

# TRAUMA-INFORMED SUPERVISION IN TRIBAL CHILD WELFARE

The ways child welfare supervisors interact and supervise their teams are correlated with staff wellness, retention rates and job satisfaction, program operations, service delivery, and client outcomes. A key to engaging in trauma-informed supervisory practices in tribal child welfare is to make sure there are trauma-responsive practices in place to meet the needs of all staff. When staff are supported through the professional hazard of trauma exposure, they are better able to deliver responsive and quality services to our relatives and communities.

Trauma-informed and trauma-responsive supervisory practices supplement and support the tasks, duties, and responsibilities of tribal child welfare supervisors and staff alike. The best pathway to providing trauma-informed and trauma-responsive supervision is for supervisors to get to know the people they supervise. The impacts of trauma exposure are as individualized as trauma experiences themselves, which also means trauma-informed supervisory skills and practices need to be flexible and responsive to support staff. When a supervisor knows their team well, they are more prepared to lead and guide the team collectively, and as individuals, through the impacts of trauma exposure.

## **TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE STRATEGIES (TIPS)**

Trauma-informed care provides space for tribal child welfare staff and supervisors to realize how common and prevalent trauma experiences are, recognize various ways in which experiences can be traumatic, respond appropriately to a person's need for support, and resist re-traumatizing others by being aware and proactive in preventing future trauma experiences. The programmatic and supervisor tips listed on the following pages align with the six principles of a trauma-informed approach:

- SAFETY
- TRUST
- CULTURE AND HISTORY
- EMPOWERMENT
- PEER SUPPORT
- COLLABORATION

## **TRAUMA AND MANAGING ADMINISTRATIVE TASKS: THE IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING CLEAR ROLES AND SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS**

Tribal child welfare supervisors are often responsible for relaying programmatic information and decisions to caseworkers as directed by upper management. Supervisors are also responsible for implementing programmatic decisions and managing the oversight of changes and ongoing duties associated with administrative tasks and responsibilities. Maintaining a clear and predictable flow of information is important, especially when considering the impact trauma can have on a person's ability to effectively communicate and complete required administrative tasks. Training supervisors to notice and address trauma responses also supports their abilities to maintain clear roles and set realistic expectations.

### **What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:**

- Ensure child welfare supervisor position descriptions, roles, duties, and responsibilities are regularly reviewed for accuracy and clarity. If position duties go beyond supervising tribal child welfare program staff (e.g., writing or reporting on grants, general grants management, budgeting, etc.), be sure to clearly outline any additional duties.
- Regularly consult with child welfare supervisors prior to recruiting for open positions to review accuracy and clarity of each position's written description, role, duties, and responsibilities.
- Ensure a disclosure regarding trauma exposure is included in all position descriptions.
- Review and update policy, procedure, and employee handbooks to accurately reflect each position's description, role, duties, and responsibilities.
- Outline clear processes and procedures for disciplinary actions that supervisors can follow in the event those actions are needed.
- Establish regular supervision times for supervisors to ensure they can communicate any desire or need for coaching or support in completing various administrative tasks.
- Incorporate [supervisory development and well-being resources](#) as part of supervisors' professional development.
- Provide and prioritize ongoing continuing education and professional development opportunities that are responsive to the requests and needs of tribal child welfare supervisors and managers.

## What Supervisors Can Do:

- Refer to job descriptions, roles, responsibilities, and duties to help determine what information needs to be relayed from upper management to various frontline tribal child welfare staff.
- Verbally communicate role expectations with each staff member based on the written job descriptions, roles, responsibilities, and duties.
- Ensure assigned tasks are aligned with the staff member's official job description, roles, responsibilities, and duties.
- Provide and prioritize ongoing professional development opportunities for staff to continue to build their trauma-responsive skill sets so they are also better equipped to recognize when trauma might be impacting their abilities to complete administrative tasks.
- Acknowledge the responsibilities and roles of a supervisor being a communication bridge between upper management and frontline staff.
  - Be transparent about the ways information flows between all staff levels within the tribal child welfare program and how it is decided what information gets passed along from one person to the next.
  - Think and reflect before passing information along. From a former tribal child welfare supervisor, [Colin Powell's 13 Rules of Leadership](#) were a helpful reminder on challenging days.

Refer to job descriptions, roles, responsibilities, and duties to aid in identifying areas where tribal child welfare staff may need more support in learning and completing administrative tasks specific to their position's duties.



## COACHING AND MENTORING: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RELATIONSHIP-BASED AND PERSON-CENTERED LEADERSHIP

Similarly, to tribal child welfare staff, it takes tribal child welfare supervisors time to learn the complexities of their professional roles. Coaching, mentoring, and leading effectively as a child welfare supervisor is an ongoing and responsive learning process. The process itself is intentional and is most successful when a supervisor takes genuine interest in learning who their staff are as individuals, what is important and motivates them outside of work, and what motivates them to work in tribal child welfare. When supervisors know who they are leading, they are better positioned to be responsive leaders who can recognize and effectively respond to the various ways trauma can impact their tribal child welfare programs.

Many supervisors and staff within any child welfare program often bring their own trauma experiences and insights into their work. Trauma is a human experience and has touched the lives of most people. It is important for supervisors to be aware of the various ways trauma has impacted them personally and how those trauma experiences have the potential to influence their approaches to supervision. Supervisors who build and maintain professional relationships and implement healthy boundaries can better lead their teams by example and be responsive to the varying individual and team needs that arise from workplace trauma exposure. Healthy relationships and healthy boundaries allow supervisors to lead, coach, and mentor their teams while also modeling how staff are expected to interact with youth, families, and other professionals involved in the tribal child welfare system.

