



Defensible decision-making in children's social care

CPD Guide

Foreword

In 2020 the North West Regional Research in Practice Partnership (comprising 23 local authorities) commissioned Research in Practice to develop a publication to support practice supervisors in the task of making defensible decisions about work with children and families. In order to do so, we consulted with staff working in children's social care including practice supervisors, Principal Social Workers, HMI Inspectors from Ofsted and senior leaders.

The original publication has now been developed further to create three related resources on the topic of defensible decision-making. We hope that you find the resources useful.

We are grateful to Samantha Sirisambhand, (previously) Policy and Performance Manager, North West Association of Directors of Children's Services, whose input helped shape the remit of this work.

Contents

- > **Section One: Using this CPD Guide** - page 3
- > **Section Two: Outline of three CPD sessions** - page 4
- > **Things to consider for online delivery** - page 5
- > **Additional resources you may find useful in preparing for the CPD sessions** - page 6

- > **Session one: Defensible decision-making in supervision discussions** - page 6
- > **Session two: Defensible decision-making – moving from discussion in supervision to recording on a child's file** - page 11
- > **Session three: Evidencing defensible decision-making on a child's file** - page 16

References cited in this CPD Guide are listed in the accompanying Resource Pack.

Section One: Using this CPD Guide

This CPD Guide has been written for any member of staff who has a responsibility for training and development within children's social care organisations (for example, workforce development leads or Principal Social Workers).

It sits alongside two other linked publications designed to be used together to support and promote defensible decision-making within children's social care organisations.

Defensible decision-making in children's social care: a resource pack for practice supervisors

- > Developed for first-line managers and practice supervisors who provide individual or group supervision and/or line management as part of their role.
- > Provides a range of tools to support defensible decision-making.

We recommend that you read the resource pack alongside this CPD Guide and familiarise yourself with it.

Defensible decision-making in children's social care: challenge questions for leaders

- > Provides an overview of key issues to prompt discussion and enhance organisational capability in defensible decision-making.
- > Includes challenge questions for middle managers and senior leaders to consider.

This CPD Guide contains all the information you need to run three CPD sessions for practice supervisors using tools provided in the resource pack.

This CPD Guide contains all the information you need to run three (3.5 hour) sessions for practice supervisors (using tools provided in the resource pack). We suggest you share the resource pack with practice supervisors ahead of the first session. The three sessions will allow you to:

- > introduce the resource pack and tools. Over the course of the three sessions, practice supervisors will work through five tools focusing on promoting defensible decision-making in supervision provided in the resource pack
- > connect with practice supervisors once they have had time to try out the resources to review their learning and identify any changes to their practice in relation to defensible decision-making
- > support practice supervisors to identify how they can continue to work on this area.

The CPD sessions can also be adapted for action learning or peer support CPD activities for groups of practice supervisors.

Section Two: Outline of three CPD sessions

Three half-day CPD training sessions are outlined in this section. Each session is 3.5 hours long and designed with online delivery in mind. For online delivery we suggest that you deliver the sessions to groups of approximately ten practice supervisors to allow sufficient time for discussion. The session structure can easily be converted to face-to-face delivery, if this is an option, which allows you to work with a bigger group.

The sessions will prompt practice supervisors to consider how they:

- > facilitate reflective and analytical discussions in supervision which promote defensible decision-making about work with children and families
- > review and further develop skills in writing brief, analytical summaries which ensure that each child's social care record demonstrates evidence of defensible decision-making and a coherent narrative about their involvement with the organisation.

After session one, practice supervisors are tasked with continuing to use the tools in supervision or to review their written commentaries on a child's file. For this reason, we recommend that you allow a gap of two to three months between CPD sessions one and two to allow practice supervisors sufficient time to do this.

Each session outline provides guidance for facilitators, which includes:

- > a brief description of the aims of the session
- > links to all resources used in the session
- > a suggested icebreaker activity
- > prompt questions and guidance to structure the whole group discussion, to reflect on learning at the end.

Things to consider for online delivery

When delivering a session online, it's important to choose a platform that allows all participants to be visible on screen simultaneously.

Before the session, make sure that:

- > everyone in the group can connect to the platform you've chosen
- > you provide guidance about 'netiquette', i.e. online etiquette (for example, asking everyone to switch off their microphones when they're not speaking to avoid background noise and distractions)
- > you consider how the group can be divided for pair work discussions and role plays which are included in the first two CPD sessions. If you use an online platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, you will have the ability to organise breakout rooms for pairs of practice supervisors for this part of the session
- > you take time to think about how you can adapt your facilitation style to be more directive because spontaneous group discussion can result in everyone talking at once – be clear that you'll seek individual contributions during the session and / or ask participants to raise their hand if they want to speak.

