

CoramBAAF Conversations | The role of the supervising social worker transcript

00:00:00 Jo Francis

Hello to everyone listening. I'm Jo Francis calling buffs publishing manager. And today I'm talking to Alison Davis about her new practice guide, the role of the supervising social worker. This is a new book in Columbia's popular good practice guide series. Allison has had a long career in social work, in our wide variety of roles.

00:00:23 Jo Francis

She's currently working as an independent social worker and also doing training for core and BAF. So Allison, hello. Hi.

00:00:33 Jo Francis

Your new book explores the role of the supervising social worker in foster care. Can you summarise what are the main duties of this role for those who aren't?

00:00:43 Jo Francis

Familiar with this?

00:00:46 Alison Davis

The main roles are really to support and supervise foster carers, with the aim of trying to ensure high quality family placement for children in care.

00:00:59 Alison Davis

So the role provide advice and guidance and support to carers, but also supervision to help carers develop, to help them ensure that children receive a high standard of care.

00:01:14 Alison Davis

To help parents understand a child's individual care plan and to deliver their part of that, their plan, and there's also the role on behalf of the fostering agency, of endeavouring to ensure that fostering national minimum standards are met.

00:01:34 Jo Francis

There's quite a lot there, isn't there, but but there is listening. You've had a lot of experience in social work yourself. Have you been a supervising social worker or managed these posts?

00:01:45 Alison Davis

Yes, I started off as a supervising social worker for several years. Since then, I've managed fostering teams and fostering services, and currently I chair fostering panels to have regular contact with supervising social workers.

00:02:02 Jo Francis

Right, OK. I can see that the supervising social worker role is quite a key one in foster care. Do you think it gets the attention that it deserves? And if not, why not?

00:02:15 Alison Davis

I don't think it's instantly recognised as the school task would be people will aware of social workers working in specialism, such as safeguarding children with additional need. This is a very skilled task that doesn't just require social work assessment.

00:02:33 Alison Davis

Skill. It needs an understanding of planning. It needs an understanding of negotiation and mediation.

00:02:42 Alison Davis

And it needs an understanding of adult learning skills with what you're doing as part of that role is encouraging foster carers to develop their skills.

00:02:53 Jo Francis

As I can see, I know you spoke to many supervising social workers when writing the book. Of course. What do they say?

00:03:00 Jo Francis

About the role, what are the?

00:03:02 Jo Francis

Positives and negatives for them about it.

00:03:06 Alison Davis

They say that they like to see children thriving and developing because they're getting the care they need. They like to watch their careers develop additional skills and they enjoy the working partnerships they can develop with foster carers, who they regard as fellow professionals.

00:03:26 Alison Davis

And they can develop that working relationship.

00:03:29 Alison Davis

On the downside, the difficulties are when you often see a placement that falls apart and you feel quite helpless because you can't stop that happening to a child.

00:03:42 Alison Davis

They also say there are challenges in managing allegations against foster carers who are working closely with the family and an allegation of May that is really difficult to manage personally and professionally, yeah.

00:03:56 Alison Davis

And they also say it's talking with cares about natural, caring instincts as a.

00:04:03 Alison Davis

Versus regulations really that require foster carers to act in a certain way, so to safeguarding reasons. You sometimes have to ask people to do something that they instinct or not to do something. They would instinctively do as a parent. So that's a challenge really, in getting people to understand the differences between.

00:04:23 Alison Davis

Being a professional parent and a parent in.

00:04:26 Alison Davis

Your own right.

00:04:27 Jo Francis

Yeah, I can see that. There's, there's definitely, yeah positives, but a lot of challenges there as well.

00:04:35 Jo Francis

You say in the book that supervising social workers, they have to be many things to many people who supporter, a teacher, a councillor, A mediator, do you name but a few? What's your advice for workers trying to tick all these boxes?

00:04:53 Alison Davis

I think the starting point is to know your own skills. We can't all have all those skills. Naturally, you need to develop some of them or to recognise where perhaps you haven't got a skill in a particular area such as mediation between various professionals.

00:05:11 Alison Davis

And learn to develop those skills overtime or work with other members of your social work team who have those skills to learn from them. Because we all function as part of a team and fostering social workers for a very strong team together, yeah.

00:05:28 Jo Francis

I I can see that working relationships with foster carers are really key here to this role. Ohh, what are the most important things for social workers to bear in mind to encourage good working relationships with foster carers and ensure the family supported?

