

**NATIONAL PRACTICE GUIDELINES OF THE AUSTRALIAN
ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS**

SUPERVISION AND CONSULTATION

PREAMBLE

The first National Practice Guidelines for Supervision were endorsed by the AASW Board of Directors in 1993 following the important work of the Standing Committee on Professional Supervision of the AASW (Victorian Branch) in 1985. In the light of subsequent significant changes in the industrial, economic and policy contexts for social work practice, members of the WA Branch were asked to review and update the Guidelines.

These Practice Guidelines seek to provide a broadly applicable, minimum expectation for Professional Supervision and consultation arrangements for a diverse population working in complex and fluid practice situations. They seek to clarify a number of problematic aspects of contemporary agency policy and practice in this area:

- The ambiguity of the core concepts of 'supervision' and 'consultation'
- The complexity of the four purposes of supervision and consultation
- The necessary linkages across other AASW policies –particularly Practice Standards and CPE
- The need for a policy for diversity within the roles and responsibilities of the membership of the AASW
- The difficulties facing members in small agencies or working in rural and remote settings
- The responsibility of the agency, the worker and the supervisor or consultant in relation to professional supervision.

In this revised Guidelines, all attempts have been made to use language which is consistent with other key policy documents, and in particular with the *Guidelines for Continuing Professional Education* and on with the *Practice Standards for Social Workers*.

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1. INTRODUCTION – CLARIFYING CORE CONCEPTS

1.1 Professional social workers are working in a complex and changing political and organisational environment world – with profound implications for professional practice and supervision. The changing demography of Australian States and Territories and the introduction of different economic and policy imperatives have impacted on the contexts of practice and supervision in the human services; the growing pressures of multiple accountabilities, generic management arrangements, risk management and occupational health and safety concerns have added to the increasing difficulties in some settings about the provision of professional supervision.

1.2 The dominant rationale for a more explicit definition of professional supervision is to enhance formal recognition of the potential importance of skilled professional social work practice in service agencies. Social work is a complex activity; complex work generates multiple accountabilities to service receivers and their immediate networks, fellow practitioners, colleagues in other agencies and disciplines, the professional association, the agency Executive and other key stakeholders in the development and provision of services. It is also in the interests of employing agencies to ensure that their social work employees have achieved and maintain a recognised level of knowledge and skills from continuing education, which can be demonstrated by adherence to the accreditation process in the AASW CPE Policy.

In all of this activity, practitioners need to receive sufficiently frequent, skilled and effective developmental supervision. It follows that agencies employing professional social workers have an obligation to provide professional supervision.

1.3 As first articulated by Kadushin (1976)¹, Professional Supervision is a problematic concept within social work and within human service agencies. The word supervision has a specific meaning in the social work profession going far beyond the concept of line management in administration and management. This document adopts the following definition of purpose provided by Morrison²:

Supervision is a process by which one worker is given responsibility by the organization to work with another worker(s) in order to meet certain organisational, professional and personal objectives. These objectives or functions are:

1. Competent, accountable performance/practice (Managerial or Normative Function)
2. Continuing professional development (Developmental/Formative Function)
3. Personal support (Supportive/Restorative Function)

¹ Kadushin, A (1976), *Supervision in Social Work*, Columbia University Press: New York

² Morrison, T (2001), *Staff Supervision in Social Care*, Pavilion: UK

4. Engaging the individual with the organization (Mediation Function)

1.4 The term supervision is frequently used to refer to working *conversations*. However, it refers also to a *relationship*, the quality of which is central to the development and maintenance of high standards of social work practice. Supervision requires mediation between the organisation and the worker, with the supervisor being an advocate on behalf of the organisation, the worker and the social work profession. The primary purpose of professional supervision is to facilitate competent, independent practice and not to perpetuate dependency.

1.5 A further source of confusion is that between the related but different processes of *supervision* and *consultation*. Whilst the two terms are frequently used interchangeably, as Figure 1 illustrates, supervision is a formal organisational relationship between a line-manager and worker and encompasses hierarchical quality assurance and administrative responsibilities. Peer and external consultations, however useful professionally, lack this formal mandate for task and resource decisions. While supervision and consultation differ in this regard, these revised Guidelines apply to both supervision and consultation as described in Figure 1.