Additional resources you may find useful in preparing for the CPD sessions

We have identified five resources which you may find useful context to inform delivery of the CPD sessions.

- 1) ***Good practice in recording and access to records: Strategic Briefing*** (2022). This strategic briefing publication provides an overview of recent research in children's social care record keeping and makes the case for developing more participatory approaches to record keeping with children and families.
- 2) ***Reflections on accessing care records and supporting good recording***. Two linked podcasts which explore the emotional impact of receiving care files and the importance of child-centred recording, and provide suggestions of how practitioners can implement good recording.
- 3) ***Risks, rights and the role of the state: Grounded professional judgement*** (2018). In this podcast Professor Danielle Turney discusses the concept of grounded professional judgment and its relevance in decision-making.
- 4) ***Analysis and critical thinking in assessment: resource pack*** (2014)

Session one: Defensible decision-making in supervision discussions

Session type: online half-day CPD (3.5 hours)

Session description: In this session we will:

- > consider the role which reflective and analytical discussions in supervision play in supporting the process of defensible decision-making
- > introduce three different models which can be used to promote defensible decision-making in supervision discussions.

You will use the following tools in this session:

- > Tool one: Wonnacott's Discrepancy Matrix
- > Tool two: Using the five anchor principles in supervision
- > Tool three: Safe Uncertainty.

These tools can be found in section three of the resource pack on pages 9 to 24.

Session plan

Online – Session introduction (30 minutes):

Housekeeping and netiquette/ introductions and ground rules

When agreeing ground rules with the group, we suggest that you pay attention to discussing confidentiality. There are two reasons for this:

- > The group will be asked to talk about their own work and role play 'realistic' practice scenarios discussed at supervision during the CPD sessions (whilst these scenarios can be drawn from practice experience, care needs to be taken to avoid presenting information online which could compromise anonymity).
- > Group members will be asked to reflect on their own work in supervision and to review their own management commentaries on children's files.

It is, therefore, important to establish a safe and containing environment which allows the group to share their ideas, and areas for improvement without feeling defensive.

Aims and structure of the session

This is the first of three linked CPD sessions which explore the issue of defensible decision-making in children's social care. Over the three sessions the group will work through five tools from the resource pack which support them to:

- > facilitate reflective and analytical discussions in supervision which promote defensible decision-making about work with children and families
- > review and further develop skills in writing brief, analytical summaries which ensure that each child's social care record demonstrates evidence of defensible decision-making and a coherent narrative about their involvement with the organisation.

Whole group icebreaker

Ask the group to spend a moment or so thinking about a time when a supervision discussion went really well and prompted curiosity and reflection. Having done so, they will be invited to share their responses to the following question with the group:

‘When you think of a time when you were working at your best in supervision, what kind of things were you saying or doing to promote reflection and curiosity in the discussion?’

It is important to set the context at the outset by highlighting to the group that there are many pressures which can affect their work in supervision and they may feel that they do not always see their best work here. In this exercise, we are asking them to identify any small moment (that stands out to them) where something they said or did helped to promote a reflective discussion.

Key introductory points

Please present a brief summary to start the session which includes:

- > highlighting what we mean by defensible decision-making and the key elements of this
- > why it can be difficult to ensure that a child’s file contains a coherent narrative about ongoing work with a family and the rationale behind key decisions.

Section two of the resource pack contains information which you can use for this. You might want to ask the group to share initial ideas about:

- > Why defensible decision-making is important in children’s social care?
- > What factors make it difficult to consistently put this into practice and evidence this?

These discussions will be picked up in more detail throughout the three CPD sessions.

Offline – Individual self-study (1 hour 15 minutes)

The group should now work offline in order to read through the tools below and consider their responses to any questions contained within them

- > Tool one: Wonnacott’s Discrepancy Matrix (15 minutes)
- > Tool two: **Using the five anchor principles in supervision** (35 minutes)
- > Tool three: **Safe Uncertainty** (25 minutes).

Break (15 minutes)**Online – Pair work (1 hour)**

The group will work in pairs for the next hour. The task is to role play using each tool in a ‘mock’ supervision (15 minutes x each of the three tools – 45 minutes total) followed by a short debrief to explore what it was like to use the tool and ideas about how this might inform supervision discussions (5 minutes x three tools – 15 minutes total). Each pair need to be responsible for their own timekeeping in this part of the session.

