towards the work, clients, other professionals or colleagues.
- Supervisors can reflect on what they have noticed in a caring and non-judgemental way. They can help the supervisee explore what is going on.
- Use the ‘Supervisee wellbeing plan example’, Guidelines (page 61).

## Questions for organisational leaders

### Question 1: How does the organisation help supervisors set supervision up for success?

#### Prompts

- Have policies and systems that encourage and reinforce culturally safe and inclusive practices.
- Set a reasonable ratio of supervisors to supervisees to improve quality one-on-one supervision (1:6 to 1:8 is recommended).
- Acknowledge that supervision is time away from the fast-paced everyday work and is crucial to support the work.
- Make sure there are enough resources and support for longer supervision sessions (over an hour) to happen regularly.
- Provide private, warm and inviting rooms with natural light.

### Question 2: How does the organisation include supervision agreements and agreement reviews in policies and practices?

#### Prompts

- Ideally, every supervisor uses supervision agreements in their practice and every supervisee has a current agreement.
- Supervision agreements are documented.
- Reviews should happen every 6 months and at least yearly.



**Question 3:** Sometimes, a supervisory relationship needs extra support, mediation or alternatives. What systems, policies and practices does your organisation have for this?

### Prompts

- Organisations need to give supervisors both supervision training and supervision.
- Organisations need to consider how they will make sure supervision is culturally safe.
- Organisations must plan for supervisory relationships that struggle, including support and options.
- It may be decided that the supervisee needs a different supervisor. If so, the organisation needs to consider how to make sure this happens:
  - without blame
  - so that the next supervisory relationship is set up for success.
- See 'When supervision becomes tricky', Guidelines (pages 48 to 51).

**Question 4:** How important is it for a supervisor to set up a supervisory relationship with supervisees they already know? Why?

### Context

In the video, the subject matter expert explains that supervisors who already know the supervisee still need to put in time and effort to set up:

- the meaning of their changed relationship
- their role
- their new authority.

### Prompts

- Often the transition is from colleague or peer to supervisor. This may be challenging due to the change in power and role.
- It is useful to reflect on and discuss how the new relationship can develop and proceed.
- See 'Transitioning to supervisor', Guidelines (page 40).

## Questions for supervisors

**Question 1:** How have (or will) you introduce discussing supervision histories and agreements with supervisees?

### Context

It is useful to talk about supervision histories and develop a supervision agreement with supervisees.

### Prompts

- Discuss how this can help you get to know one another and avoid misunderstandings.
- It can uncover assumptions and reveal differences in role expectations.
- Past supervisory relationship experiences can create anxiety and taint the current one. Exploring their impact can be useful.
- Explain that each supervision agreement will be unique.

Question 2: What has discussing supervision histories or agreements been like for you?

### Prompts

- Explore hesitations and concerns about using these discussions.
- Consider positive and less positive experiences.
- Invite supervisors to reflect on what worked well and what didn't work.

Question 3: In the videos, how does the supervisor share power and decision making with the supervisee? What would you do the same or differently?

### Prompts

- Supervisor openly states they do not know everything and adopts a lifelong-learner approach.
- Supervisor asks the supervisee for feedback, showing humility and an openness to improve.

Question 4: How do you do manage expectations around your expertise? How do you foster lifelong learning?

### Context

It is important to:

- manage unrealistic expectations about supervisors being experts
- present the idea of being a lifelong learner.

### Prompts

- State how you see your role in the first session.
- Always start from a place of asking the supervisee what they think.
- Share articles and discuss.
- Support and encourage collaborative supervision, which can include peer supervision.
- See 'Collaborative supervision', Guidelines (page 20).

Question 5: What strategies would you use to repair a rupture in the supervisory relationship?

### Context

The video mentions the attachment concept of 'rupture and repair'. This recognises that relationship disconnections happen frequently. When they do, some action is needed to restore:

- balance in the relationship
- a sense of safety and connection.

### Prompts

- Ruptures can be 'wake-up calls' that something needs to change.
- They can also lead to new and deeper understanding in the relationship. This is a positive thing.
- If you sense a rupture, check in with the supervisee and describe their behaviour (for example, more withdrawn).
- Own any miscommunication or misunderstandings and apologise.
- See 'Why conflict arises', Guidelines (page 49).

Question 6: In the video, the supervisor shows insight about themselves and how stress affects them. Why did she do this?

### Prompts

- To show self-awareness and insight.
- To normalise that we all get stressed, but it is important we to own it and know how to express it.
- To start the process of building a supervisory alliance and sharing power in the relationship.

Question 7: What do you think of ‘bringing our whole selves’ to work? Are there limits to this?

