Developing knowledge about the effectiveness of reflective supervision

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Background: Supervision has been described as the ‘cornerstone’ of good practice in social work (Laming, 2009). The Munro review of child protection in England (2011) stressed the importance of social workers having frequent opportunities for reflective supervision separate from case management. Nevertheless, a systemic review of the research 2000-2012 in Children and Youth Services Review (November 2013) concluded the evidence base for supervision was ‘surprisingly weak’. Aim: to evaluate the effectiveness of reflective supervision for newly qualified child and family social workers (NQSWs) delivered through a national programme in England (2008-2011). Methods: Supervisors received a three-day training programme in supervision based on Morrison’s (2005) 4x4x4 model. They then provided reflective supervision to NQSWs for 90 minutes fortnightly for three months, reducing to monthly meetings. Outcomes measured using validated scales were: self-efficacy, stress, role clarity, role conflict and job satisfaction. Demographic and outcome data were collected using an anonymous online survey at baseline and 12 months. Analysis of co-variance compared outcomes over time for NQSWs who received their full entitlement of reflective supervision (n = 390) vs partial receipt (n = 139). Path analysis explored hypothesised relationships between variables. Results: self-efficacy increased in both groups (difference ns). Full supervision had an ameliorating effect on role conflict (p<.05) and stress (p<.001). It had no effect on intention to leave or intrinsic job satisfaction. Conclusions and implications: Reflective supervision was highly valued by NQSWs and beneficial outcomes were found for those who received it. The most notable effect was in ameliorating stress, an important finding given the high rates reported for social workers. This study provides practitioners with evidence to insist on the provision of reflective supervision in addition to case management supervision. Future research should employ rigorous experimental designs and fidelity checks.