



# ND Child Welfare Supervision

## SHARING POWER IN CHILD WELFARE

In Child Welfare, we are faced with a dual mandate of preserving families and keeping children safe. This mandate highlights the complexities of our work with families. It also makes it difficult to establish relationships with families. One key component of establishing a relationship with a family is dictated by how the worker uses power within the relationship. Researcher, Saar-Heiman identified two main modes of power: “power over” which is described as a form of control, coercive and authoritative and “power with” which is defined as care and support that involves a mindful and judicious use of power through relationship-based practice.

The “power over” approach includes workers speaking more than the parents, the use of closed needed questions, and offered little space for reflection or dialogue. The “power with” approach includes finding what the parent sees as important versus the worker dictating services and changes, listening and empathizing, asking open ended questions, focusing on the strengths of the family as well as having clear communication regarding the agency’s purpose of their involvement around safety in a clear and honest manner.

The “power with” approach goes hand in hand with the philosophy of the Safety Framework Practice Model that North Dakota implemented three years ago. A great deal of our success is dependent on the mindset in which we approach this work.

It is believed that when workers are maltreatment focused, feel overwhelmed, or lack knowledge regarding the use of power, they tend to dismiss parent’s point of view, confront in a threatening manner, and minimized the parent/ caregiver concerns. All of which negatively impacts our ability to engage parents and caregivers in the work.

# Why is Sharing Power Impactful?

**By being deliberate about sharing power in our work with children and families, we can be responsive to those that have experienced trauma in the following ways:**

- 1. It increases participation by the family.** When a worker is willing to listen to their story, respects their opinion and knowledge about their family, families will be more willing to show up and actively participate in services.
- 2. Two heads are better than one.** When families can contribute as the expert on their families and can share what has worked well in the past, and what hasn't, we are able to achieve much more!
- 3. We can focus on learning and changing versus compliance.** Compliance is not change, and if we want others to change their behavior, their thoughts and attitudes, we need to approach them in a "not knowing" approach. Threatening, blaming, and shaming does not change behavior long term and by building on the strengths of the family we will be able to incorporate long term change which is much more productive.
- 4. Honest communication takes place.** If there is a dialogue where the worker is exhibiting honest and open communication and reinforcing the right for self-determination, parents and caregivers will be more likely to share information and may feel more comfortable sharing the fact that they may disagree or don't have the answers. This allows room for discussions on different perspectives as well as the possibility of new solutions to be had. A basic core principle of social work is meeting people where they are at, even if they perceive us as an adversary.
- 5. Counteracts compassion fatigue.** When workers share power with their families, they also share the creation of change and commitment to the progress. If workers feel solely responsible for the decision to change or the outcome, they become caught up in efforts that they cannot control. By sharing power, we are also sharing accountability, responsibility and ownership.
- 6. Efforts are long lasting.** When the relationship with the family is built upon sharing power, this encourages families to seek help in the future as they felt validated during the process. This is more likely to lead to long lasting change as well as their ability to seek assistance on their own when needed.
- 7. Successful families lead to better retention of workers.** When we have families that are experiencing long term success, workers are more confident in the work that they are doing, this leads to higher worker retention as well as better recruitment efforts. A win all around.

Adapted from: What's SHARING POWER Got to Do with Trauma-Informed Practice?; [https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/whats\\_sharing\\_power\\_got\\_to\\_do\\_with\\_trauma-informed\\_practice\\_2.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/whats_sharing_power_got_to_do_with_trauma-informed_practice_2.pdf); retrieved December 4, 2023.

# Sharing Power in Supervision

A critical aspect of any supervisor- supervisee relationship is the way in which power and authority are used and understood. We also know that supervisors and their supervision is a critical piece to the organizational culture and a main factor in the retention of quality workers. There is no doubt that supervisors have power simply due to their rank and position. They can reward, recognize, provide performance ratings, provide opportunities for growth or promotion. This tips the scale in regards to who has the most power within the supervisor-supervisee relationship.

One factor that influences how power and authority play out between the supervisor and supervisee is the organizational context. In addition, the organizational context also clearly influences how power and authority are used within the agency as well.

- 1. Ask workers about their needs.** Ask workers, “what does support from me look like?” Each worker will need and desire something different from your supervision. Look at their unique individual needs, developmentally as a worker. A more experienced worker may need something completely different from you than a new worker that is just getting through orientation.
- 2. Have conversations that exhibit respect, and more listening than talking.** Create an environment that is safe enough to make mistakes and one in which the mistakes are seen as opportunities to learn. Move from a directive approach to a coaching approach where you ask more questions versus telling the worker what to do. Give workers the tools and information that they need to make their own decisions. This builds confidence and competence.
- 3. Trust between team members and their supervisor is critical to a healthy work environment.** When trust is established, it is easier to distribute power in other ways such as distributing tasks or giving additional duties to a worker. We must be able to trust the person that you are sharing power with, trust that they are going to deliver, trust that they will show up.
- 4. How you treat your staff is a model for workers with the families that they serve.** Talk about the use of power in your time with staff. This is a parallel process, when we distribute power with our workers and treat them with respect, they tend to do the same with their families. When someone feels listened to it is much easier to do the same with someone else.

# Upcoming Training Opportunities

## Supervisor Foundation Training added for Spring 2024:

### Educational Supervisor Training for Child Welfare Supervisors

January 25- 26, 2024

[Register here](#)

### Basics of Clinical Supervision for Child Welfare Supervisors

April 17-18, 2024

Registration opening soon!

## Did you know?

Micro Learnings will be available on the CFSTC Website starting in January of 2024. These can be used to provide basic foundational information about the Safety Framework Practice Model prior to a worker entering Child Welfare Certification. It can also serve as post training opportunities for individual workers or as a group learning opportunity for your staff to clear up questions, or to refresh our efforts.

Power with and power over: Social workers' reflections on their use of power when talking with parents about child welfare concerns; <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740922004121>; retrieved November 30, 2023

Walking the Tightrope: Using Power and Authority in Child Welfare Supervision; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48623141?seq=4>; retrieved December 1, 2023

What's SHARING POWER Got to Do with Trauma-Informed Practice?; [https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/whats\\_sharing\\_power\\_got\\_to\\_do\\_with\\_trauma-informed\\_practice\\_2.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/whats_sharing_power_got_to_do_with_trauma-informed_practice_2.pdf); retrieved December 4, 2023.