

Key Messages

The role of the supervising social worker in foster care

What research has been carried out previously on this topic and what can it tell us about the role of the supervising social worker in foster care? The Rees Centre looked closely at a wide range of international research and published a summary of the main findings as a literature review in October 2014.

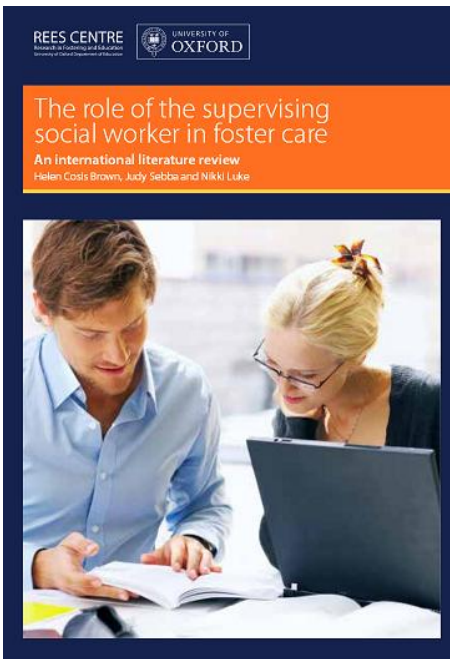
What is the issue?

The supervising social worker provides the link between the fostering provider and the foster carer. It is separate from the role of the foster child's social worker. The role is complex and provides both supervision and support to foster carers. The supervising social worker role is common in many countries.

Foster carers see the relationship with their supervising social worker as very important. It is known to be a reason why carers keep fostering and are attracted to the profession in the first place. However it has received little attention in research.

Call for Action

- Manage caseloads to ensure that supervising social workers are available to work with foster carers directly.
- Provide supervision of supervising social workers to enhance their effectiveness.
- Consider ways to enhance the working relationships between supervising social workers, children's social workers and foster carers, for example through joint training.
- Recognise the potential role of supervising social workers in the planned development of foster carers.



The role of the supervising social worker in foster care. An international literature review by Helen Cosis Brown, Judy Sebba and Nikki Luke.

The full report can be read and downloaded for free:
<http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/research/publications/>

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What did we do?

A search of the international research on this topic provided 22 relevant studies (24 related papers) from the UK, US, Canada and Australia for this review; all were published since 1996. The review includes studies looking at family and friends (kinship) foster care.

We asked the following questions:

What do supervising social workers do, and what are the components of supervision and support they offer foster carers?

What contributes to effective supervision by social workers of foster carers?

Does the quality and/or quantity of support and supervision offered to foster carers by supervising social workers impact on: outcomes for foster children; stability of placements; retention of foster carers?

What did we find out?

Foster carers value the support provided to them by their fostering service and their supervising social worker.

Foster carers want to be trusted, respected and valued by supervising social workers but the supervisory aspect of the social worker's role sometimes causes tension.

Foster carers in general had a more positive view of their working relationships with their supervising social worker than they did with their foster child's social worker. When carers felt that supervising social workers and children's social workers worked well together this was perceived as helpful.

Social work education and training were thought to need a more explicit focus on foster care, to adequately prepare supervising social workers to work in foster care covering family placements and systemic practice.

In general, studies did not address any link between support to foster placements and placement stability and where they did so findings were not consistent.

Foster carers in the independent foster care sector felt particularly well supported by supervising social workers.

Supervision of supervising social workers was reported to need to include discussion about the personal attitudes of the social workers, to make sure that their attitudes did not affect decision-making.

Retention of foster carers in many of the studies was reported to be linked to the quality and quantity of the support received by the foster carer in general, and in particular that provided by the supervising social worker.