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How can child protection agencies support quality supervision?

“What I hear time and time again is if you have a good, supportive supervisor, whatever that means to each individual, that’s really what drives the most employee success and the best employee experience.”¹

—Amy Davidson, Deputy Director, Summit County (Ohio) Children Services

Effective supervision is essential to the effectiveness of the child welfare workforce. Quality supervision ensures that caseworkers have necessary skills and knowledge to accurately assess family strengths and safety concerns, make sound decisions, and develop and implement effective service plans.² Supervisors support the well-being of staff, help caseworkers manage secondary trauma from being exposed to child and family crises, create boundaries to protect personal time, and help staff advance in their careers.

Supervisors also may serve as mentors and coaches, assist on hiring panels, conduct performance reviews, and be involved in the administration of policy and practice changes. In sum, effective supervisors are equal parts educators, administrators, emotional supporters, case managers, and champions of their staff.

The supervisor’s role is critical throughout a workers’ time in an agency. Studies have documented the importance of supervision to employee retention in the first year,³ as well as for staff who have been in their job for five years or more.⁴ An analysis on supervision in child welfare, behavioral health, and social work found that effective supervision is related significantly to positive outcomes for caseworkers.⁵

[Anecdotal research](#) also demonstrates that support from supervisors matters, but supervisors also need to be supported in order to succeed in their positions.

Supervisor turnover

In a study of more than 30,000 child welfare caseworkers (based on data from 46 states from 2003 to 2015), about 20% of supervisors left the job every year with the average tenure at 2.5 years, and in most states, supervisors carried their own caseload.⁶ This data does not reflect the additional turnover and related strain placed on supervisors during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the [so-called “great resignation.”](#)

Retaining supervisors can be challenging for many of the same reasons that [caseworker turnover](#) is so high (excessive workload, trauma, burnout). High rates of staff turnover during and shortly after the pandemic increased stress on supervisors. That contributed to a higher than typical number of supervisors exiting their positions, which in turn led to more people with less tenure and experience moving into supervisory roles.⁷ Additionally, many highly skilled caseworkers may have opted to remain in their frontline positions instead of welcoming the added responsibility of being a supervisor.⁸

To support retention, child protection agencies provide training for supervisors on topics ranging from human resource matters to reflective supervision practice. In addition to training, agencies looking to retain supervisors and strengthen their practice offer supervisors additional support, such as peer networks and self-care resources.

Training for supervisors

Training is a go-to strategy to support the child welfare workforce. A competency-based training approach ensures trainees are learning the specific knowledge and behavioral skills required to perform the functions of the job. An organization first must identify supervisor job competencies — specific statements of awareness, knowledge, or skill that will be achieved — so that these competencies are adequately represented in trainings. The curricula then should include learning objectives that reflect specific dimensions of each competency. A robust menu of training opportunities is necessary to build supervisory competence and advance the professional development of supervisors over time.⁹

Supervisor onboarding

Some jurisdictions have created programs for new supervisors to build knowledge and peer support. **Colorado**, for example, launched a [New Supervisor Academy: Foundations in Leadership](#) course in 2022 (see box).

Minnesota plans to launch a [new supervisor onboarding](#) pilot in 2026. Designed for supervisors within their first year of the job, the training includes two courses with a mix of virtual and in-person sessions to cover the technical, supportive, educational, and administrative aspects of supervision. These programs build on the core supervisory training model in their jurisdiction. Some new supervisor trainings also are covering topics such as adaptive leadership, leading from the middle, and how to focus on empathy.

Strengthening supervisor training in Colorado

The New Supervisor Academy: Foundations in Leadership in **Colorado** explores both the adaptive and technical elements of leading in child welfare. This six-week, 49-hour learning experience includes an orientation, adaptive leadership workshop, pre-work and technical sessions, small group meetings, an independent project, and a closing session. All participants are expected to read the Supervisor Manual prior to the orientation. The training is led by the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect.

Eighty-four people participated in the *New Supervisor Academy* in state fiscal year 2025. Post-training knowledge test scores averaged 80.4, a 17-point improvement over the pre-test average of 63.5.

According to participants, the Independent Learning Project and 3-day Adaptive Leadership Workshop were the most effective portions of the *Academy*.

Ongoing training

Supervisor training in child welfare should cover a variety of topics including leadership, practice model implementation, evidence-based practices, critical thinking, and management strategies. Examples of ongoing training include:

- [Supervisor Practice Standards](#) in **North Carolina** outline expectations for supervisors related to communication, engagement, assessment, planning, and implementation. Each standard describes optimal, developmental, and insufficient characteristics of supervisor behavior.
- **Transfer of learning** is the process of helping staff apply the skills learned in training to the job. The [Academy for Professional Excellence](#) in **California** offers a course on this topic.
- [Supportive supervision](#) is a trauma-informed approach to supervising child welfare workers that focuses on encouraging staff self-efficacy. The [National Association of Social Workers](#) recognizes supportive supervision as a best practice and reports that it decreases the job stress that interferes with worker performance. **Wisconsin** offers supportive supervision training as a part of its [supervisor orientation](#).
- [National Child Welfare Workforce Institute Leadership Academy](#) is designed to build and support skills critical for the success of supervisors, managers, and directors. Offered since 2008, a [2023 evaluation](#) points to high participant satisfaction, significant knowledge gains, robust learning transfer, and significant increases in leadership behaviors.
- **Performance management** includes setting goals, conducting reviews, providing constructive feedback, and implementing disciplinary measures as necessary. The **Pennsylvania** Child Welfare Resource Center created a highly structured [Employee Performance Review Process](#) for supervisors to help them explain to staff the performance review process, goals, accountability, and expectations.

