

Child Welfare Supervision

A Practical Guide for Supervisors,
Managers, and Administrators



EDITED BY

Cathryn C. Potter Charmaine R. Brittain

CHILD WELFARE SUPERVISION

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PREFACE

Child welfare workforce issues are taking center stage in the national discussion about how best to serve children and families. Child welfare systems face multiple workforce challenges, including changing national demographics, the nature and complexity of the work, recruitment and retention issues, and organizational limitations, both structural and cultural. The literature on the child welfare workforce is very clear: supervisors are at the frontlines of dealing with workforce issues and are critical contributors to workforce solutions and effective practice.

At the Butler Institute for Families, at the University of Denver, we had the opportunity to work in one of the first set of Children's Bureau grantees focused on workforce issues. The eight Recruitment and Retention grantees worked intensively with sites around the country to support child welfare workforce development. All grantees worked with supervisors as part of the projects. All experienced the power that comes from an effective supervisory workforce. Our own experience of working with supervisors in Colorado, Wyoming, and Arizona through the Western Regional Recruitment & Retention Project showed us firsthand the importance of supervisors to the overall functioning of the agency. The Children's Bureau has recently expanded focus on these issues through funding of the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. In addition, multiple not-for-profit organizations have tackled workforce issues at the national level, including the Children's Defense Fund, Child Welfare League of America, Casey Family Programs, and the Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, to name just a few.

However, as we examined the literature on preparing child welfare supervisors, we were struck by the lack of professional resources that translate generic supervision principles to the specifics of child welfare supervision. While the availability of professional training programs in the states for supervisors has grown exponentially over the past years, publications that can support this are few.

In this book, we seek to bridge the gap between research and supervisory practice, between management and organizational theory and supervisory practice. At its heart, we hope the book speaks to child welfare supervisors and those who aspire to supervise in child welfare settings, as well as to the managers who have responsibility for selecting and preparing child welfare supervisors. This audience includes those of us in schools of social work, as the need for continued professionalization of the child welfare workforce is perhaps most important at the supervisory level.

No book can address all the issues facing child welfare supervisors. We hope that the content helps supervisors and aspiring supervisors identify areas for continued professional development. Child welfare leadership—at supervisory, middle-management, and executive levels—is recognized as being of critical importance to the health of the field. The national conversation about how best to prepare these current and future leaders is at the forefront of the field. The authors of this book have enjoyed the opportunity to join that national dialogue. We invite readers to do the same.

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Child Welfare Supervision

1

CHILD WELFARE SUPERVISION An Overview

CATHRYN C. POTTER

Child welfare is one of the most complex, challenging, exhausting, exhilarating, and satisfying practice arenas in human services. Child welfare workers make life-and-death decisions on a daily basis, and they make a difference in the lives of families and children at risk. Their supervisors stand with them, managing both their work and their ability to stay with the work, while contributing to positive and productive agency cultures and standing as a buffer to less productive organizational cultures (for an example of a supervisor's day, see Box 1.1).

Many have described the child welfare workforce situation as being in crisis, with heavy turnover among workers and increased stresses on agencies putting pressure on the quality of child welfare interventions (Drake & Yadama, 1996; U.S. Government Accounting Office [U.S. GAO], 1995, 1997, 2003). Yet, many child welfare workers and supervisors thrive in their careers (Stalker, Mandell, Frensch, Harvey, & Wright, 2007). Numerous examinations of job satisfaction and job commitment in the child welfare workforce have identified supervision as a critical component in supporting both the retention of workers and the quality of service for families (Landsman, 2001; Smith, 2005; Strolin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2007; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). In this book, we turn our attention to child welfare supervisors, believing strongly that they hold a key to excellence in child welfare practice.

Each of the following chapters will focus in on a critical area of child welfare supervision, beginning with competencies in management, leadership, and diversity, and moving on to specific supervisor roles that range

Box 1.1 A Supervisor's First Day

Gina reflects on her first day as an intake child welfare supervisor in a medium-sized urban-suburban county. She has been with this public child welfare agency for almost 7 years. She has 5 years of experience in an intake unit, and almost 2 years of experience in an ongoing, intensive family intervention unit. While she was an intake worker, she took advantage of the agency's partnership with a local university and completed her master of social work (MSW) degree in their weekend program, with a concentration in family intervention. Her advisor suggested she take a class in supervision, but she was sure she would stay in direct work with families, so she didn't think it would be necessary. She thinks of that decision with amusement as she reflects back on her first day as a supervisor.

Gina works in a state-supervised, county-administered child welfare system. Her county must often collaborate with other counties in the urban area; however, Gina understands that the organization and cultures of these other county's agencies are somewhat different from her own. Her agency is bound by many state policies, but the director reports directly to the County Manager and Board of Commissioners. Gina recognizes there are larger political realities and wonders if supervisors are ever involved in responding to them. She wonders if her assessment of her agency's organizational culture will change as she gains experience in this new role.

Gina reports to the agency child welfare administrator (who reports to the director). The child welfare administrator was her first supervisor when she came to the agency. While Gina knows it is an advantage to be familiar with her supervisor's style, she realizes that the focus and tone of supervision is quite different in this new role. The agency child-welfare administrator recruited Gina to apply for this position, saying that Gina had the clinical child welfare skills, the respect of her fellow workers, a "good head on her shoulders," and the potential to be a strong leader and manager.

Her unit consists of seven workers who are quite diverse in age, gender, ethnicity, social and economic class, and experience. Gina hopes her own diversity-related skills will allow her to work well with this group. Four workers have at least 4 years of public child welfare experience, and one of these experienced workers had hoped for the supervisor job. Two workers have been with the agency for 2 years, and one is new to the unit, having been on the job only 2 months.

This new worker, Lavonne, who is a recent college graduate, appears to be a bit overwhelmed. Gina knows that Lavonne will need supervision with an emphasis on developing her practice skills and supporting her decision making, while providing the support needed during the first year of child welfare practice. Her mid-level workers may need a different approach, and Gina isn't quite sure how this might best be handled. Some of her experienced workers are excellent, but one shows definite signs of cynicism, emotional exhaustion, and work avoidance. Gina realizes that she will need to respond to this at some point, but she doesn't know much about burnout or secondary trauma or about performance management.

There is some tension in the unit; Gina knew this before beginning this job. Indeed, it was the reason why the child welfare administrator wanted to bring in a supervisor from outside the unit. Two experienced workers have an ongoing conflict, and others feel they must choose sides. Lavonne seems to be trying not to make a choice, and this may result in her isolation from both groups. Gina knows that she will need to find a way to promote development of a team even as she supports individuals and manages the unit's workload.

Gina's first day coincided with a supervisors' meeting at which she learned several relevant things.

A mock Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) review is to be held in 3 weeks and several cases from her unit have been selected for the sample. She will need to

(continued)