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| Best practice supervision functions |
| Family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing |
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# Background

This information sheet was written with the family violence, sexual assault and child wellbeing sector (the sector). It outlines the four functions of supervision.

It is best understood alongside the broader guidelines, supervision definitions and reflective supervision information sheets.

It explains the purpose of supervision within the sector. Use this document during initial supervision sessions and when discussing supervision agreements.

There are many definitions of supervision (refer to the supervision definitions information sheet), but supervision broadly refers to professional development that promotes best practice for professionals working in human services.

Supervision functions are often incorporated within supervision models. Some examples include the PASE1, 7-eyed 2 and 4x4x43 supervision models.

The 4x4x4 integrated model of supervision is used in many Victorian sectors, including child protection. It includes the three functions (support, management, and development) outlined in the Australian Association of Social Workers *Supervision standards*.4 The 4x4x4 model helps to promote reflective supervision and locate it within the context within which supervision occurs by including:

* the four functions of supervision (support, management, development and mediative)
* the Kolb learning cycle (experience, reflection, analysis, plan and act) that underpins reflective practice
* the context in which supervision occurs or stakeholders.

The supervision functions provide the ‘what’ of supervision. The stakeholders are the ‘who’ or ‘why’ in supervision. The reflective learning cycle is the ‘how’, or the glue that holds the model together. It ensures supervision is a developmental process which improves supervisee practice and decisions, as well as their insight about themselves and their work.

# Four functions of supervision

Supervision serves several functions. These overlap and occur to varying degrees depending on the context, supervisory relationship and organisation. A clear separation of the functions is never entirely possible, or desirable.

It can be difficult for supervisors to cover all four functions. Sector feedback and related literature show that there is often a lack of balance across the functions, with managerial supervision prioritised. Partly for this reason, some family violence and sexual assault programs have separated clinical (supportive, developmental and systemic functions) from line management (managerial function) supervision. They have also provided peer supervision to ensure these more reflective functions occur.

The four functions of supervision are outlined in more detail below. Note that the sector prefers the term ‘systemic’ over ‘mediative’.

## Supportive

* provides a forum to discuss confidentiality, develop trust and a supervisory alliance between supervisor and supervisee
* creates a safe context for supervisees to talk about the successes, rewards, challenges, conflicts, uncertainties, and emotional impacts (including vicarious trauma) of the work and to monitor supervisee safety and wellbeing
* provides an opportunity to explore vicarious resilience which can have significant and positive impacts on practitioner wellbeing and satisfaction since it identifies client strengths and signs of progress5
* explores supervisee’s own personal experiences (including current and previous trauma and lived experience), assumptions, beliefs, and values and how these can impact, and be used, in client practice and interactions with colleagues6
* works from the premise, and is sensitive to the reality, that many practitioners will have their own lived experience of family violence and sexual assault and the decision to disclose is a personal one7
* provides a space to recognise the impact of the work and identify when external supports may be needed such as Employee Assistance Programs, clinical supervision or a therapeutic response
* helps maintain professional boundaries which are critical in sustaining the workforce
* engages the supervisee and supervisor in discussions about trauma and violence-informed theory and practices, organisational culture and creating psychological safety
* recognises the potentially distressing and stressful nature of the work
* gives practitioners a restorative space to explore the impact of the work on their mental health, identity and work-life balance
* allows discussion about team wellbeing and how collective care can be enhanced.

*Always lead with care and curiosity.*

—Lisa Robinson, Executive Manager, Meli

## Managerial

* promotes competent, professional and accountable practice
* checks supervisee understanding and compliance with policies, procedures and legislated requirements
* monitors workloads, hybrid working arrangements and work-life balance
* checks that the supervisee has the information and resources they need
* helps supervisees understand their role and responsibilities
* reflects on interpersonal boundaries and the work
* includes human resource tasks, such as leave requests.

## Developmental

* establishes a collaborative and reflective approach for life-long learning
* focuses on professional development
* supports those working to meet mandatory minimum qualification requirements
* helps embed the Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) Framework and best interests case practice model for vulnerable children and young people into practice
* clarifies individual learning styles, preferences and factors affecting learning
* explores supervisee knowledge, ethics and values
* enables two-way constructive feedback and learning between supervisor and supervisee
* allows feedforward, which focuses on future behaviour and can be better received than feedback
* allows supervisors to coach more experienced practitioners via curious, reflective questions
* helps determine and support supervisee professional development or training needs.

## Systemic

* explores power structures and inequalities in the work context and the supervisory relationship
* supports discussions about intersectional feminist theory, how intersectionality is contextual and dynamic, and requires ongoing reflection and analysis of power dynamics
* ensures culturally safe and informed supervision is available to First Nations practitioners, which recognises the extra layer of vicarious trauma that First Nations practitioners are exposed to and the cultural load they carry
* recognises that there is systemic discrimination and racism that is part of the cultural load an Aboriginal practitioner must carry in their work
* helps supervisees make sense of, relate to and navigate the broader system, sector changes and system limitations
* helps improve multi-agency collaboration
* provides a forum to consult about policies and organisational change
* provides important upward feedback about the frontline experience and interface with the system
* offers another forum to plan advocacy work on a systemic level.

*We do not store experience as data like a computer: we story it.*

—Winter, 19888

# Endnotes

Amovita International, [*Home page*](https://amovita.com/), Amovita website, n.d., accessed 13 February 2023.

2 P Hawkins and R Shohet, *Supervision in the helping professions*, Open University Press, 2006.

3 T Morrison, *Staff supervision in Social Care,* Pavilion, Brighton, 2005.

4 Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), [*Supervision Standards*](https://www.aasw.asn.au/), AASW website, 2014, accessed 13 June 2023.

5 D Engstrom, P Hernandez and D Gangsei, ‘Vicarious resilience: A qualitative investigation into its description’, *Traumatology*, 2008, 14(3):13–21, doi:10.1177/1534765608319323.

6 D Hewson and M Carroll, *Reflective Practice in Supervision*, MoshPit Publishing, Hazelbrook, NSW, 2016.

7 D Mandel and R Reymundo Mandel, ‘[Coming 'out' as a survivor in a professional setting: a practitioner's journey](https://safeandtogetherinstitute.com/season-4-episode-2-coming-out-as-survivor-in-a-professional-setting-a-practitioners-journey/)’, Partnered with a survivor podcast, 2023.

8 Winter, cited in G Bolton, ‘Reflective practice: an introduction’, in G Bolton and R Delderfield (eds), *Reflective practice in writing for professional development*, 2nd edn, Sage, London, 2009.

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