

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



## Practice what we preach:

## Supervisory practice for youth worker

## professional development

### Key Details

#### KEY WORDS

Youth Work, Youth Workers,  
Youth-Adult Partnerships,  
Relationship Building

#### POPULATION GROUPS

All Youth; Youth Workers

#### STEPPING UP THEMES

Health & Wellness  
Education, Training & Apprenticeships  
Employment & Entrepreneurship  
Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety  
Civic Engagement & Youth Leadership

#### RESEARCH ORIGIN

USA

#### SOURCE

Academic

**“I have seen that adults who work directly with youth need to be partners in their own development just as they partner with young people to encourage their development. A workplace that partners in developing its youth workers actively encourages three things: authentic relationships, emotional safety, and reflective learning” (p. 18).**

### 1. What is the research about?

This research examines effective practices to supervision for youth worker professional development. The purpose is to provide examples of strategies for how to incorporate three supervisory strategies into practice: authentic relationship building; emotional safety for staff with their direct manager; and reflective learning to increase capacity and professional development of the youth worker.

Reflecting on their own practice experience, the researcher highlights the importance of supervisors modeling what they want from youth workers in order to train and retain quality staff, and describes a range of contextual factors that they feel should be included in supervisory practice in order to build a culture of professional positive development.

### 2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in the United States.

### 3. Who is this research about?

This research is about youth workers.

### 4. How was the research done?

A systematic and comprehensive review of youth work development and positive youth work development research was conducted for this article, utilizing North American sources. Existing theories and studies from 2007 to 2012 were reviewed in order to understand how this field of research has progressed over time in supervisory practice.

Over four years, the researcher also collected data from youth workers, using a mixed-methods approach, including observations, interviews, informal conversations, surveys, and reflections.

### 5. What are the key findings?

The researcher concluded that a values-based approach to supervision that parallels the approach of direct youth work practice “was effective in giving the youth workers the sense that they and their professional development were valuable to the organization” (p. 19). The key findings can be summarized into **three effective supervisory practices**, with examples of specific strategies identified:

#### a) Building Authentic Relationships

- Ensuring multiple face-to-face interactions and ongoing communication supported building rapport and better accountability.
- Having meetings off site was a key aspect in positively affecting pride, ownership, communication, and professional development.
- Holding consistent monthly team meetings that included food.
- Scheduling quarterly one-on-one check-in meetings that included dialogue

- about professional development (i.e. education, future plans, exposure to networking events/trainings, discussing areas of challenge or what was going well).
- Sharing an open office space with the entire team or having an open-door policy.
- Connecting and caring about the individual outside of work.

### b) Creating Emotional Safety

- Maintaining a positive, strengths-based approach through building trust.
- Offering a safe and welcoming space where youth workers can talk about any issues that arise was key to establishing a sense of emotional safety in the physical space.
- Fostering a sense of personal power and control.
- Ensuring that workers are not afraid to try new things and address mistakes.
- Creating a feeling of being cared for by colleagues and management staff.
- Ensuring transparency and open communication of any concerns in advance.
- Communicating on youth outcomes and how they are measured.
- Providing ongoing check-ins about programs and interventions that were working and not working.
- Re-investing in staff by creating additional leadership opportunities, which in turn creates a sense of financial, physical, and emotional safety for the staff.

These strategies increased a youth worker's decision-making ability and empowered them to step into leadership roles in groups, find full-time positions, and feel safe in the workplace. This in turn taught them how important it is to help youth feel safe.

### c) Facilitating Reflective Learning

Professional development plays a role after safety is established, as there is space to admit struggles and learn new things. This, in turn, allows for supervisory practice to build reflection time and leadership learning opportunities into staffing structures. A culture of partnerships in creative problem-solving that values ongoing improvement and learning is then created. Specific strategies built into reflective practice could include:

- Arriving 30 minutes before programming and/or events to allow for space to do a check-in and prepare.
- Staying back 30 minutes after programming and/or events to allow time for youth workers to decompress in the shared office space, wrap-up documentation or put away supplies while chatting.
- Being present as a supervisor and asking questions to allow for facilitated dialogue about strengths and weaknesses.

The research revealed that seasoned workers tend to learn the best when given some control over their learning, with opportunities to reflect on their decisions.

### 6. Why does it matter for youth work?

These findings demonstrate that youth workers can improve the quality of youth programming by receiving adequate supports from their direct managers through the key supervisory practices of authentic relationships, emotional safety, and reflective learning.

**Intentionally-designed programs that provide skillful supervision, professional development, and guidance for youth workers raise the quality of the team and thereby raise the quality of the program.** Supervisory practice offers a creative space to improve skills and motivation within youth workers through modeling in a supportive learning environment. Therefore, youth workers will be equipped to be strong leaders in the field and feel more accountable to their programs.

Additional training and information are needed on this topic in order for management staff to benefit and foster these skills within their roles.



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