Implementation considerations

Organizations that have a learning culture have lower staff burnout and promote employee commitment and retention.¹⁰ Supervisor training is most effective when implemented within a learning organization where leaders at all levels develop, use, and share knowledge to improve the quality of agency practice. Ongoing training is necessary to update supervisors on policy and practice changes, but supervisors cannot always break away from their work to take part in professional development opportunities, even those offered virtually. North Carolina offers supervisor training from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. so that supervisors can check in with staff before the training and respond to staff needs after the training. Some jurisdictions create training cohorts so that supervisors can participate in trainings with a group of peers who came into their positions at roughly the same time.

Training evaluation

An ongoing training evaluation helps to ensure that supervisors are achieving the desired and necessary levels of knowledge and skills. An evaluation must be based on stated competencies and ideally will include an assessment at both the conclusion of training and six or 12 months after. The evaluation also should address how the training has been applied in the field.

New Jersey's supervisor training

The first module in the [New Jersey Department of Children and Families training series](#) for supervisors focuses on the transition from caseworker to supervisor. Participants develop skills in fostering trust, creating a motivating environment where communication is open, conflict is effectively managed, and worker performance is assessed for continued development. Participants examine how to coach employees, build worker capacity, and create effective teams.

A module on people management focuses on self-assessment, reflection on personal viewpoints and capabilities, and getting work done through others. Topics include cultural competence, various supervisory roles, time management, and personal learning style. In June 2021, all agency staff received access to the New Jersey Civil Service Commission's Center for Learning and Improving Performance eLearning catalog, which offers over 600 courses, including ones on management and supervision.

Investing in an array of supports

In addition to training, effective support for supervisors should include access to tools and resources, coaches and mentors, regular supervision from their own bosses, and peer networks. Professional development opportunities also are key and can include workshops, conferences, and advanced degree programs. A wide range of support opportunities will allow supervisors — and staff at all levels — to learn and grow.¹¹ As with training, supervisor supports also need to be evaluated for effectiveness.

Tools and resources

Checklists, guides, and other tools can reinforce training and be used by supervisors to guide their meetings with caseworkers. Several jurisdictions and their training partners have created materials to support supervisors. Examples include:

- The [Supervision/Coaching Guide](#) provides a matrix to guide meetings with staff and includes a list of core practice model behaviors to assess competency. The Northern California Training Academy at University of California, Davis, created this tool.
- The [New Worker Checklist](#), created in 2024 by the **Minnesota** Child Welfare Training Academy, provides supervisors a straight-forward list of requirements they are responsible for covering with a new worker.
- The Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development developed a guide for [providing virtual supervision](#) to help child welfare supervisors manage a hybrid workforce.

Supports for supervisors

Supervisors have many demands on their time and can benefit from additional support as they are exposed to secondary trauma (through their own cases or providing case consultation to staff), an intense workload, and competing demands. Peer support, including group sessions, allow time to share management strategies, encouragement, and engage in problem solving. Offering these groups during the workday can help supervisors build a positive peer network and reinforces agency support for supervisors.

Several county child protection agencies in **Ohio** took part in a [supportive supervision and resiliency intervention](#) to support the child welfare workforce and help staff cope with secondary trauma. “In addition to supervisor-specific coaching and groups, we have supported leadership training opportunities in the community,” said Amy Davidson, executive director of Summit County Children Services, one of the participating agencies. “We’ve also looked for ways to lessen internal bureaucracy by revising several policies that affect workload. We also allocate money annually that supervisors can spend as they wish on their staff for team building activities and wellness throughout the year.”

Arizona provides dedicated spaces for supervisors to discuss cases and practice guidelines in groups among their peers. **Colorado** created a [self-care survey](#) to guide new supervisors in assessing the various ways they are caring for themselves, recognizing that self-care is critical for anyone caring for the well-being of others.

Coaching for supervisors

The 2023 evaluation of the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute Leadership Academy found that supervisors who met with coaches (up to five coaching sessions of about one hour per session) reported that coaching helped them better understand their own strengths and challenges. Academy participants also said they appreciated that content from the coaching sessions was practical and applicable, including information on the topic of self-care.

¹ The content of this brief was informed by an interview with Amy Davidson, Deputy Director, Summit County Children Services, on May 9, 2025.

² Bulletins for Professionals (2020). [Supervising for Quality Child Welfare Practice](#). Child Welfare Information Gateway.

³ Anna de Guzman, Tabitha Carver-Roberts, Robin Leake & Shauna Rienks (2020). Retention of child welfare workers: staying strategies and supports, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 14:1, 60-79.

⁴ Steen, J. and Stewart, C. (2025). [Supervision in Child Welfare: Its Importance to Investigators and Case Managers](#). *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 19:2, 476-492.

⁵ Mor Barak, M. E., Travis, D. J., Pyun, H., & Xie, B. (2009). The impact of supervision on worker outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Social Service Review*, 83(1), 3-32.

⁶ Edwards, F. and Wildeman, C. (2018). [Characteristics of the front-line child welfare workforce](#). *Children and Youth Services Review* (89), pp 13-26.

⁷ Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Analytics. (2022). [The Child Welfare Workforce Crisis – What We’re Hearing from the Field](#).

⁸ Arnett, Alessi, Bruick and Winokur. (2024). ARCH Caseworker Retention Study. Social Work Research Center, Colorado State University.

⁹ Kanak, S. Baker, M., Herz, L. & Maciolek, S. (2008). [Building Effective Training Systems for Child Welfare Agencies](#).

¹⁰ Turnell, A., Munro, E., & Murphy, T. (2013). [Soft is hardest: leading for learning in child protection services following a child fatality](#). *Child Welfare*, 92(2), 199-216.

¹¹ National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. (2015). [Workforce Development Framework \(WDF\)](#). Albany, NY University at Albany.

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