

# Social Work Supervision in Child Welfare:

*The way forward in Nova Scotia*



**NSCSW**

NOVA SCOTIA  
COLLEGE OF  
SOCIAL WORKERS

## Introduction:

Though there are various support and supervisory mechanisms available for social workers in child welfare, data from the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers and other sources suggest that social workers in child welfare are experiencing increasing rates of burn out, stress and other mental and health related issues.

- In conditions where social workers are overcome by the emotional intensity of the work and complex interactions with angry, resistant parents and family friends, the child can become invisible (Ferguson 2013).
- Studies in jurisdictions with similar conditions often find this kind of environment is emotionally draining for workers (Ingram, 2013).
- In a study of child protection in Alberta, 75% per cent of social workers involved in the study reported that they have to work very intensively and neglect some tasks because they have too much to do. Just under half say that they have unrealistic deadlines; 31% feel pressured to work long hours (Kinjerski, 2012).
- Consequently, these conditions can create what Ferguson (2013) refers to as the phenomenon now **known as the 'invisible child'**. **In these stressful environments, the risk** that child will not be the focus increases as the other pressures of the job become intensified.
- **It is in this stress environment that can leads to child deaths (Ferguson 2013).**
- In the face of such challenging work, many cases have found the supervision of social work was often of low quality impacting the overall organization capacity (Ferguson, 2013; Ingram, 2013)

## Traditional Notions of Social Work Supervision

Social work supervision has been influenced by professionally defined notions of 'competent' and 'accountable' practice (Kadushin; 2002). In the traditional notions of social welfare supervision,

1. The functions of supervision are mostly aimed at achieving individual interests within the organization and follows the traditional one-on-one approach to supervision.
2. This function of supervision is limited to achieving organizational goals and increasing productivity and accountability within the organization.
3. Though social work supervision are not only organizational and professional (Tsui, 2005), traditional notions of supervision focus on the administrative functions of supervision at the possible expense of support and educational functions (Glee, Smith & Dubois, 1993).

## Supportive Supervision in Child Welfare:

In child welfare, supportive social work supervision is essential. The child welfare settings most of the time, has high turnover rates and the struggle is always to fill a number of positions within rising demand for services by clients amidst looming workforce crisis in Child Welfare (Chiller & Crisp, 2012; Alwon & Reitz, 2000).

Supportive supervision offers the following opportunities;

1. It allows social workers to connect the emotional stress of the day with theory and practice and focuses critical reflection to ensure the child remains the focus of the work (Fergusson, 2013).
2. When opportunities to critically reflect on experiences are placed at the core of practice, and where a sense of shared responsibility for the effectiveness and safety of the practice are created, better service often follows (Beddo, 2012).
3. It provides opportunity for workers in child welfare to integrate lessons learned into actual practice (Shireman; 2003).
4. It plays a key role in assuring competent social work practice because it benefits both **the client and the social worker as it contributes to social worker's personal and professional development** (Hughes, 2010).

Inadequate social work supervision could result to harm to both the social worker, the client and the organization (Borders, 2017).

**The NSCSW believes that traditional notions of social work supervision as evident in Nova Scotia is not adequate for social workers in child welfare and therefore intends to present alternative notions of supervision.**

## Child Welfare Policy in Nova Scotia:

The need for adequate supervision for child welfare social workers has been stressed in Nova Scotia. In the Child Welfare Policy manual,

- The child welfare specialist provides clinical supervision, oversight and ensures consistent application of policy in the Child Protection and Placement Services programs across the province (pg. 91).
- The casework supervisor is responsible for overseeing the practice of frontline child welfare social workers regarding case management and performance reviews.
- The supervisor ensures that the necessary level of support is provided, in line with the experience and needs of the social worker” (pg.13).
- The Policy **mentions that ‘All supervisors must be provided with ongoing training in supervision skills and up-to-date knowledge of child welfare issues to assist in the**

provision of quality, relevant and current services to clients and to support social workers' (pg. 13).

- The casework supervisor is responsible for regular caseload review for all social workers under their supervision.

### Challenges with supervision of social workers in child welfare:

Recognizing that child protection is one of the most demanding social work roles; that social workers in child welfare work with unwilling clients under emotionally charged atmosphere and within regulatory specifications and scarce resources (Kinjerski, 2012). **Supervision cannot be over-emphasized.**

Though the policy manual recognizes the important role of supervision for child welfare workers, a review of the policy reveals that

1. The emphasis here is clinical supervision and performance focusing on the administrative and managerial functions of supervision with an emphasis on caseload management.
2. Supervision is very individualistic and tailored to increase the productivity of social workers in meeting clients and organizational goals. It is designed as a managerial and administrative tool.
3. This policy is designed to control, monitor and evaluate the efficiency of frontline social workers and to hold them accountable.

This policy and practices are not efficient to address the current level of burnout and lack of rendition with the Child Welfare system.

### The Role of the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers:

The NSCSW mandate is to ensure that Nova Scotians have competent social workers who are knowledgeable, ethical, qualified, and accountable to the people who receive social work services. Social workers need to work in an environment that support wholistic personal and professional growth and development.

According to the NSCSW member data,

- child protection social workers are younger than their peers in the rest of the profession.
- child protection social workers are more likely to be Social Worker Candidates when compared to the rest of their peers.
- Social Work Candidates in child welfare are struggling to complete their candidacy program compared to their peers in other areas of service. 50% of Candidates within the child protection system have not submitted reports. This indicates that they are not

meeting the requirements of the Candidacy program thereby demonstrating that they are inactive.

The Candidacy program is a critical piece in the development of a social worker as it provides essential supportive supervision in the first two years of practice.

### Recommendations:

1. Develop policies and procedures for supportive social work supervision in child welfare.
2. Monitor and evaluate to ensure that new social workers are completing their Candidacy requirements and ensure that there is time in their schedules to achieve this.
3. Supportive supervision needs to continue after the Candidacy period. It would be vital to explore alternative forms of supervision such as peer and group supervision, self-supervision, team supervision and the formation of communities of practice and learning circles.
4. There is need to adopt an integrative approach that combines supervision, mentorship, coaching and consultation as part of the broader context for organizational learning and knowledge management.
5. If current workloads are barrier to supportive supervision then appropriate resources must be put in place to ensure time for supportive supervision.

### Conclusion:

**Given the likelihood of increased caseloads, current stress and burnout issues a crucial way forward for the Department of Community Services is to build an organizational culture that facilitates social work supervision (Fergusson, 2013).**

In this culture child protection social workers would receive supportive supervision. Supportive supervision would allow them to connect the emotional stresses of the day with theory, practice and the reflection needed to ensure the child remains the focus (Fergusson, 2013). When opportunities to critically reflect on experiences are placed at the core of practice, and where a sense of shared responsibility for the effectiveness and safety of the practice are created, better service often follows.

**In an Alberta study of child protection social workers who felt as though they had supportive social work supervision performed 21% better at work, were 36% less at risk for stress, were 73% more committed to stay with the organization and 100% more committed to their organization (Kinjerski, 2012). Effective professional supervision can also facilitate social worker workforce retention and is important for their wellbeing (Chiller & Crip 2012).**

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