Role play – One person plays themselves as a practice supervisor. The other person role plays being a practitioner and presents a realistic scenario about a child/family which someone in their team might work with for discussion in the role play. The practice supervisor asks the ‘practitioner’ to reflect on their work with the family using the model presented in the tool to guide the discussion. It is important to remind the group that care needs to be taken to protect anonymity of children and families in the role plays.

Debrief – Both ‘practitioner’ and practice supervisor should ask each other about what it was like to use the model from their different perspectives before considering what this tool might offer in discussion to support defensible decision-making.

Repeat until all three tools have been used to guide a supervision discussion.

Online – Whole group discussion (30 minutes)

Take feedback from the group members about any issues that struck them or learning points they reflected on from completing the tools. You might want to ask them to reflect on:

- > Any comments from the experience of using the tools in the previous role plays?
- > Any other tools or models for reflective discussions which they currently use?
- > What difference did it make using a tool to structure the discussion?
- > Which tool did they like best and why?
- > What are the group's experiences and thoughts about the role which reflective and analytical discussions in supervision play in contributing to defensible decision-making in children's social care?
- > How might using tools (such as the ones we have used today) help inform reflection, analysis and defensible decision-making?

If members of the group are already familiar with some tools, you can draw on their experiences of using these in supervision in this discussion.

Please allow time at the end of the session to invite each group member in turn to share their learning/reflections from the session and any action points they are taking away about what they would like to do differently.

Please end the session by asking the group to try using one or more of the tools regularly in supervision sessions as a self-study activity so that they can feedback their experiences at the second CPD session.

You should also advise the group that they will need to access their organisational electronic systems to review their own work on a child's file in the next session, so if the group are meeting face to face they will need to bring laptops. It is important to highlight that this is a developmental activity and done privately during the session.

Session two: Defensible decision-making – moving from discussion in supervision to recording on a child’s file

Session type: online half-day CPD (3.5 hours)

Session description: In this session we will:

- > explore how use of summaries in supervision discussions can help make explicit what decisions have been made and the reasons for doing so
- > reflect on the purpose and function of what the practice supervisor writes as management oversight commentary on a child’s file
- > consider the role of the practice supervisor in ensuring that the records about children provide a coherent narrative about the child’s journey and evidence of defensible decision-making.

You will use the following tools from the resource pack in this session:

- > Tool four: Using summaries to make decisions explicit in supervision
- > Tool five: Evidencing defensible decision-making ‘with the child on your shoulder’

These tools can be found in section three of the resource pack on pages 32 to 37.

Session plan

Online – Session introduction (20 minutes)

Housekeeping and netiquette/ introductions and ground rules

Aims and structure of the session

Please use the session description (above) and the session plan (below) to outline a draft structure for this session. In this second session the group will be introduced to tool four Using summaries to make decisions explicit in supervision.

They will also start to work through tool five Evidencing defensible decision-making ‘with the child on your shoulder’. This is a longer tool which asks them to start to consider how their management oversight commentaries on each child’s social care record demonstrates evidence of defensible decision-making and a coherent narrative about the child’s involvement with the organisation. The group will complete tool five in the third CPD session.

If you are running this CPD session face to face, you should check that everyone in the group has brought their laptops with them as they will need to use these during the session.

Whole group icebreaker

Ask the group to spend a moment or so thinking about a supervision discussion where they have used one of the three models which they were introduced to in the first CPD session and briefly share anything which struck them about using these to promote reflective discussion. For example:

- > Anything which surprised them?
- > Anything which went well?
- > Anything which they would do differently?

Key introductory points

This session prompts practice supervisors to think about the golden thread which connects defensible decision-making in supervision with what is written on a child's file. In particular, the role of the practice supervisor in ensuring that the child's file contains a clear, overarching, chronological narrative about what decisions the organisation makes about the child and why. These discussions will be picked up in more detail throughout the session.

The second part of the session focuses on the issue of professional writing in children's social care. The pace and volume of work in children's social care organisations mean that for many practice supervisors writing up management oversight commentaries and record keeping often 'is an interrupted and fragmented activity' (Balkow and Lillis, 2019¹, p. 19). It is important to acknowledge at the start of the session that writing is a skilled activity and highlight the importance of focusing on this to consider how this could be improved to ensure that there is evidence of defensible decision-making on a child's file.

¹ Balkow, M and Lillis, T (2019). *Social Work Writing and Bureaucracy: A Tale in Two Voices*
<https://www.centreforwelfareform.org/uploads/attachment/667/social-work-writing-and-bureaucracy.pdf>

Online – Whole group discussion (25 minutes)

Building on the icebreaker activity, please invite the group one by one to talk to share their experiences of using the tools introduced in the first session.

