

REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION AS TRAUMA INFORMED CARE:

One Agency's Experience

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JAMES' grandmother reports that she finds him **asleep on the floor of his closet** every morning **curled tightly into a fetal position**.

MYRA rode in the ambulance that took her mother to the hospital after her most recent overdose. Now, she **screams every time she hears an ambulance**.

KENNY jumps up and begins **swinging his fists at anyone nearby** every time a tray is dropped or other loud sound occurs in the school cafeteria.

TORY silently begins **pulling her own hair** as **tears leak out of her eyes** when her foster mother cooks spaghetti.

REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION & TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Every one of these children have experienced trauma, and each, in their own way, is trying to cope with the ongoing reminders they face daily. Supporting them in this healing process are dedicated relatives and foster parents who, in turn, are supported by child welfare caseworkers. Day after day, caseworkers patiently listen to dozens of these stories, see the wounded children and try to help their caregivers with tools and strategies. Day after day, caseworkers return to their desks to write up casenotes and other reports documenting their encounters with the smallest victims of trauma. The cumulative impact of this daily exposure to trauma can cause workers to experience secondary traumatic stress (STS) which impacts their own personal and professional well-being.

Staff turnover has long been highlighted as a challenge facing child welfare agencies. There is a growing recognition of the role that the STS workers experience as a result of this daily exposure to children's trauma plays in not only in turnover, but in feelings of hopelessness, decreased effectiveness and lowered staff morale. Supervisors serve in the critical role of educating and supporting such workers, improving morale and increasing effectiveness as they serve children and families on their caseloads. In trauma-informed systems, what tools and resources are available to supervisors to improve their success as they face these daunting challenges?

This is one of the questions that faced Yvette Bradford, Quality Improvement Director at **Lutheran Children and Family Services (LCFS)** in Philadelphia upon reviewing an internal evaluation citing the critical need for improved supervision within the agency. She recognized

that addressing this challenge would require more than a new initiative or additional training for supervisors. It would require a complete culture change as the organization sought to become more thoroughly trauma-informed at all levels.

The Chadwick Trauma Informed Systems Project (CTISP) in California has defined a trauma informed child welfare system as one in which:

... all parties involved recognize and respond to the varying impact of traumatic stress on children, caregivers, families, and those who have contact with the system. Programs and organizations within the system infuse this knowledge, awareness, and skills into their organizational cultures, policies, and practices. They act in collaboration, using the best available science, to facilitate and support resiliency and recovery.¹

CTISP further notes that trauma-informed child welfare systems will recognize that

- Exposure to trauma is part of the child welfare job, and
- Trauma has shaped the culture of the child welfare system, the same way trauma shapes the world view of child victims.

Reflective Supervision is an approach to supervision centered around the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee. The approach utilizes a variety of strategies including regularly scheduled meetings, reflective questions, creative thinking and collaborative problem solving to address case-related challenges and build worker skill, competence and confidence. Multiplying Connections has recognized Reflective Supervision as a practice that is highly consistent with trauma-informed systems change,² and set out to support implementation of this practice within Philadelphia child welfare agencies, at the same time that Bradford was seeking approaches to improve the quality of supervision at LCFS.

As a result of conversations with June Cairns at The City of Philadelphia Department of Human Services and Leslie Lieberman of Multiplying Connections, Bradford decided to attend the June 2011 symposium sponsored by Multiplying Connections, **Reflective Supervision as Trauma Informed Practice: The Time is Now** along

with three members of her staff. This proved to be the first step in a year-long intentional, thoughtful and strategic approach to implementing Reflective Supervision at LCFS as part of the desired culture change towards building a fully integrated trauma-informed system of care.

Since that June 2011 symposium, LCFS has successfully adopted and implemented Reflective Supervision into its in-home protective services, family reunification and refugee services and is moving towards agency-wide adoption of this practice. LCFS Supervisor Samantha Waschow notes, “Our agency is strongly committed to this.” The progress to-date at LCFS provides valuable lessons on how to achieve and sustain agency-wide practice change. Core elements of success have included:

- A strategic and inclusive preparation process
- Intensive training
- Ongoing mentoring and coaching

STRATEGIC & INCLUSIVE PREPARATION

Bradford used a deliberate process to build support for this practice change on multiple levels, recognizing that buy-in would be needed by both the top management of the agency and its umbrella agency Liberty Lutheran, as well as by the managers and supervisors who would be responsible for implementation. She selected key staff to learn about reflective supervision and the benefits it could provide to the staff and clients of LCFS and then convened a working group composed of administrative, management and supervisory staff. Inviting Cairns and Lieberman to join the working group, and reaching out to the organization’s Nurse-Family Partnership program that had been utilizing Reflective Supervision for several years established a collaborative tone from the beginning. This group met bi-monthly to develop a vision and plan that would ensure that Reflective Supervision would be successfully embraced as part of an agency-wide culture shift towards increased trauma-informed care. As a result, LCFS was successful in getting both their executive director, Richard Gitlin and Liberty Lutheran’s President and CEO Dr. Luanne Fisher onboard.