2. PURPOSES OF SUPERVISION

As illustrated in Figure I, supervision in social work encompasses administrative, educational, supportive and mediating functions, all of which are interrelated

2.1 Administration

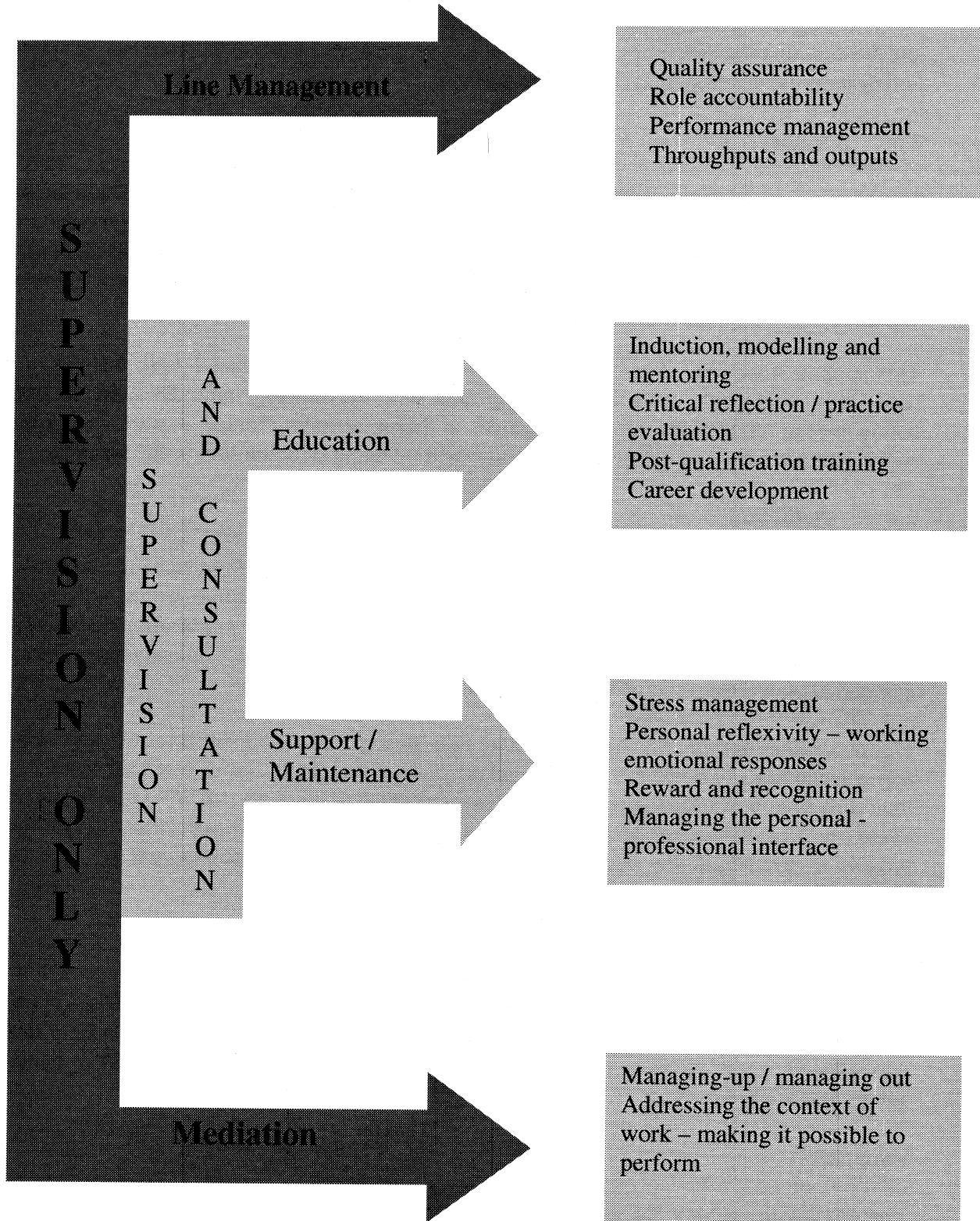
The Managerial / Administrative function addresses issues to do with formal accountabilities, 'risk management', effective recording, informed and ethical decision-making and performance management. This includes the variety of formal and unplanned methods, including reviews and case conferences, for monitoring the quality of service delivery to protect the client, the agency and the worker.