- > What tools have they been using? What is their experience of doing so?
- > Have they noticed any differences in the quality of discussion and decision-making in supervision as a result?
- > What have they been thinking about in relation to defensible decision-making since the last session?
- > Do the tools help practice supervisors make the process of defensible decision-making explicit in supervision?
- > How might the group summarise their learning and thinking at this point?

Online – Pair work (55 minutes)

The group will work in pairs for this part of the session.

- > Each person should read tool four and then discuss what ideas are generated from doing so with their partner (15 minutes).
- > Then have a go at doing two role plays of ‘mock’ supervision where the focus is on using summaries to provide an overview of key points from the discussion and any decisions which have been made. This means each person has the opportunity to experience playing a supervisor and a supervisee. Each pair need to be responsible for their own timekeeping in this part of the session. Timings are 15 minutes per role play followed by five minutes’ discussion for each (40 minutes in total).

Role play – One person plays themselves as a practice supervisor. The other person role plays being a practitioner and presents a realistic scenario about a child/family which has reached the point where a decision needs to be made in supervision about what to do next. It is important to remind the group that care needs to be taken to protect anonymity of children and families in the role plays.

Debrief – Both ‘practitioner’ and practice supervisor should ask each other about what it was like to use summaries from their different perspectives and how this might support both defensible decision-making in supervision and greater clarity about recording decisions on a child’s file.

Break (15 minutes)

Online – Individual study and whole group discussion (25 minutes)

As the group comes back together, please invite feedback about using summaries in supervision (5 minutes):

- > Is this something they already do?
- > How did it feel to consciously use summaries in supervision?
- > What did it feel like when playing a practice supervisor and social worker in the role play?
- > How might summaries be helpful in making the reasoning behind decisions explicit?

In this next part of the CPD session the group will be introduced to tool five Evidencing defensible decision-making ‘with the child on your shoulder’. The session will consist of reading sections of the tool individually and then reconvening for whole group discussion before reading the next section and repeating. Ask the group to:

- > **Read** – Switch their microphones and cameras off and read ‘Introduction’ and ‘Questions for you to consider’ in tool five pages 37 to 38 (10 minutes).
- > **Discuss** – Invite the group to share their thinking in response to the content they have read and the questions posed (10 minutes).

Offline – Individual self-study (50 minutes)

The group will have a self-study activity during this session to review their own written work on a child’s file. At the outset it is important to highlight the value in reviewing one’s own written work and create the conditions in which the group do not feel defensive about doing so.

- > Introduce the task to the group (5 minutes).
- > **Read** – Ask the group to read ‘What is the purpose of keeping a record of involvement with a child and family?’ and ‘Questions to consider’ in tool five page 38 to 40 (10 minutes).
- > Then they should complete the activity ‘Reviewing what you have written on a child’s file’ in tool five page 40. In order to do so they should log into their recording system via their laptop and review their own management oversight comments on a child’s file considering the reflective questions in the activity (30 minutes).
- > Give the group a quick comfort break (5 minutes) before returning to a plenary whole group discussion.

Online – Whole group discussion (20 minutes)

- > **Discuss** – Invite the group to share their thinking in response to the content they have read and their review of their own written work on a child's file (10 minutes).
- > In the plenary discussion you can invite each group member in turn to share their learning/ reflections from the session and any action points they are taking away about what they would like to do differently (10 minutes).

The group will continue to work through the tool in the third CPD session.

You should advise the group again that they will need to access their organisational electronic systems to review their own work on a child's file in the next session. If the group are meeting face to face, they will need to bring laptops.

Session three: Evidencing defensible decision-making on a child's file

Session type: online half-day CPD (3.5 hours)

Session description: In this session we will:

- > Continue to consider the role which practice supervisors play in ensuring that the records about children provide a coherent narrative about the child's journey and evidence of defensible decision-making.
- > Introduce the SEA principles (summary, evaluation and analysis) as a way of evidencing defensible decision-making when writing commentaries on a child's file.
- > Explore ways in which practice supervisors can create space and time to focus on writing management oversight commentaries on a child's file.
- > Review learning from all three CPD sessions and consider how practice supervisors can continue to focus on defensible decision-making.

You will use the following tools from the resource pack in this session:

- > Tool five: Evidencing defensible decision-making 'with the child on your shoulder'

This tool can be found in section three of the resource pack on page 37.

Session plan

Online – Session introduction (25 minutes)

Housekeeping and netiquette/ introductions and ground rules

Aims and structure of the session

If you are running this CPD session face to face, you should check that everyone in the group has brought their laptops with them as they will need to use these during the session.

