

Gaspar, M. & Walker, R. *Mentoring, Coaching and Supervision in the Early Years: theory and practice*. Chapter 6 – Claire Majella Richards

“Is it safe?”...Creating safe reflective spaces for child protection practice.

Chapter Summary

Organisational cultures of calm and compassion are highlighted as being conducive to supporting effective organisational safeguarding children practice. The importance of safe spaces for practitioners is considered to enabling quality supervision and mentoring of staff and, nurturing the advocacy skills of practitioners in protecting the rights of children. A focus is given to the effect of past trauma of abuse and the impact on responses and decision-making in the protection of children. The chapter includes a focus on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (Shusterman, 1999) and its application and meaning for child protection practice. A fictitious case scenario based on domestic violence and abuse aims to represent important issues related to mentoring and coaching in supervision and child protection practice, any resemblance of the case study to a past or present case is entirely coincidental.

Introduction

The theme of the chapter recognises that the protection of children is undoubtedly one of the most challenging and complex practice issues for any individual working with children and their families. This requirement implicates the need for effectively trained practitioners who are supported and nurtured in their work contexts while undertaking their daily child safeguarding responsibilities. Good quality supervision, and the coaching and mentoring of less experienced practitioners and students are

all part-and-parcel of caring for each individual involved in child protection. There has been a significant wind change in the early years profession on an international scale, with more prominent recognition of the importance of reflective practice and quality supervision in the care and education of children. These factors go some way to nurturing the advocacy skills of the practitioner in augmenting the rights of the child. A crucial relationship with 'the self' is integral to the practitioner while the emotionality and vicarious trauma experienced by practitioners in child protection work needs to be acknowledged, as conscious links are made to practitioner narratives and histories of abuse. The personal narratives of previous or current trauma can impact directly or indirectly on our work with children, families and colleagues (Bradbury- Jones, 2013 & Conti O' Hare, 2002). These are issues that will be explored further in the chapter.

Critical Questions -

- 1) How does your child protection practice 'feel' when you reflect on your role and responsibilities within your professional spaces?
- 2) What is your experience of mentoring, coaching and supervision in your workplace and what might you do to improve this experience?

The Meaning of "Safeguarding and Protecting Children" and the relationship to Supervision, Mentoring and Coaching.

Definitions and theories of Mentoring, Coaching and Supervision have been introduced in chapter 1 of this book, which seek to promote a shared understanding

of what we mean by these terms. The chapter will offer definitions for consideration in the context of safeguarding and protecting young children. The “discovery” of child abuse has beleaguered many professional disciplines, (notably frontline social work), public inquiries, survivor testimonies, research and literature over the last 100 years or more. While there is recognition that the term “safeguarding” is more familiar in a UK context, the concept does translate fluently across nations and cultures on considering the principles of early intervention and prevention for a child’s welfare and safety. The terms safeguarding and child protection will be used throughout this chapter in exploring both concepts. Firstly, in referring to child protection there is recognition of a child’s safety and how their welfare and safety is of paramount importance to all concerned with their world. I have described “safeguarding” children as ‘the processes of supporting families and empowering children. It is about early intervention and preventative strategies to ensure better outcomes for children. Being safer, more resilient and to grow in confidence, fulfilling their potential’ (Richards, 2009: p 73).

The concept of professional advocacy is an essential component of professional skills and practice in promoting the rights of children. This is arguably more difficult in the reality of the stress conditions of challenging practice and the ability or willingness of a novice student or seasoned practitioner to question the prevailing judgement or opinion of what is or, is not in the interests of a child’s safety and welfare. Lord Laming referred to supervision as ‘the cornerstone of good social work practice’ (2003: p.14) and Helm (2017) relates more innovative approaches in supervision practice where colleagues are enabled to engage with those aspects of uncertainty in child protection work, and extract meaning rather than seek solutions within unhurried professional encounters. Harlow (2016) suggests that the terms

Mentoring and Coaching can become intertwined and blurred in terms of meaning and application but, she succinctly describes a mentor as someone who offers assistance to a less experienced colleague, while a coach is more typically appointed as an external facilitator to the organisation to support the improvement of role performance. In terms of good practice in supporting students and new colleagues to a setting, the norm should be to allocate a mentor as part of the induction process and their long-term development within the new environment. This is exemplary of good practice and should readily ease any apprehensions of the new student or colleague in their 'settling in' period within their new professional environment.

