

Trauma informed support and supervision for child protection professionals: A model for those working with children who have experienced trauma, abuse and neglect and their families

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The author shows passion and commitment throughout this book to the field of child protection and the stress and trauma impacts that it can generate. Acknowledgement of those working in the wider child-protection workforce (so beyond only a statutory context) is respectfully offered. The book begins with definitions of the main forms of child abuse, and neglect along with defining the different types of services working with vulnerable children and their families. The defining of neglect could have been further strengthened, namely in relation to being an act or omission that impacts on the physical and psychological functioning of a child.

Trauma is conceptualised firstly through a general definition, and exploring occupational trauma. Examples of extreme aggression and violence experienced in child-protection settings while offered, are countered, in order to not inadvertently create a hierarchy which might minimise other experiences for workers. The three main forms of indirect trauma impacts are defined, although mainly positioned together, along with burnout. The concept of emotional labour would have added to the discussion of compassion fatigue.

Throughout the book there is recognition and respectful emphasis from the author to the additional stress and trauma for First

Nations people through daily experiences of racism, which may have been further enhanced by defining historical trauma further as a concept. In locating the need for trauma-informed support and supervision for practitioners (and other layers of an organisation) the author provides an excellent quote, on p. 29: "When the workplace is the source of one's trauma, it is the workplace that needs to become a place of safety".

The chapter exploring supervision begins with acknowledging the role of the social work profession in defining and growing supervision, and applying Beddoe and Davys' (2010) definition of professional supervision. Three traditional functions of supervision are explored: administrative, educative, supportive, and acknowledgement of mediation. The choice of these three functions highlights the problematic dominance of the administrative function in supervision, especially in an organisational culture of risk adversity. Defining more clearly the different forms of supervision (line, clinical, and professional) may have helped with the argument here.

A good point is raised about other professionals, such as teachers and nurses, exposed to workplace trauma not necessarily having standardised access to supervision.

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The importance of the supervisory relationship is emphasised and positioned with six principles of trauma-informed care to support trauma-informed supervision. The role of supervision and psycho-education to help practitioners with their own trauma histories is also discussed. In noting the impacts of organisational trauma, there was an opportunity to discuss the concept of professional dangerousness which is not defined through the book, but is alluded to.

Within the organisational context and culture discussion, the author notes that not all managers have practitioner experience or training in child abuse and neglect, and they also may not have experience of supervision within their professional group. There is acknowledging of there being often a lack of professional support and development for managers and supervisors, adding to a sense of isolation and loneliness in their roles. Fear of not being seen as competent or coping is further exacerbated for this group often, as the author says, in a “sink or swim” organisational culture. Transactional management structures and the influence of neoliberalism where staff need are viewed as resources that are replaceable, are touched on to highlight the need to counter this with trauma-informed leadership “only able to occur in a trauma informed organisation” (p. 82) to help a practitioner restore their sense of internal safety.

The author raises the question of whether it is “ethical for line managers to have the dual role of managing practitioner performance and being the central point of practitioners to access support for wellbeing issues” (p. 71). Examples are offered of supervisors and line managers struggling to recognise and work with practitioners with their own lived experiences of trauma resulting in counter-transference and unsafe practice. There is a discussion of the boundary between supervision and therapy which could have been expanded on to present the notion of the therapeutic function of professional supervision as opposed to therapy.

The author states that occupational trauma is inevitable in child protection and therefore all practitioners would benefit from being viewed as having the wounded healer archetype in order to receive more responsive support. It is an interesting position, and a contribution of positive experiences of working in child protection may have helped balance this, as other authors such as Ferguson (2005) comment that such impacts are not inevitable.

The final chapter, on the Trauma Informed Support and Supervision (TISS) framework, feels a little long-awaited given the title of the book. In this chapter, the six principles of trauma informed care are applied, along with key premises such as acknowledging the reality of occupational trauma, professional development and wellbeing not being managed solely by a line manager or line supervisor, and recognition that a practitioner’s professional support needs will change over time. These are then further supported by “core pillars” to develop a TISS plan focusing on the practitioner, the team, including the great idea of a “care team” to work together on complex situations, and also provide other avenues of support that might better meet a worker’s individual needs. A discussion on job satisfaction and the importance of the supervisory relationship as key ways to mitigate occupational traumatic stress in child protection environments draw the book to a close. A helpful diagram of the TISS framework is provided on page 96 and the book offers three resources in the appendices: a TISS preparation worksheet, a TISS team agreement and a TISS plan.

This book brings attention to the importance of weaving trauma-informed thinking into how practitioners, supervisors, and line managers are supported in the complex and often stressful environment of child protection work. It offers examples from the author’s research, and reflective questions at the end of each chapter. It surfaces a number of key areas of vulnerability for practitioners including a lack of clear,

professional, reflective supervision, failure of workplaces to support development and wellbeing, and working in highly bureaucratic organisations where cultures of learning and development are lost to risk adversity and workload pressures, both internally and externally. The framework itself may have benefited from

coming earlier in the book and thus being given more expansion and attention. The support of those working in the complex area of child abuse and neglect is a critical conversation, and this book expands this further with suggestions on how to better attend to these impacts through the framing of a trauma-informed lens.

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