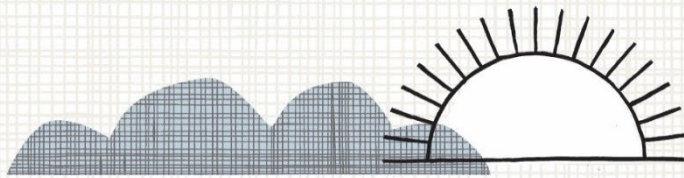




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## **TRAUMA-SENSITIVE SUPERVISION: AN APPROACH TO SUPPORT EDUCATORS, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

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*For many teachers the term “supervision” sounds like something you do in the classroom and playground. In other helping professions, supervision means something quite different. This resource, written with educators in mind, offers a brief introduction to trauma-sensitive supervision. It explores two questions: What is trauma-sensitive supervision and what difference might it make?*

### **What is trauma-sensitive supervision?**

In a general sense, the intention of supervision is to “support best quality work and necessary continuing professional development” (Chidiac, Denham-Vaughan & Osborne, 2018, p.21). In an educational setting, supervision is about helping staff to better help children and young people.

Trauma-sensitive supervision recognises the ripple-effect, through a school, of complex trauma. Thinking with Sandra Bloom (2010), these ripples include hyper-arousal, fragmentation and absence of a felt sense of safety. While this negative parallel process might be familiar, it is also important to acknowledge trauma-sensitive supervision’s potential to send

out ripples of safety. When a school leader feels safe and supported, and a teacher feels safe and supported, it is easier for a child and family to feel safe and supported.

Guided by a relational approach to supervision, my intention is to help staff to feel seen and heard and held. When staff are invited into a non-judgemental safe space, with time to pause, they are better able to reflect, to sustain their own wellbeing and to attune to the needs of others.

It might also be helpful to identify that trauma-sensitive supervision is not:

- counselling or therapy, where the focus is largely on the staff member's needs, rather than the child's needs. Thinking with Yontef (1995, p. 96), who writes of supervision's "twin goals" (of growth of the supervisee *and* client), trauma-sensitive supervision in schools supports growth of the educator and the growth and protection of the child.
- coaching, where the intention is to help an individual or group to "take action towards its goals" (Garmston & Wellman, p.24). Especially in a relational model, supervision might better be described as "holding space" (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2006). It is a dialogical unfolding, with an intention to bring an ethical presence, that is, to hold in simultaneous awareness an openness to the self, to the other and to the situation (Chidiac & Denham-Vaughan, 2019).
- performance review, where the focus is on evaluation. While supervision may contain an evaluative component (e.g. compliance with professional standards and workplace policies), its primary focus is on support and development of the worker. Ideally, an experience of supervision leaves a supervisee feeling "safe and cared for" with "a more accurate and accepting sense of self as person" (Yontef, 1995 p.97).

## **What difference might trauma-sensitive supervision make?**

In the pressured world of an educator, supervision has the potential to provide a sanctuary, a confidential, non-judgemental, safe space to reflect, check for other perspectives, sift through complexities, to celebrate highs and, to experience attunement through lows.

What I have noticed is the difference supervision has made to my energy. It's a felt sense of care and support – of safety. I feel less isolated and more regulated. I'm curious about different perspectives my supervisor might bring. I leave feeling encouraged and challenged. Not only am I supported to learn in terms of knowledge and skills, I'm also gently challenged to increase self-awareness and personal capacity (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020, p.1). For example, I am more aware of a pattern of “rushing to action”, a sense of “excessive responsibility”, a tendency toward the “hyper-arousal” of traumatised organisations (Denham-Vaughan and Glenholmes, 2019, p.218).

Supervision is also a regular and tangible reminder that I do not have to do this work alone. Moreover, it recognises that “quality work by an individual professional cannot be sustained alone” (Hawkins & McMahon, 2020, p.1).

What I enjoy about supervision is that it feels like “co-action”, something “we are doing together” (Fairfield, 2013, p.30). We have the benefit of our combined windows of tolerance, our different perspectives and experience and insight. There is also a sense of common humanity through challenges, mistakes and situations of potential shame or grief. What I had not anticipated in supervision was the reassurance of feeling like someone has my back, the comfort of having somewhere – at least briefly – to rest a heavy load, and the encouragement of hearing that I was doing well.

At a more basic level, supervision offers a way to support teachers before they feel stressed, vicariously traumatised, burnt out or on the point of leaving the profession. In the Australian context, supervision might be of particular benefit to teachers who have been identified as most vulnerable: “early career teachers, primary teachers, and teachers working in

rural and remote areas” (Carroll, et al., 2022, p.441). Unsurprisingly, school leaders have also been identified, as being “at risk of fatigue, mental health decline, and burnout” (Riley et al., 2021, p.7). Supervision offers one response to such needs. As outlined in two recent research papers from Barnardo’s Scotland, supervision in schools has the potential to support:

- a healthier workforce
- better educator mental health
- better wellbeing for children
- better educational outcomes for children and young people impacted by trauma and adversity
- reduced referrals to other services (Lawrence, 2019; 2020).

In trauma-sensitive supervision, the focus is on safety, regulation and resource building, with the twin goals of supporting the growth of educator and child. As Adam Burley puts it, in the foreword to Barnardo’s Trauma Informed Schools Discussion Paper, ‘Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff through professional supervision structures’:

Every interaction with a child carries the potential for change and for long-term impact on that child’s life outcomes. But interacting can be hard, it can give rise to vicarious trauma and adversity, and can lead to burnout and withdrawal, both of which can be disastrous for teacher, student, and for their relationship. Teachers are supremely placed to provide positive educational, social and therapeutic relationships to children who have experienced trauma and adversity, but to do so effectively and over time, their own care simply must come first. (Lawrence, 2019, p.2)

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Email [sonja@sonjavanderaa.com.au](mailto:sonja@sonjavanderaa.com.au) for a complementary introductory session, to see if trauma-sensitive supervision feels a good fit for your needs.

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