### What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

- Provide and prioritize ongoing professional development opportunities specific to trauma-informed and trauma-responsive supervision skill development.
  - Review considerations for designing effective supervisory training.
  - Include opportunities for all tribal child welfare supervisors and staff to participate and discuss how trauma is defined by the local community.
- Recognize that all supervisors need supervision and support; provide ongoing and regularly scheduled supervision for tribal child welfare supervisors to strengthen quality supervisory practices.
  - Building trusting supervisory relationships makes space for reflection, growth, and adaptive leadership skills for both supervisors and tribal child welfare staff.
  - Supervision for supervisors also provides opportunities for one-on-one coaching and practice.

- Stay up to date on practice trends and [resources for child welfare supervisors](#).
- Review various aspects of the [supervision process and practices](#) where supervisors need support.
- Implement responsive policies and procedures that support trauma-informed and trauma-responsive supervisory practices. Regularly revisit this topic with supervisors and staff to ensure there is voice and choice.
- Openly discuss and provide training for all tribal child welfare program employees on identifying and responding to [lateral violence](#).
- Recognize that supervision is an essential component of child welfare practice and, across child welfare programs, is correlated with job satisfaction, retention rates, and ethical service delivery to youth and families.

### What Supervisors Can Do:

- Remember that a supervisor is someone who collaborates with their team to learn how to best lead their team. Talk to staff about [coaching](#).
- The practice of trauma-informed and trauma-responsive supervision requires human connection. Show your team how to build relationships. What a supervisor models in the office also shows staff what is needed – and expected – in their direct practice with youth, families, and community partners.
- Be familiar with differences between [leading through coaching vs. mentoring](#); both are valuable tools.
- Practice [self-awareness and thinking about what you do, and do not, bring to the table](#).
- Explore various supervision skillset resources such as the [Learning and Living Leadership Toolkit](#) or [Emotional Intelligence for Leaders](#).
- Engage in professional development opportunities that build and develop your supervisory skillset.
- In instances where a person is transitioning from caseworker to supervisor:
  - Have clear expectations about how relationships with colleagues will remain the same and how they will change both at work and outside of work.
  - Talk to your new team about what you, and they, need to adjust to the change in relationship from peer to supervisor.
- Create and nourish a supportive culture. Trauma exposure is a predictable hazard for anyone working in child welfare.
  - Learn and remember what is important to the people you work with. Understand their motivations for working in an often difficult and emotionally taxing field.
  - Build relationships to create a cohesive team and to increase your ability to recognize when trauma exposure is directly influencing team members' abilities to perform their job duties.
- Support staff members' development of personal and professional trauma-informed and trauma-responsive skillsets.

## SUPPORT AND RETENTION: THE ESSENTIAL NEED FOR ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Child welfare work is often stressful, crisis situations are common, rarely is there enough time to get everything done during work hours, and both staff and supervisors equally need each other to navigate the complexities of individual cases and decision-making. Tribal child welfare supervisors have numerous responsibilities to attend to within their middle management roles and are often pulled in multiple directions while balancing their workloads and supporting tribal child welfare staff. Adaptive leadership and reflective supervision/consultation are key components to engaging in trauma-informed and trauma-responsive supervision.

Adaptive leadership engages a tribal child welfare supervisor's ability to think creatively about approaches to the challenging aspects of child welfare work. Tribal child welfare supervisors and tribal child welfare staff rely on each other to be able to complete various tasks, and it is beneficial to both the supervisor and staff when supervisors can adapt and engage in reflective practice. Much like adaptive leadership skills, reflective supervision focuses on being humble while listening attentively and reflecting back in a thoughtful, respectful, and empathetic manner.

### What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

- Provide supervisors with ongoing professional development opportunities and regular coaching to deepen understanding of reflective practices.
- Model respectful communication, processes, and procedures for the tribal child welfare program and the children, families, and communities being served.
- Ensure that tribal child welfare supervisors have administrative support so they can attend to the supervisory tasks related to child abuse and neglect reports and ongoing case management tasks.
- Review the resources for reflective supervision and critical thinking for ideas about how to support tribal child welfare supervisors and staff.

### What Supervisors Can Do:

- Review the Toolkit for Reflective Practice in Supporting Community-led Child Protection Processes for ideas about ways to engage in reflective practice with tribal child welfare staff.
- Embrace curiosity and be willing to see and acknowledge various approaches to tribal child welfare casework.
  - Focus on the strengths of what staff are doing well in their tribal child welfare casework practices and embrace curiosity when staff are debriefing their efforts and case decisions. Lead the team through decision making processes.

- Model for tribal child welfare staff what it means to adapt and engage in reflective practice as a tribal child welfare supervisor. It takes time and practice for supervisors and child welfare staff to build reflective practice skills.
- Build an inclusive team by modeling and demonstrating what it means to be supportive and, as often as possible, working together to make decisions in complex situations.
  - Mentoring and coaching approaches can be utilized
- Provide and prioritize ongoing professional development opportunities and reflective consultation opportunities for tribal child welfare staff.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Reflective Supervision and Consultation in Child Protection](#)
- [Reflective Supervision and Consultation: Perspectives from Child Welfare Professionals](#)
- [Reflective Supervision/Consultation: A Training for Child Welfare Professionals](#)
- [Online Reflective Consultation Groups with Child Welfare Workers](#)
- [National Child Welfare Workforce Institute \(NCWWI\) Online Learning Portal](#)



This resource was created by the  
Capacity Building Center for Tribes,  
and has been updated by NTCWCIA.