

## *The Supervisory Relationship: Integrator, Resource and Guide*

**Rebecca Shahmoon Shanok**

The best supervisors I've had – and there need to be many over the course of a career – listened intently, found something to value, and then recast what I told them, embellishing it with something of their own. The experience of good supervision is like finding a fellow-traveler on a challenging journey, a companion worthy of trust who has visited similar destinations. This fellow-traveler knows many routes to our goal but is open to discovering a different path, a path we walk together, often with me in the lead, except when I miss the flowers to smell, or when I stumble or can't find my way. Then the supervisor is there to guide, even to prod a little, to bolster my courage, and to help me regain my footing and focus, to help me find my strength.

When it's going well, supervision is a holding environment, a place to feel secure enough to expose insecurities, mistakes, questions, and differences. Supervision parallels good work with families, the place for parents and children to feel safe enough to recognize the worst and best of their feelings and capabilities with a partner who helps them get where they need to go.

Good supervision makes the supervisee long for more. She feels, "If only I could tell my supervisor every single thing that happened in the interaction, I would feel more secure and know what to do." Of course, this is never possible, and, in fact, reminds us of the frustration that is an integral part of "good enough" mothering. "Good enough" supervision cannot review everything that has happened,

or can it anticipate everything that might happen.

The supervisory relationship represents an investment on both sides, a cooperative enterprise, a comradeship. To understand its power and value, it is useful to look at what the supervisee and supervisor each bring to the relationship, and at the ways learning takes place within it.

### **The Supervisee**

In her daily work with infants, toddlers, and their families, the supervisee is on the spot. She must make a multitude of moves in the given situation. "Out there" in the situation, she learns by doing; in supervision, she learns by reflection.

Initially, the supervisee focuses on and reports behaviors and actions. She may give verbal summaries to her supervisor, basing her reports on memory, notes written after a treatment session, or notes written during a session. She may use process recording, a method of attempting, after a session, to record every nuance of both the client's behavior and apparent feeling state, her own, and the interaction between them. Both approaches encourage the supervisee to become more adept at reporting, a skill which is fundamental to the ability to reflect on process and, eventually, to introspect about it. Moreover, with the help of animated yet gentle inquiry by the supervisor, the supervisee increasingly observes and reports on her functioning in relation to feelings, and gradually in relationship to complex feeling states as they are responsive to her patients . . . and as her patients

**Supervisor:** "Tell me what you did, and how you felt about what you did."

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may be reacting to hers. She becomes able to consider thematic connections between patterns in her own key life relationships and the evolving relationships with her clients (Greenspan & Wieder, 1984). She comes to know herself in the work, to recognize herself as an instrument, learning which vibrations are likely to be emanating from the patient and which, though stimulated by the patient, are in fact refrains from her own inner melodies.

Front line work with very young children and families is an intense experience – always challenging, sometimes joyful, many times humbling. To metabolize these experiences fully, the practitioner requires a confidante – someone with whom to focus, investigate, and brainstorm; someone with whom to share the experiences and the reactions; someone to be a model and to mirror the emerging professional self. Every practitioner has had uniquely painful experiences, and each tends to keep some things hidden. How much a given supervisee feels she has to keep hidden and how much she lets the supervisee see depends greatly on her sense of being partnered, her sense of safety in the supervisory relationship. In a good one, the supervisee feels understood, recognized and respected. As she comes to convey more and more of the whole story, even those aspects which hurt, confuse, or humiliate her, her supervisor's empathy and clarifications boost her ability to accept, even make use of, that which had previously felt unacceptable. She is thus able to feel enabled, rather than undermined, when the supervisor raises questions and concerns or offers information. The supervisee feels that the supervisor, knowing not only her strengths but also her vulnerabilities, is on her team.

### **The Supervisor**

The supervisor is an expert because she was a front line worker. She was there. She saw it, felt it. By now, the supervisor can also bring a conceptual framework, experience, and a process

of inquiry to the task of finding a way of working with a particular family and child. With supervisees, she hunts for strengths to support and cultivates a sense of optimism about the supervisee and about the work. She plays midwife to the emergence of the trainee's own strength and style.

The supervisor is a teacher who fosters the integration of process and content learning. But unlike classroom instruction, which can be planned systematically in terms of content and objectives, supervision is more like a life-space, spontaneous interview. In this context, the supervisor may relate theory to practice, teach a theoretical point, make a connection, appreciate what the supervisee did, tell a story to illustrate a point, share an experience of feeling, ask questions, point out a pattern, or raise a concern (Sheafor & Jenkins, 1982); or she may simply listen, validating, even cherishing the supervisee's experiences. She also helps the supervisee to maintain continuity of attention, so that concerns and strands of interest are developed rather than lost.

