

# Training **MATTERS**



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- N.C. Division of Social Services
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- UNC-Charlotte Dept. of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work
- UNC-Greensboro Department of Social Work

## **We Want To Hear from You!**

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*Training Matters* is written and designed by John McMahon, Jordan Institute for Families, UNC-CH School of Social Work.

## **Supervisor's Role in Training Is Critical**

When a family in crisis answers that first official knock on the door, the person they see standing there is often a child welfare worker from the local county department of social services.

Although much of what ultimately happens to that family has to do with the family itself, a lot is also riding on that child welfare worker. Is she the right person for the job? Has she been adequately trained? Does she know her personal and professional strengths and weaknesses? Is she properly supported in her agency? Will she be with the agency for long?

The answer to most of these questions depends in large part upon the person who hired, trains, and supports this child welfare worker—her supervisor.

### **Supervisors**

It is hard to overstate the effect supervisors have on the people who work for them. They influence not only how well they understand and do their work, but whether they stay with their jobs.

Research shows a clear relationship between turnover and supervision. Compared with those who leave their jobs, child welfare workers who stay with their agencies are more likely to rate their supervisors as competent, appre-

ciative, approachable, and concerned for their well being.

### **Training**

Child welfare supervisors are responsible for ensuring that the people they send out to work with families and children have the skills and knowledge they need to do the job right.

Yet given the time, money, and resource constraints they face, how can supervisors make sure their workers are getting the training they need? The following strategies should help.

**Begin with the Work Environment.** In order to develop professionally, workers must *want* to learn and grow. This desire must come from within themselves, out of their awareness that they do not have all the skills and knowledge they need to do the job. Yet supervisors can nurture this desire by creating an atmosphere at work that makes it clear that continuous professional learning is expected and prized.

This atmosphere cannot be created by decree. Instead, supervisors must model the behavior they wish to see in their employees. They can do this by incorporating discussions of training and new approaches to practice into formal unit meetings. *continued* ➔

# Supervisor's Role in Training

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They can also encourage workers to talk informally amongst themselves about training (what's helpful, what's not so helpful) and practice. This will help individuals select courses to attend and give workers a sense of what to look for in a particular training.

Also, supervisors can demonstrate the importance of professional learning by attending training themselves.

**Training Courses.** The training provided through the NCDSS Children's Services Statewide Training Partnership is a tool to help supervisors develop their employees. To use this tool to their best advantage, supervisors should try to attend as many of the courses relevant to their work unit as they can. This will help them know what each course covers and what it doesn't. Knowing what's in a course will enable them to prepare their workers to attend training and assess whether workers have learned what they should when they return. If there are important areas they feel the training did not address, supervisors will also be able to formulate a plan for teaching those elements to their workers.

**Supervisory Training Courses.** Supervisors should not neglect their own professional development. Attending *Introduction to Supervision for Child Welfare Services* will help new supervisors understand the scope of their jobs, develop their own personal leadership style, and support and develop their employees. More experienced supervisors should attend courses such as *Conflict Management for Supervisors*, *Motivating Staff*, and *Results-Oriented Leadership*. These courses will help them expand the skills and knowledge that enable them to do their important, challenging work.

## A Supervisor Talks About Training

This year *Training Matters* will do several articles to encourage supervisors to think about their role in training. We hope this first piece, an interview with Tom Flowers, supervisor of a CPS investigations unit at Cumberland County DSS, will help you reflect on your own approach to staff development. As you read this, think about how Tom's approach to training compares with your own. What do you like about his approach? What would you change or add to it? Special thanks to Tom for talking with us and for his commitment to supervisory excellence.



**Tom  
Flowers**

### **Are there things you do to enhance the impact of training on your workers?**

I think it is important for supervisors to have participated in training. That way you know what the worker's getting. Then you can enhance or talk about what their experience was when they get back. Sometimes it's not always formal, but there is always a conversation and dialogue about what they got out of it and where they felt it was lacking.

Beforehand, in the unit, other workers also share in that. They try to help the person going have realistic expectations by being honest, telling them, "Though this part's going to be boring, this information is good—good stuff came out of it." They do this during unit meetings and also informally, both before they go and when they get back. They'll ask, "Did you see anything you didn't already know? Do you have a different way of looking at things now?"

### **Do workers always react positively to training?**

Sometimes workers come back and say "This was really *bad*." But we talk and try to find something good about it. Most of the time they can. And sometimes workers come back and say, "This was really great, I was interested, I feel energized, I can't wait to try this with the next family I work with." So you get both extremes.

### **Are there things you do to help workers apply what they learn in training to their work with families and children?**

I don't have a formal method of doing that, but a lot of times comments will be made that reflect back on the training they've received, so I know they applied a particular technique or make reference to the things they learned in training. They'll say, "I heard this in training," or, "I got this in training and I tried it and it worked." There's constant feedback coming from workers.

### **What would you like to see added or changed to the training that's available now?**

I think certain trainings could do a better job of helping workers understand how their work fits into their personal feelings. Because that's very important to be aware of, so that the social worker does not get so emotionally involved or upset that they're going to miss things. They always need to be aware of that and how they're feeling. Are they going to be able to control their anger when they meet a certain type situation? Those are the type of issues that it would be helpful for training to address more.

### **Is there anything else you'd like to say on the topic of training and supervision?**

For training to succeed, you've got to start with the right person for the job. Somebody asked me one time what I looked for when I was interviewing CPS investigators. I said, "Well, it may be a little unorthodox, but I'm looking for good common sense and a sense of humor." If you've got that, I think you can be trained to do the rest of the job. And that's the way I try to do my job as supervisor—with common sense and a sense of humor.

*Our next issue will feature specific strategies supervisors can use to help their workers apply on the job the things they learn in training.*