Whole group icebreaker:

Share the image below on screen. This has been developed by Dr Karen Treisman. You can access this [here](#). The image contains a number of 'take what you need tokens' developed to encourage conversation about resilience and self-care.



Ask the group to choose one of the tokens, thinking about what they need professionally at this time. Each person should then say what they have chosen and, if they want, share why.

Key introductory points

Please present a brief summary to start the session to highlight that it can be difficult to find the time, without interruption and without pressure to complete other more pressing tasks, to focus on ensuring that management oversight commentaries on a child's file provide evidence of defensible decision-making. Section Two of the resource pack may be helpful in providing context here.

It is useful to begin by highlighting three key points (all of which are covered in these three CPD sessions).

- 1) Practitioners need to have access to high quality supervision which supports the process of defensible decision-making.
- 2) Both practitioners and practice supervisors should be able to provide high quality written commentary on a child's file which explains how and why decisions were made.
- 3) A child's file belongs to them. We need to be confident that decision-making is recorded in respectful and clear language, providing a coherent narrative about ongoing work with a family and the rationale behind key decisions.

Offline – Individual self-study (40 minutes)

The group will have a self-study activity during this session to review their own written work on a child's file. At the outset it is important to highlight the value in reviewing your own written work and create the conditions in which the group do not feel defensive about doing so.

- > **Read** – Ask the group to individually read 'Writing records with the child at your shoulder' and 'Questions for you to consider' in tool five page 41 to 42 (10 minutes).
- > Then move on to complete the activity in 'Reviewing what you have written on a child's file' in tool five page 42. In order to do so they should log into their recording system via their laptop and review their own management oversight comments on a child's file considering the reflective questions in the activity (30 minutes).

Break (15 minutes)

Online – Individual study and whole group discussion (50 minutes)

- > **Read** – Ask the group to switch their microphones and cameras off and work offline reading ‘Using the acronym-SEA to structure how you write up oversight commentary on a child’s file’ and ‘Questions for you to consider’ in tool five page 43 and 44 (10 minutes).
- > Then move on to complete the activity in ‘Reviewing what you have written on a child’s file’ in tool five page 44. In order to do so they should log into their recording system via their laptop and review their own management oversight comments on a child’s file considering the reflective questions in the activity (25 minutes).
- > **Discuss** – Invite the group to share their thinking in response to the content they have read and their review of their own written work (15 minutes).

Offline – Individual self-study (45 minutes)

There are two activities in this section in which the group will read through to the end of the tool: Evidencing defensible decision-making ‘with the child on your shoulder’.

- > The first task is to read ‘Getting in the zone to focus on writing’ in tool five page 45 (10 minutes). After this, spend 15 minutes reflecting individually on the Questions to consider on page 46 (25 minutes in total).
- > Then complete task one in ‘Reviewing your learning: where to from here?’ in tool five page 47. Having done so group members should move on to task two which is an individual reflection about development and learning in relation to writing commentary on a child’s file (20 minutes).

Comfort break (5 minutes)

Online – Whole group discussion (30 minutes)

Take feedback from the group members about the work they have completed during the session, asking about any issues that struck them or learning points they reflected on from completing these. The focus of the discussion should be on asking the group:

- > What have you learnt from spending time focusing on the issue of management oversight commentary on a child's file?
- > What are you going to do differently as a result? What do you do already that you will continue doing?
- > The last part of the discussion should then explore the question 'What support do you need to continue to focus on the issue of defensible decision-making in social work a. in supervision discussions and b. when inputting written comments on a child's file?

Please allow time at the end of the session to invite each group member in turn to share one sentence with the group about what they have learnt overall from the three CPD sessions and how they will continue to focus on defensible decision-making from here.

Concluding points

Collins and Daly (2011, p. 15) argue that decision-making processes are 'something that can be taught and improved upon'. We hope that this resource pack supports this process within your organisation.

If you have found this resource pack useful you may wish to access additional resources providing information, guidance and ideas about ways to structure and approach supervision in children's social care on the open access website, **PSDP- Resources and Tools for Practice Supervisors**. The website contains over 100 resources freely available for you to use and includes knowledge briefings, podcasts, presentations, films and learning tools, many of which have been adapted from teaching materials used on the Practice Supervisor Development Programme (PSDP).

Research in Practice
The Granary Dartington Hall
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE
tel 01803 867692
email ask@researchinpractice.org.uk

Author: Alison Domakin

Research in Practice is a programme of
The Dartington Hall Trust which is a company
limited by guarantee and a registered charity.
Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756 VAT No.
402196875

Registered Office:
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall, Totnes TQ9 6EL

ISBN 978-1-911638-85-8

© Research in Practice June 2022