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Why are supervisions so important?

Supervision relates to support and opportunities for professional discussion provided for team members by their line manager(s). It incorporates various techniques including one-to-one meetings, observations of working practice, open discussions and time and opportunities to discuss concerns, worries or issues. It also allows the line manager to support the professional development of the individual and therefore improves outcomes for children through raising the quality of the provision, supporting staff retention and identifying and acting on developmental needs of staff as they arise.

The value of successful supervisions/reviews/one-to-one meetings in early years was identified in the Plymouth serious case review which looked at the failings in the case of Little Teds Nursery and the abuse Vanessa George inflicted on an unknown number of young children during several months in her role as nursery practitioner in 2008/09. When the investigation commenced it was discovered that the nursery failed in several key areas which put the children at risk of this abuse, and failed to support staff to be alert to the abuse and act on this appropriately. One of the main reasons that enabled the extent of the abuse to go unnoticed for so long was the staff's lack of knowledge of safeguarding and where to go with concerns. Staff supervisions and reviews did not take place, which denied staff a route to discuss concerns with the manager and address any training needs they had. This highlighted how important supervisions or reviews are and early years settings are required to have robust staff supervision, staff training in understanding abuse and child abuse in the workplace and a mobile phone policy.

The Plymouth serious case review found the following:

"Research into lessons from serious case reviews has concluded that supervision is important in assisting practitioners in coping with the emotional demands of the job, as well as enabling them to reflect on the meaning of their gut feelings. Staff working at (nursery) Z were becoming increasingly uncomfortable and worried about (nursery worker) K's behaviour yet had nowhere to go with these feelings. Supervision would also have provided a forum for ensuring staff training needs were met. There had been no opportunity for any member of staff through supervision or appraisal to reflect on the knowledge they needed to do their job and identify where there might be gaps that needed addressing through staff development opportunities."

Plymouth Safeguarding Children's Board, Serious Case Review Overview Report, in respect of Nursery Z, March 2010

In the Birmingham Safeguarding Children Board's serious case review relating to the male nursery worker who subjected a child to abuse in a nursery in this locality, statement 3.8 under Review Findings is as follows:

“Effective supervision is important and this should support staff in reflecting on any concerns they may have about the behaviour of a colleague,” page 9, Serious Case Review, in the respect of Serious Injury of Case No.2010-11/3.

Although these cases were both in England, the messages are valid in all childcare settings across the UK. Supervisions are not only important for safeguarding, they provide opportunities to talk openly with your team members about their own professional development, their strengths and areas for development and any challenges they feel they may need further support with. Providing this opportunity for team members to talk about their strengths and developmental needs will enable your workforce to grow in confidence and will support staff retention and ensure any concerns, issues or worries are dealt with as and when they happen. This approach also reduces the pressure and time required for the more formal annual appraisal.

There are several benefits to providing one-to-one supervisions with your team on a regular basis:

- As a manager you are better informed and more up to date about what is happening in the setting, what the individual team members are feeling, where they are performing well and where they need support. Remember your team are your eyes and ears on the ground and the regular discussions with all staff will enable you to be confident that all issues can be identified, discussed and resolved quickly, before they become more serious. This of course should be backed up with regular interactions with the team as they are working and regular manager observations of practice (whether formal or informal)
- Training and development steps and actions can be broken down into smaller steps which will enable you to budget better for external training, organise your internal training more effectively and provide your team members with a clear training programme for the whole year, supported by these regular one-to-one discussions
- Support can be given more readily by you as the manager when it is required – your team members may not ask for help unless they see a good opportunity to do so. The regular one-to-one time provides this opportunity and will open up your relationship with the team and enable them to ask for support if and when they need it, not just in these meetings
- The relationships between you and your team will be supported more effectively and the potential fear of appraisals that your team may have is likely to be reduced following the meetings held with you and each team member on a regular basis
- Your team members will be better prepared for the formal appraisal each year, knowing where they have excelled, where they have needed support, how they have overcome obstacles, what training they have received and how this has impacted on their personal development and that of the nursery.