INTENSIVE TRAINING

Ten LCFS supervisors were selected to participate in a pilot intensive Reflective Supervision training model developed by Multiplying Connections beginning in February of 2012. The training was designed to educate participants about Reflective Supervision, provide practice at using critical skills and provide a supportive structure in which the practice is modeled and experienced. Yodit Amaha, who has been a supervisor at LCFS for 18 years, notes that,

“We were not just thrown into this whole concept and told to go and do it. The eight training sessions, spread across 16 weeks were very effective. They were not standard one-way trainings. Meaningful discussion was built in. As supervisors, we were able to share strengths and challenges and we felt empowered. We felt that our voices were being heard at the same time as we were learning new skills. Also, we built a strong camaraderie with one another.”

Both Wascow and Amaha emphasized that the trainer, Cynthia Shirley, MSW, LSW created an atmosphere of safety and trust with an emphasis on the collaborative, problem-solving approach that is the hallmark of Reflective Supervision. “We didn’t just learn *about* Reflective Supervision,” Wascow explained. “We saw it in action every time we attended. We looked forward to going to these sessions. Cynthia was wonderful. It was a terrific learning experience.” They described the trainer as always prepared, the materials as excellent and the level of engagement as very high.

ONGOING MENTORING & COACHING

Perhaps the most vital key to sustaining the enthusiasm achieved during the eight sessions has been the ongoing coaching and mentoring for supervisors at LCFS. While both Wascow and Amaha recognize that the practice is still new within the agency and not all supervisors have fully implemented it yet, it has created a more hopeful atmosphere within the agency and even those supervisors and managers who initially expressed some resistance to yet another new initiative are “coming around.”

Reflective Supervision is taking hold because supervisors and staff are experiencing the difference it is making in their day-to-day work. The practice, Amaha summarizes,

“Provides opportunities for workers to be creative, to think, to brainstorm, and to have give and take relationships with one another. Workers and supervisors and the agency as a whole are growing together. When people feel appreciated and valued, they give more – I have seen workers push themselves further than they did before because this model creates a safe space for trying different approaches to solving problems and challenges presented by clients.”

Wascow reiterated the value of the “safe space” concept inherent in Reflective Supervision and is appreciative that the agency is making the physical quiet spaces available as well as supporting the philosophy of safe spaces. The **Community Meeting** approach to engaging workers in this safe-space model of supervision as illustrated and practiced within the eight week training has proven to be an effective tool in supporting workers and supervisors as they adapt what they learned in training to the workplace environment.

IMPACT OF REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION

Both Wascow and Amaha report that the implementation of Reflective Supervision has had an ameliorating effect on both their own and their supervisees experiences of Secondary Traumatic Stress. “Workers feel heard in a more concrete way than they ever did before,” Amaha notes. “They know their issues are being discussed and this cuts down on their own stress levels.” Wascow adds, “It has transformed the culture to one of hopefulness and this brings down the temperature for everyone.”

While it is still too soon to measure the impact this shift to a Reflective Supervision approach has had on the children and families served, Amaha believes she is already seeing signs that it is making a difference. Reflective Supervision contributes to a culture where workers feel both heard and empowered to become problem-solvers even in the face of the crushing and at-times overwhelming traumatic experiences their clients are coping with. “The more you empower a worker, they will go out and empower their clients that they can handle the situation they are facing,” Amaha states. “They are working with their clients in new ways, pushing them to share more, vent when they need to and then explore strategies and resources for solving their problems.”

Reflective Supervision, when approached not as an initiative, but as a cornerstone of meaningful culture change within an agency, can be a powerful tool towards building a truly trauma-informed system. As workers and supervisors feel stronger and more hopeful about their work, they can pass on this sense of hope and contribute toward lasting healing and resilience in the lives of children and families who have experienced trauma.

1 The Chadwick Trauma-Informed Systems Project. (2012). *Creating trauma-informed child welfare systems: A guide for administrators* (1st ed.). San Diego, CA: Chadwick Center for Children and Families.

2 Anje van Buckelaer, M.D., *Multiplying Connections*. (2011) *Using Reflective Supervision to Support Trauma-informed Systems for Children: A White Paper Developed by the Multiplying Connections Initiative*. Philadelphia, PA.