2.2 Education

The Educational / Developmental function addresses issues to do with continuous improvement activities by staff facing the demands of acquiring professional competence and / or facing the challenges of changes in policy and methods. This involves encouragement of reflective practice by individual workers and by the 'team' - to enhance processes of managing changes in policies and procedures and to challenge routinised thinking and the 'rule of optimism' in complex work.

This involves the provision of knowledge and skills, which are the worker's necessary equipment for effective practice. It includes the development of self-awareness of the social worker in relation to his/her work. Educational supervision is a core component in the professional development of the worker.

Figure 1: Supervision and Consultation: Functions and Overlaps³



³ Adapted from training material: M & B Clare and Centrelink WA (2004)

Supervision can also be seen as a potential vehicle for building the knowledge base of the social work profession, through conceptualising the practice experience of social workers. By reflecting on the similarities and differences, presenting characteristics, the nature of the intervention and the outcomes, propositions can be generated from 'practice wisdom' which may lead to the development of 'practice theory'.

2.3 Support

The Maintenance / Supportive function addresses issues arising from the collision of the personal and the professional in high-risk service delivery. This is problematic and involves respecting the emotional, intellectual and physical stresses - and individual coping strategies for stress management. There is a careful line to find and maintain between supervision and the invasion of privacy to provide unasked for treatment.

The support function of supervision and consultation is concerned with helping the supervisee deal with job-related stress, and with developing attitudes and feelings conducive to maximum job performance. It helps sustain worker morale, gives the supervisee a sense of professional self worth, and a feeling of belonging in the agency.

2.4 Mediation

The Mediation / 'Managing-up' function addresses issues arising from tensions in service delivery and programme management; this additional purpose of professional supervision recognises the importance of supervisors monitoring the impact of organisational change or workload patterns on their staff. This can lead to a decision to report relevant management and policy concerns to senior managers or to outside agencies.

Figure 1 makes explicit the different power relationship and accountabilities of supervisory and consultancy relationships. Having acknowledged this important difference however, in line with common usage and for purposes of consistency across AAWS Guidelines and Standards Documents, the term 'supervision' as used throughout this document is defined broadly as referring to the range of activities undertaken to meet professional development needs and accountability requirements"

3. ORGANISATIONAL GUIDELINES

3.1 Regardless of their organisational role or experience, social workers should receive supervision which maintains their professional accountability and meets their educational, supportive and mediation requirements (including occupational health, safety and welfare)

Rationale

The employing agency has an obligation to develop and implement a formal supervision policy of social work practice; the previous formulation was unhelpfully ambiguous and appeared to leave responsibility with the middle manager/supervisor. This is unnecessarily

burdensome and professionally dangerous without contextualising the formal mandate and resource implications of professional supervision.

Operationalisation

Supervisory arrangements should be documented in a mutually negotiated supervision agreement which includes long-term professional development objectives. The agreement should be reviewed periodically by the supervisor and supervisee. A process for appraisal and accountability of the supervisor, appropriate to the nature of the agency, should also be developed. While the criteria for appraising supervision will differ between agency settings and types of social work practice, the following includes some possible criteria suitable for supervision in direct practice:

- Is the supervisee's workload monitored?
- Is the supervisee's written work reviewed?
- Is the process of intervention discussed? t Are the outcomes for clients discussed?
- Is the complexity of ethical issues implied in practice considered?
- Is there discussion of the working relationships within the multidisciplinary team, among social work colleagues and within the agency as a whole?
- Are issues related to the supervisee's role and professional identity discussed?
- Is morale discussed?
- Is the supervisee's particular learning style identified and utilised in supervision?
- Are the supervisee's long term professional development needs addressed in supervision?

3.2 Where a social worker position includes the provision of supervision, the duty statement should specifically identify the time allocation, accountability and lines of authority associated with this responsibility. Duty statements should be periodically reviewed and assessed in regard to the feasibility of carrying out the specified duties.

