Do the Components of Strengths-based Supervision Enhance Child Welfare Workers’ Satisfaction with Supervision?


Issue

Turnover rates, burnout, vicarious trauma, and professional development needs of the workforce are specific challenges often faced by child welfare administrators. The relationship between the supervisor and the frontline worker is important to increasing staff retention, debriefing stress, and enhancing staff development. The strengths-based supervision (SBS) model enhances the intentionality and quality of supervision provided by child welfare professionals. The SBS model supports family-centered practice (FCP) by using supervisory activities and is considered the overarching theoretical framework guiding child welfare practice in the United States. The FCP is recommended as essential to achieving positive outcomes for children and families involved in the child welfare system and has six organizing principles commonly discussed. FCP: 1) prioritizes the family as the unit of attention and family preservation is paramount; 2) is relational and expects child welfare workers to form professional, supportive partnerships with families; 3) is grounded in an empowerment approach; 4) allows for individualized practice to meet the cultural and personal preferences of the family; 5) involves meeting the practical needs of each family, using a holistic view when considering how best to support the family; and 6) is a strengths-based model that identifies and builds upon the strengths and resources of the family. The parallel process is repeating patterns that occur within the relationship between the supervisor and worker and similarly within the relationship between the worker and the family—the interactions between the supervisor and worker influence the interaction between the worker and the family being served. Therefore, it is crucial that supervisory interactions remain theoretically consistent within any practice model implemented. To create an intentionality in supervision that is consistent with FCP, the strengths-based supervision model expects supervisors to: 1) parallel FCP principles in supervision; 2) integrate the use of crisis and reflective supervisory conferences; 3) use individual and group supervision modalities; and 4) fulfill administrative, educational, and supportive functions. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the degree to which certain components of SBS predict higher levels of satisfaction with supervision for child protective services (CPS) specialists. Satisfaction with supervision is imperative as it impacts retention and enhances decision-making and improves client outcomes.

Method

The purpose of this project was to determine which supervisory processes are associated with higher levels of satisfaction with supervision. A mixed methods concurrent nested design was used to evaluate the association between six components of SBS and levels of satisfaction with supervision. A cross-sectional survey was administered online to a group of child welfare workers that consisted primarily of closed-ended questions (38 items), supplemented by two open-ended items to allow participants to explain their responses. The survey consisted of demographic questions, questions about the amount of supervision received, and six scales measuring the primary components of SBS: 1) reflective supervision; 2) supervision availability in crisis and for scheduled supervision; 3) modeling FCP; 4) educational supervision; 5) supportive supervision; and 6) administrative supervision. A scale measuring respondent satisfaction with supervision was included to assess the association between these elements of SBS and levels of satisfaction with supervision in child welfare. All the scales were created based on the supervisory activities expected in SBS. An 8-item scale was created to determine the degree to which respondents perceive that their supervisors prompt critical thinking during supervision. A 5-item scale was developed to assess the degree to which the direct report observes FCP practice principles in action by the supervisor. Three scales, with three items each, were created to measure participants’ perceptions regarding a supervisor’s supportive, educational, and administrative functions. Finally, a scale measuring the supervisor’s availability for crisis and in-depth scheduled individual and group supervision was also included. The outcome variable, satisfaction with supervision, was created for the purpose of this study, which consisted of a 4-item scale asking the level of agreement. The sampling frame included child welfare specialists in one specific region of about 811 and resulted in a sample size of 427 (response rate of 52.6%). The average years of service in the child welfare system was about 9 years (M = 9.3; SD = 5.8); however, nearly 20 percent of the sample identified serving 1 year or less. Similarly, while the average years in the current position in CPS was 7.6 years (SD = 5.1); the highest frequency of years indicated was 1 year or less.
Findings

Multiple regression was used to test the association between the components of SBS and the levels of satisfaction with supervision. Variables were added hierarchically in order to compare the relative change in explained variance. Model 1 tested the control variable: number of hours of supervision, which was associated with levels of supervisor satisfaction such that as hours of supervision increased, so did the level of satisfaction ($R^2 = .12$). Model 2, incorporated the six SBS variables. Five of the six SBS variables were significantly associated with the outcome variable, with more than 70 percent of the variance explained ($R^2 = .82$). Interestingly, when regressed along with the components of SBS, not all levels of the hours of supervision were significant and some relationships moved from positive to negative indicating that when accounting for elements of supervision that relate to content of supervision, more hours of supervision were not consistently associated with increased satisfaction.

The open-ended comments were relevant when triangulated with the quantitative findings. There were 317 responses to the question “What do you appreciate about the supervision that your currently receive?”, with 59 percent of the respondents providing comments regarding supervisory support, which indicates that support in supervision is imperative. The second most commonly discussed theme was about the importance of availability (40% of subsample). Although the impact of number of hours of supervision on satisfaction was inconsistent in each of the models tested, the open-ended responses demonstrated the importance of the availability of the supervisor. The general theme was that workers felt appreciative of supervisors who were readily available and checks in on the worker. The 261 respondents who answered the question, “What would help to improve the supervision you receive?”, the most commonly addressed item was the supervisor’s availability (40% of subsample). Workers who did not feel their supervisors were available to them when needed, often expressed dissatisfaction with supervision. Respondents also identified issues of lack of support (39% of subsample). Respondents identified a need for increased support of the individual worker and the need for increased support at the organizational level. This qualitative data corroborated the primary quantitative findings by continuing to emphasize the importance of supervisor support and availability for crisis and in-depth, scheduled supervisory conferences.

Implications

These findings indicate that most of the supervisory practices measured in this study were associated with higher levels of satisfaction. The quantitative findings are corroborated by the open-ended comments that lend further support to these conclusions. Supervisory practices such as forming positive supervisory relationships, engaging in reflective supervision, being available in a crisis, and scheduled in-depth supervision meetings were highly valued. Given that the model explained 82 percent of the variance, this suggests that these components should be integrated into a model of supervision such as SBS. There are certain components of supervision that are of great importance, such as supportive supervision and availability of the supervisor, both of which have been demonstrated as important to the relationship between the supervisor and worker. Although the hours of supervision were less explanatory in the full model, this variable did predict increased satisfaction in the initial model suggesting that increasing quality of supervision may be more important than quantity of supervision. This satisfaction is demonstrated in the second model that had negative effects between hours of supervision when the supervisory activities were not valuable. The role of supervisory support was replicated in this study, suggesting that child welfare agencies need to create time in the supervisor’s schedule to remain adequately available to regular, scheduled, and crisis supervision activities. Policies should consider the number of workers assigned to a supervisor, the additional caseload supervisors should carry, and the degree of other responsibilities required of supervisors to ensure supervisory activities include a reasonable level of supervision. Training is needed to ensure that supervisors have the skills needed to communicate effectively with CPS specialists. Supervisor-support requires the ability to leverage the knowledge and expertise of the supervisor while still allowing specialists to make decisions. Workers often perceive their supervision activities to include instrumentation and to be task-oriented, suggesting a need for enhanced skills in clinical debriefing. Supervision activities should not be too procedural but should promote professional development and clinical skills. Findings also lend support to the benefit of SBS as a model that can integrate supervisory activities into a coherent program. Considering that five of the six SBS components were associated with higher levels of satisfaction, SBS may provide one strategy for improving supervision satisfaction, potentially increasing worker retention.