### Prompts

- Bringing our ‘whole self’ to work can be considered a feminist act.
- Everyone needs to decide what they are comfortable sharing.
- Boundaries can be important. They can help us cope with the work.
- Consider the professional role and what this means in practice.
- Consider the impact of our personality on colleagues and clients – and adapting at times.

## Questions for supervisees

Question 1: How would you ask your new supervisor for a discussion on your supervision history and making an agreement?

### Prompts

- Explain your previous experience of this and how it helped.
- Explain that you saw it recommended in the guidelines.
- Discuss how it might help going forward in terms clarifying expectations and how you will work together.

Question 2: What are the benefits of talking about your supervision history and agreement? What are the key things you want to discuss?

### Prompts

- To learn more about one another.
- To be clear on expectations.
- To understand how to handle relationship difficulties.
- See ‘Supervision agreement example’, Guidelines (page 59)

Question 3: How do you contribute to creating a trusting relationship with your supervisor?

### Context

Relationships need intention and take work by both parties.

### Prompts

- Be willing to share more about yourself.
- Be honest about your expectations of supervision and the relationship.
- Actively engage in supervision and reflection.

Question 4: In the videos, how does the supervisor share power and decisions with the supervisee? How would you like a supervisor to do this?

### Prompts

- Supervisor openly states they do not know everything and adopts a lifelong-learner approach.
- Supervisor asks the supervisee for feedback, showing humility and an openness to improve.
- Supervisors need to ask supervisees what they think and include them in decisions.

Question 5: What do you think of 'bringing our whole selves' to work? How much personal information are you comfortable sharing with your supervisor and peers?

### Prompts

- Everyone needs to decide what they are comfortable sharing.
- Boundaries can be important. They can help us cope with the work.
- Bringing our 'whole self' to work can be considered a feminist act.
- Consider the professional role and what this means in practice.
- Consider the impact of our personality on colleagues and clients – and adapting at times.

Question 6: What strategies would you use to repair a rupture in the supervisory relationship?

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The video mentions the attachment concept of 'rupture and repair'. This recognises that relationship disconnections happen frequently. When they do, some action is needed to restore:

- relationship balance
- a sense of safety and connection.

### Prompts

- Ruptures can be 'wake-up calls' that something needs to change.
- They can also lead to new and deeper understanding of the relationship. This is a positive thing.
- If you sense a rupture, check in with the supervisor and describe their behaviour (for example, more withdrawn).
- Own any miscommunication or misunderstandings and apologise.
- See 'Why conflict arises', Guidelines (page 49).

Question 7: How challenging do you want your supervisor to be during supervision? How do you communicate this?

### Prompts

- Supervisees need to feel a safe level of discomfort to be stretched.
- The supervisor's role is to both support and challenge the supervisee.

## More resources

### Supervision information sheets

- The Guidelines are available on the [Victorian Government's Best practice supervision guidelines: Family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing](https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-guidelines).<sup>1</sup>
- Definition information sheet – see the [Victorian Government's Supervision definitions page](https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-information-sheets/supervision-definitions).<sup>2</sup>
- Functions information sheet – see the [Victorian Government's Supervision functions page](https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-information-sheets/best-practice).<sup>3</sup>
- Example supervision agreement – see the [Victorian Government's Scheduled or one-on-one supervision agreement example page](https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-guidelines/appendix/scheduled-or-one-one-supervision-agreement-example).<sup>4</sup>

### Zone of fabulousness resources

- Zone of fabulousness health, safety and wellbeing resources – PDF available on the [Victorian Government's Zone of Fabulousness page](https://www.vic.gov.au/zone-fabulousness).<sup>5</sup>
- *The Zone of Fabulousness: Resisting vicarious trauma with connection, collective care and justice-doing in ways that centre the people we work alongside* – article by Vikki Reynolds available on [Vikki Reynolds' Articles page](https://vikkireynolds.ca/writings/articles).<sup>6</sup>
- Burnout – see [Vikki Reynolds' Resisting burnout page](https://vikkireynolds.ca/resisting-burnout).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <<https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-information-sheets/supervision-definitions>>

<sup>3</sup> <<https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-information-sheets/best-practice>>

<sup>4</sup> <<https://www.vic.gov.au/best-practice-supervision-guidelines/appendix/scheduled-or-one-one-supervision-agreement-example>>

<sup>5</sup> <<https://www.vic.gov.au/zone-fabulousness>>

<sup>6</sup> <<https://vikkireynolds.ca/writings/articles>>

<sup>7</sup> <<https://vikkireynolds.ca/resisting-burnout>>