Rationale

Unless the necessary resources, accountability and authority are provided, adequate supervision is unlikely to occur, as supervision will become a low priority under conditions of resource scarcity.

Operationalisation

The time fraction required for the supervision of each supervisee should be calculated (including time for preparation, documentation and evaluation) and the other responsibilities of the supervisor should be adjusted accordingly. The lines of authority between supervisor and supervisee should be clearly stated. This should include an explicit statement of the rules of information sharing.

3.3 The agency should provide opportunities for the further development of the supervisor's knowledge and skills in relation to supervision.

Rationale

The quality of supervision is dependent on the supervisory capacity of the supervisor as well as his/her practice expertise.

Operationalisation

The agency should enable the supervisor to attend seminars and conferences relating to supervision and this should be included in any existing budget for staff development, conference leave etc.

3.4 The agency should provide opportunities for the further development of the social worker's knowledge and skills in making effective use of professional supervision.

Rationale

Qualified practitioners have a number of varied experiences of supervision from student placements and from beginning work as a new graduate. In agencies with implicit policies about purposes, frequency and quality of supervision, such ambiguities are to be expected. There needs to be attention to the potential for ambivalence about effective supervision - and opportunities to address explicitly the professional responsibilities of social workers to make good use of this process.

Operationalisation

Supervisors should be alert to the potential for social workers' ambivalence about supervision in the light of previous experiences. The organisation should also resource induction/training opportunities for workers which equip them as proactive and assertive supervisees.

3.5 Agencies should develop an appropriate mechanism to assess and negotiate situations in which the supervisor - supervisee relationship is in difficulty.

Rationale

Unless conflict can be resolved supervision will not be successful in achieving its objectives. (NB: Conflict resolution will be enhanced if the above standards relating to clarity of duty statements, supervision agreements and appraisal of supervision have been achieved.)

Operationalisation

Agencies should include other formal organisational processes including requirements for feedback and evaluation, internal audits and a complaints procedure to locate professional supervision as core agency business owned by the agency not left to the two main players.

Procedures for dealing with a potential conflict which cannot be directly resolved between the supervisor and supervisee should be developed based on appropriate conflict resolution models, and this should be specified in the supervision agreement. For example, the supervisor, and supervisee could select a mutually acceptable colleague (of at least equal status to the supervisor) to mediate and/or review the possible structural sources of the conflict.

If this fails, a mutually acceptable consultant external to the organisation could be approached by senior personnel in the agency to mediate and/or review the possible structural sources of the conflict which are being expressed in the supervisor - supervisee relationship. Ultimately, it may be necessary for agency management to arbitrate in relation to this conflict.

4. SUPERVISION GUIDELINES

4.1 The supervisor should be a qualified social worker eligible for membership of the AASW and have at least three years practice experience, preferably in a relevant field of practice (but not necessarily in the particular subfield) or have had supervisory experience in another field.

The term 'field' used here refers to a broad client population and service system, such as child welfare: or health. Specialized sub-fields are the specific areas which constitute the broad field, such as protective services or foster care in child welfare, or medical social work or rehabilitation in health.

It should be recognised that where a supervisor does not meet these standards they will require a high level of support in carrying out their supervisory duties.

4.2 The supervisor or should have undergone some basic training in fieldwork supervision of social work students and have had some experience in student supervision.

or

4.3. The supervisor should have successfully completed; an approved course in social work supervision of a minimum of 30 hours duration and have the demonstrated capacity to design individual and Team-level arrangements for supervision and consultation.

or

4.4 The supervisor should have undergone post-basic training in a field of practice or method of intervention relevant to the supervisee's practice, for example, a higher degree in social work, or specialist training in a field or method.

Rationale

Supervisors have a higher level of practice experience than their supervisees and have had some training in supervision. It is unlikely that a person would be able to acquire and integrate the complexity of social work theory and practice, without at least three to five years experience.

5. GUIDELINES FOR DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EXPERIENCE

5.1. Regardless of experience, social workers should receive induction training to equip them for a new role.

Rationale

Whilst supervision is essential to maintain and develop practitioners in their role, strategies should be in place to introduce them to the parameters and requirements of a new role, and to ensure that they have a base-level capacity to meet their responsibilities at the outset.