Critical Questions –

3) How do you consider the child's voice and professional advocacy as integral to the protection of children?

4) What would you suggest is important in supporting the needs of new students or staff in the context of their child protection role and responsibilities?

An Organisational Culture of Calm and Compassion.

The sounds or noise of our workplace can sharpen or dull our senses to what is happening around us and we may find ourselves having difficulty in finding a quiet space to be calm and reflect on our practice. The community that is our team, large or small, can at times be a stressful place and how we manage this also depends on the culture and the leadership within our workplace. Helm (2017) describes the importance of practitioners needing a 'secure base' (p.395) and activities such as making coffee or sharing food with each other, can be a means of communication

and expressing emotion. I suggest that these practices in my experience are conducive to a calm and compassionate culture in any workplace. Ruch (2007) relates the importance of 'emotionally informed thinking spaces' (p.372) as critical for effective child protection practice, and this concept chimes with the provision of supervision for practitioners by their immersion within collaborative and inclusive communications.

Peshkin (2002) makes thoughtful reference to the power of silence within our reflective practice as it alerts us to the less visible or invisible, the silenced and the unheard within organisations and institutions. This injustice may trouble us as there is recognition of how children are silenced by their abusers, just as practitioners may also be silenced for speaking out and advocating for the rights of the child (Ferguson, 2005; Goddard and Hunt, 2011; Richards, 2015). Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (Shusterman, 1999) offers an illuminative perspective of how power in organisations is played out, used and abused by those in positions of greater power and status over those who have less power and status. Your disposition as a child, adolescent, student or professional is acquired over time and through a range of your experiences in the life span. These life experiences can inform our perceptions of who we are and of our place in the world, the same applies to professional contexts. An awareness of a sense of place or "knowing one's place" is thought-provoking, particularly when we apply this notion to 'the structures of organisational cultures and the status and power taken by, or given to professionals in the context of their expert position in child welfare' (Richards & Gallagher, 2018: p. 88). The student who sees themselves as "less worthy" or uninformed to question or challenge poor practice in relation to the welfare of a child, in contrast to their more knowledgeable and experienced colleague, is something that I suspect is familiar to

many students across a range of professional disciplines. An organisation culture that is calming and compassionate, promoting an equal voice to all practitioners, should benefit all those who work within the institution and ultimately the children and families who use the service.

A Critical Question –

5) How does Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' relate to you as a student or practitioner? How might the meaning of habitus inform and develop your disposition in protecting children within your organisation and working with other professionals?

Domestic Violence and Abuse as a Practitioner Narrative

There is a wealth of literature and research that reminds us of the impact of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) on women's health and well-being, in pregnancy and as mothers (Barlow, 2016; Douglas & Walsh, 2010; Humphreys, 2010; Moulding *et al.* 2015; Morrison, 2015). Goodard and Hunt (2011) highlight the gendered perspective of the social work profession which tends to be female dominated, this point also relates to the early years profession. Douglas and Walsh (2010) highlight how mothers as victims of DVA are viewed as being un-protective of their children, especially where they remain in a violent relationship. However, there is much evidence to support the protectiveness of mothers where DVA is a feature of family life. Her coping and survival strategies include responding to the emotional needs of her children after witnessing abuse, avoiding situations where her children are left alone with her partner or trying to reassure her partner that she is not leaving him (Moulding *et al.* 2015). This last tactic is possibly one of the safest strategies for her

and her children as the point of leaving or having left an abusive relationship is the most dangerous (Fleury *et al.* 2000; Kim & Gray, 2008). In recognition of past trauma and abuse, the following fictitious case scenario as referred to previously, attempts to illustrate the complex dynamics and perspectives where the personal and professional worlds of the practitioner collide.