The supervisor models openness and good practice. She is willing to say, you can relax here and let the picture build. But here where there is danger, we must decide on an intervention. And here where there is opportunity, let us move forward.

Like any other good clinician, a supervisor develops a sixth sense about how others are feeling. She has an ability, often preconscious, to place herself in another's space, to imagine how he feels. But every once in awhile she check it out: "I think you are letting me know that . . . tell me, did I catch it correctly?" Thus she shares what she sees/feels, enlisting the supervisee as co-adventurer, indeed as expert on her dawning self-recognition. And within such collegueship, self-recognition, plus knowledge, plus skill equals self-as-instrument, self-as-observer, self-as-assessor, self-as-intervenor, self-as-clinician.

The supervisor is open to honest feedback from students and workers

**Supervisor:** *"What I think that I hear, Jean, is that whenever the Mom begins to talk about her feelings of being trapped by having such a needy child, you tend to move away. Let me tell you what that suggests to me and then you can think it over and see what occurs to you. Okay?"*

and is willing to be led by them when appropriate. Supervising democratically means knowing when and where to ask for help. Like a “good enough” mother, the supervisor needs to figure out what she needs to avoid becoming overwhelmed – companionship, peers to talk with, time to think.

### **The Supervisory Relationship**

A supervisor and a supervisee are not unlike Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, the senior partner more a thinker and the junior more a doer, but each essential to the other. Curious and motivated to solve a problem, they hunt for clues to guide their understanding of how best to offer services to a distinctive family and their unique child. Through their exchanges, supervisor and supervisee develop a mutual formulation as they strive to understand what is going on with children and families in their care. Neither one could do the work alone.

Each keeps the balance of the other. For example, work with children and families often involves going beyond our personal comfort zone in the making of relationships. Making relationships across classes and cultures, or with people who have been wounded and who cannot join reciprocally, who cannot give us the feedback that would let us know what we are doing all right, requires the insight, courage, and resilience born of collaboration.

The supervisory relationship is about power, but it does not need to be about dominance or control. Any supervisee recognizes her supervisor as someone with power over her. The greater the felt power, the greater will be the supervisee’s anxiety. As much as possible, then, the power needs to be transferred. In the relationship model described here, the power is shared (which is a great relief not only to the supervisee but also to the supervisor!). The supervisor facilitates the articulation of a contract, even as she helps supervisees make explicit their contracts with families. The supervisee needs to have the right to:

- participate in developing the learning structure to which she is being exposed;
- develop a contract or an agenda defining reciprocal expectations;
- take first responsibility in analyzing her own work; and
- contribute meaningfully to her own evaluation.

In doing these things, the student/supervisee develops her capacities for reflection, analysis, and planfulness. She becomes more responsible and is better able to think and contribute creatively to her own learning when she has had a stake in developing the terrain to be covered, when the qualities of the learning are explicit, and when the supervisory relationship features openness (Manis 1979).

For her part, the supervisor depends on the supervisee’s ability to observe, interact, and report. She acknowledges – even respects – the supervisee’s style and choices. The “good enough” supervisor recognizes that there are many roads to Rome and that her supervisee will come up with a novel, yet authentic and meaningful response in a given situation. The supervisor seeks and supports that which is facilitative in the supervisee’s work. She also raises questions about those areas of the supervisee’s interactions and functioning which reflect either blind spots, limited knowledge, or lack of experience, confidence, or awareness. The supportive supervisor violates the supervisee’s negative expectations, just as the supervisee will try over and over again to violate the negative expectations of those families too wounded by past experience to enter the therapeutic relationship with optimism. People learn and grow when they feel understood, supported, and, when appropriate, even appreciated. There is an exquisitely delicate relationship between the experience of positive regard, self-esteem, and the ability to be effective. Thoughtful supervision is a process through which the supervisee comes to recognize the decision points in a given

### **Supervisor:**

*(Earnestly) “If we realize that you were only at the center for two hours last week, it’s easy to see why your observations are so sketchy at this point. It’s just not possible to do an adequate job in such a short time. You’ll recall that the application materials state that ten hours per week at the Center is required. What else are you trying to juggle?”*

case and the basis upon which to make decisions. But “decisions” are not to be seen as “answers” (for worse, *the* answer). Rather, decisions represent a forward position, a choice of direction along a path that will yield further useful information and another decision point. In-depth supervision looks beyond decisions and beneath manifest details of behavior, interactions and learning styles. The trust and safety of the process encourage peering below the surface to latent ideas and *feelings* of clients, of the supervisee, and, at times, even of the supervisor. By recognizing and engaging with the supervisee around the emotions they are experiencing, the supervisor models the use of empathy and the recognition and use of emotional experience in professional situations.

To understand feelings, it is important to attend to the history and context of *each* individual