00:05:46 Alison Davis

I think to start from the beginning with a very clear contract about the working relationship you will have with Foster parent, a written agreement about what they can expect from you and what you expect from them.

00:06:00 Alison Davis

I think then you need to stress honesty and openness, that as a supervising social worker, you're there to support that. You have to be open about everything. You have to share your concerns with other people. If there are concerns.

00:06:17 Alison Davis

I think you need to be clear about your availability and what your professional boundaries are, because you do become quite close to the carers you support and you need to be clear about when you can be contacted, what you can be involved in. So you keep that professional boundary. What's being open and welcoming.

00:06:38 Alison Davis

And I also think everything you do with foster parents and visiting them should be recorded and a copy given to the foster carer. So if you're recording positive, they can see that if you're recording concerns, they're aware of what your concerns are. So you've got that open working relationship.

00:06:56 Alison Davis

But also to make it clear that it is your role to both support and supervise, so you will be there to support, but if you feel the carer, he is straying into an area they shouldn't spray into, you have a concern that you will spell out quite clearly what the expectation of them is.

00:07:16 Jo Francis

It's. Yeah, there's it's. It's a little difficult, isn't it? Obviously you're going to be close with them, but but you're there for a reason. And it is a job. I. Yeah, I can see that, Sir. It's a difficult balance to strike, really.

00:07:30 Jo Francis

Isn't it?

00:07:31 Jo Francis

Yeah. And of course, one of the key parts of the bowl is it's about the child. It's about ensuring that a child's time in foster care goes well. So I'm presuming that you're gonna have to prepare the carer, make sure they have information about the child and also, of course, support them. When a child leaves other ways in which current practise.

00:07:52 Jo Francis

Things down here and perhaps could be improved.

00:07:56 Alison Davis

In an ideal world, you would be able to give a foster carer clear information about the child before their place would be a little bit the child information about the Para, so they know what's going to happen and you do introductory visit. That's the ideal world.

00:08:14 Alison Davis

The reality is you've got limited numbers of parents. Children are often placed in an emergency without full information being provided to either the child.

00:08:24 Alison Davis

Or the care.

00:08:25 Alison Davis

And without the closest match possible being made between what the carer offers and what the child needs. So you're backfilling after a child has been placed, which can lead to difficulties. The carers don't know what's important to the child. The child doesn't know the carers and their household routine.

00:08:45 Alison Davis

And that can make placements quite difficult to start off with.

00:08:50 Alison Davis

If you can plan it.

00:08:52 Alison Davis

You have a better chance than without them, but limited number.

00:08:58 Alison Davis

Makes that difficult at the moment.

00:09:00 Alison Davis

And when it comes to a child leaving again, ideally planned that the decision is that the.

00:09:07 Alison Davis

Child is moving.

00:09:08 Alison Davis

On whether it's rehabilitation or moving on to permanence, but it should be in a planned move and that doesn't always happen either, sometimes because there was an agreement that it would be a time limited.

00:09:20 Alison Davis

Placement, yeah, but most of our social workers haven't managed to find a new placement until very close to the end of that original placement, and there isn't the time to do the introductions that you would want. And again, that's mostly about the lack of availability of office carers.

00:09:40 Jo Francis

These social workers will be working with a range of foster carers, of course, including kinship carers. I know they're also called connected people. Are there particular areas to be aware of when you're working with kinship carers?

00:09:55 Alison Davis

Yes, I think so. If we think about mainstream parents, they go through six months, sometimes eight months preparation period being.

00:10:07 Alison Davis

Assessed having training all before they have.

00:10:10 Alison Davis

A child placed with them.

00:10:11 Jo Francis

Of course.

00:10:12 Alison Davis

To connect his parent children, who usually placed at very short notice because of an issue in their primary family and the carers had no time to prepare, they weren't planning on being foster carers, they see themselves.

00:10:28 Alison Davis

Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and they're having to adapt to a whole new world of fostering with its new language, with lots of professionals coming in and out of their home, and it's quite confusing and they are quite conflicted. Many just want to be a family carer. They don't want to be a professional.

00:10:47 Alison Davis

Off the care, the training and supervision and all the things that there of course, I think the other side of that, they're also particularly with grandparents may have health needs that need consideration. You need to think about what support they.