CASE STUDY SCENARIO

Jacqui is an Early Years Professional in a pre-school and she is a key worker to four-year old Jacob, who is currently in foster care. His mother was seriously injured by her partner and there has been a history of domestic violence in the family before Jacob was born. His mother remains with her violent partner and Jacob was removed from his home by the Local Authority as it is no longer a safe place for him. Jacqui experiences Jacob as a very anxious child who is reluctant to join in with any of the daily activities with his peers. He is distrustful of adults in the pre-school, he avoids eye contact with others and is almost mute, communicating non-verbally to Jacqui and her colleagues. Jacob has become attached to Jacqui and is reluctant to be away from her side during his sessions at the pre-school, he follows her and wants to sit close to her which makes Jacqui's interactions with other children and colleagues quite difficult. Jacqui feels very protective towards him and is aware that she has felt sad and concerned about his welfare if he is to return home to his mother. In fact, she acknowledges that she is feeling angry about the child's circumstances.

Jacqui is a survivor of domestic violence, she grew up in a household where she witnessed and experienced violence and the threats of violence to her mother, herself and her younger siblings. She once stayed in a refuge when her mother fled the violence but returned home again because her younger sister was missing their pet dog. Jacqui remembers how frightened she used to feel and she is reminded of her own childhood trauma when she thinks about Jacob.

Critical Questions-

- 7) What might some of the challenges be for Jacqui as a key worker for Jacob?
- 8) How can safe and supportive supervision enable Jacqui to be effective in her role with Jacob while acknowledging her own feelings about her traumatic childhood?
- 9) How might the experience of mentoring and coaching be useful to Jacqui?

Hurt and Pain as Histories of Practitioners in Practice

It is important to consider the impact of the trauma of child abuse on the individual practitioner who has themselves been traumatised by their own abusive childhood. This consideration relates to those who are still living with trauma as adults, such as in the case of domestic violence, and how they may see their own children being affected by this experience of abuse. These issues are complex and undoubtedly have implications for how the “personal and professional being” of a practitioner are

intertwined and connected to the everyday interactions with children, families and colleagues. The mess that is troubling in a child's world, the mire where professionals can become stuck and the feelings that resurface when faced with the trauma of children's narratives of violence, pain and hurt, evoke a re-traumatisation for hurt practitioners as they recollect past histories of their own abuse as children. Meadors *et al.* (2010) reflect on the concern of secondary traumatisation of healthcare professionals as their study highlights the emotional challenges for practitioners in meeting the needs of patients because of their secondary traumatisation syndrome (STS). Goddard and Hunt (2011) emphasise the concern of vicarious trauma and post-traumatic stress within the discipline of social work, including secondary traumatisation as mentioned. The emotional impact of child protection work is increasingly recognised in the literature and this exposure causes emotional pain or, what Bradbury- Jones refers to as vicarious emotional pain that is vicarious trauma (2013). Good supervision and mentoring enable a practitioner to express their anxieties, hopes and doubts for a child based on their relationship with them and what they know or do not know about the child's world. Bradbury-Jones (2013) adds that this point does highlight ethical issues in terms of the 'protection of practitioners' (p.261), she suggests that a willingness for some disclosure is required, and this should be in the domain of safe and supportive supervisory structures and practice in a setting.

A Critical Question -

9) How can vicarious or secondary trauma of students and practitioners be addressed as part of holistic approaches in good safeguarding and child protection practice?

Conclusion

The chapter has sought to address issues that are pertinent in the context of the role of supervision, mentoring and coaching in safeguarding children. It is important to acknowledge the emotional component of safeguarding and protecting children as this indicates that you are emotionally connected to those children in your care. The availability of safe and sound supervision is important to your developing professionalism and that includes the space for you to acknowledge and check out your thoughts and feelings of concern for a child, in addition to how you are working effectively with others in your safeguarding role. This critically includes your inter-professional discussions and your voice within supervision. A calm and compassionate environment is not representative of every workplace, however it is something every professional who works with children should strive for, in recognition of enabling and promoting their safety and well-being. By acknowledging the emotionality of our child protection practice, we may begin to appreciate the benefits of calm and compassion in our work environments.

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