5.2 All social workers, regardless of position or experience, should receive supervision relevant to and sufficient for their accountability and developmental needs.

5.2.1 Recent graduates should receive frequent formal supervision (an optimal standard would be one hour per week).

Rationale

Recent graduate have a particularly high need for structured reflection and explicit critique of their practice in order to consolidate and ground the learning acquired during their professional education and successfully manage the demands of their role as qualified practitioners.

Supervision programs for recent graduates need to be tailored to the specific practice context⁴.

5.2.2 More experienced social workers should have the equivalent of fortnightly individual supervision of at least one uninterrupted hour. If peer supervision is

⁴ An excellent example of the development and implementation of a structured supervision program in a hospital setting is provided by Rosalie Pockett in 'New Graduate Social Workers: Mutual Expectations in Employment', *Australian Social Work*, 1987,40-41.

chosen, responsibility for accountability and review should remain the duty of the occupant of a senior position.

Experienced social workers also need and have a right to expect an opportunity to formally use social work colleagues as a 'sounding board' for consultation and reflection upon their own practice. On occasions it may be appropriate for an experienced social worker to use the expertise of consultants of other professions/disciplines to further their own professional development goals.

Nevertheless, supervision by social workers should be an integral and ongoing part of the professional practice of even the most experienced social workers, regardless of field or specialty. If peer supervision is to be effective it is necessary that members be sufficiently experienced to know their own limitations as well as be able to share their strengths.

5.3 The form of supervision or consultation may vary according to the characteristics of the agency and practice situation. For example, it may include 'in vivo' consultation or group consultation led by a senior colleague, who meets the requirements of supervisors outlined above.

If group supervision or consultation is used, the focus should remain on the specific practice of the worker or student and the size of the group, and its duration should be such that recent graduates still receive the equivalent of one hour weekly individual supervision (for example, fortnightly individual supervision and fortnightly group supervision totalling one hour per individual per week).

Attendances at staff meetings, in-service training and workshops or seminars, while constituting valuable sources of professional development, are not acceptable substitutes for supervision.

6. ALTERNATIVES IN THE ABSENCE OF AGENCY RESOURCES

6.1 These Guidelines recognise the diversity of employing contexts for practice. They work from the assumption of joint responsibility between agency and practitioner for providing and receiving effective supervision. They recognise that the structure and resource base of some practice contexts precludes the provision of all elements of professional supervision as they are described in this document. In addition, they acknowledge the particular challenges facing lone practitioners, social workers in private practice and colleagues working in rural and remote settings.

6.2 In situations where practice agencies are unable to support all the dimensions of professional supervision identified in these Guidelines, practitioners should be provided with / seek out alternative consultation opportunities. These may include:

- Periodic face-to-face meetings between colleagues from different practice settings;
- More creative use of 'Distance Supervision' strategies including e-learning and video conferencing facilities;

- Formal interagency arrangements;
- Employment of a social work consultant on a sessional basis to provide educational and supportive supervision;
- External private consultation funded in part or whole by the agency (at least time in lieu for travelling and attendance).

6.3 Where the person providing the consultation is paid by the agency, issues of accountability, confidentiality and other possible ethical dilemmas need to be anticipated and clarified between all three parties (the agency, the consultant and the social worker).

6.4 Where a social worker chooses to independently seek private consultation, issues of accountability, confidentiality, and other possible ethical dilemmas need to be anticipated and clarified between the social worker and the consultant. The AASW Code of Ethics may need to be consulted in some situations.

6.5 Practitioners providing consultation should have qualifications and experience which meet the supervision requirements outlined in this document.

7. GUIDELINES FOR THE SUPERVISION OF STUDENTS

7.1 Further work will be needed to integrate the Guidelines for Approving Social Work Courses to incorporate the information on the Student Pathway.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 The aim of this document was to build on previous Practice Guidelines to incorporate more recent developments in thinking about the purpose of professional supervision and to account for changes in the organisational and political context for practice.

8.2 As in the previous Practice Guidelines, professional supervision and consultation remain as core elements in the development and maintenance of high standards of social work practice and of the recognition and protection of social workers.