00:11:04 Alison Davis

And while they're trying to adapt to the entire fostering world, we're also having to come to terms with some incident within our own birth family.

00:11:13 Alison Davis

That they may find really difficult to deal with, so they may have a lot of stress on them and I think just supervising social worker, you need people to be eased into the role gradually to allow them time to talk about their feelings before we talk about what we expect of foster carers.

00:11:34 Jo Francis

Yeah, it's a very different situation, isn't it? And I, I would imagine frequently at very short notice.

00:11:40 Alison Davis

Yeah, yeah, it can be 24 hours and they're having to adapt their whole life to some people, it's changing their working patterns. It's changing all their household layout to fit it to your children in. It's a tremendous shock to the system, I think. And we need to recognise.

00:11:58 Jo Francis

Yeah, definitely. I could see supervising social worker is is really key there in helping these families adjust your books about more than just the the job description for supervising social workers, though it also looks at learning styles at supervision models and at the culture in fostering services.

00:12:19 Jo Francis

Would you say that part of the job as a supervising social worker is about being reflective on on how we learn and why we learn?

00:12:29 Alison Davis

Yes, I mean I think.

00:12:32 Alison Davis

Being approved as a foster period, the start of the I used the word.

00:12:37 Alison Davis

Like many horrors, they're moving through a process that will help them gain skills and develop their errors. So you need to understand how they learn and develop their thinking about their learning.

00:12:53 Alison Davis

I don't think so. Supervising social workers, it's helpful to start by reflecting.

00:12:58 Alison Davis

On our own learning style.

00:13:00 Alison Davis

I'm I'm thinking about how we learn. Excuse me and understanding that we cannot assume that everyone.

00:13:08 Alison Davis

Else has been learning.

00:13:09 Alison Davis

File and we need to adapt.

00:13:12 Alison Davis

To the learning style of our careers.

00:13:14 Alison Davis

In the same way, thinking about issues of culture, we need to understand our own beliefs and values.

00:13:22 Alison Davis

And then we look at our careers and understand their beliefs and values so that we can work with them to develop into fully rounded areas.

00:13:33 Alison Davis

So I think there's a lot about understanding ourselves to enable us to understand other people.

00:13:39 Jo Francis

In the book you talk also about the importance of listening to everyone involved as being really key to foster carers. Also to the children in placement of course.

00:13:49 Jo Francis

Can you say more?

00:13:50 Jo Francis

About the importance of listening in this role.

00:13:54 Alison Davis

Yes, I mean I always refer to that old adage, we've got one mouth and two ears.

00:14:01 Alison Davis

Fantastic. We need to ensure that not only.

00:14:05 Alison Davis

Listen to the words being said, but hear what is being said to us or not being said to.

00:14:10 Alison Davis

Us and I think it takes time.

00:14:14 Alison Davis

And we say that when you're working with children, take time to to understand what it is they're.

00:14:20 Alison Davis

Trying to convey to.

00:14:21 Alison Davis

You so the importance is to give your carers time to talk, to understand what the underlying message is as well as what they're saying to you.

00:14:31 Alison Davis

And I think it's really important to demonstrate that we've heard at time. So by reflecting back what we think the carrier has said to us, so that we can be sure we fully graph the information they're trying to share. And in that doing that supervise and social worker for role modelling to the era.

00:14:52 Alison Davis

What we would like them to do with the child as well, or I think it is important.

00:14:58 Jo Francis

Of course, that's that's a very important message. I think that Ross, maybe to to leave on. I've gotta say your book, it does seem to have struck a bit of a chord with social workers out there. It's selling well and we did the community care live event last month.

00:15:17 Jo Francis

Which some of our listeners may be familiar with, there were social workers taking photos of your book on their mobile phones so they could show colleagues back in the office. So congratulations. Do you have any final message for social workers when it comes to this subject?

00:15:38 Alison Davis

Yeah, I think the wrong with the supervising social worker is vital to support foster care because the aim is to provide children in care with high quality care and the supervising social worker supports the carer to achieve that. I think the normal supervising social worker is complex.

00:15:58 Alison Davis

And possibly undervalued within social care. And I just hope that the book has gone some way to highlighting the importance of the role.

00:16:09 Jo Francis

Fantastic. Well from from what I've seen so far, it's it's certainly helping to do that. So thank you very much, Allison. Thanks for your thoughts and thanks for the time in coming to speak to us.

00:16:21 Alison Davis

Thank you.