

Addressing Secondary Trauma in Child Welfare through Reflective Supervision

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Advancing California's Trauma-Informed Systems

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Background

This brief presents a framework for addressing Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) developed by the Advancing California's Trauma-Informed Systems (ACTS) project, a collaboration between the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), Office of Child Abuse and Prevention (OCAP) and the Chadwick Center for Children and Families at Rady Children's Hospital – San Diego. Through this initiative, ACTS partners with county child welfare agencies and connected systems across California to advance trauma-informed care.



The Challenge of High Turnover and Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)

A typical child welfare worker interacts with children and families with high rates of trauma every day, balancing difficult decisions and dilemmas. Child welfare staff investigate suspected maltreatment and intervene in substantiated cases of child physical, sexual, and emotional abuse or neglect, often with limited resources and large caseloads (Pecora et al., 2000; Government Accountability Office, 2003). As part of their role, workers are at high risk for directly experiencing trauma and being exposed to traumatic narratives and stories. This knowledge and exposure to traumatizing events experienced by another can lead to what is termed Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS). STS is the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person (Figley, 1999). Multiple studies have found higher rates of PTSD symptoms among child welfare professionals from indirect trauma exposure than the lifetime prevalence of overall PTSD in the general population (Bride, 2007; Lee et al., 2018).

Exposure to trauma and the development of STS may contribute to the high rates of turnover among child welfare staff. According to one study, child welfare workers have an average tenure of less than two years and many leave the field entirely (Yankeelov, 2008). Exposure to trauma and STS, in addition to high administrative load, low pay, and overwhelming caseloads, seem to be primary contributors to low retention in child welfare.

One study of child welfare professionals across five organizations found that those who experience high rates of secondary trauma were more likely to leave (Middleton & Potter, 2015). Addressing high rates of STS and turnover among child welfare professionals may contribute to improved service delivery and outcomes for children and families if workers are better able to manage their emotional responses, feel supported, and stay longer in their positions.

This brief presents a framework for addressing STS developed by the Advancing California's Trauma-Informed Systems (ACTS) project, a collaboration between the California Department of Social Services (CDSS), Office of Child Abuse and Prevention (OCAP) and the Chadwick Center for Children and Families at Rady Children's Hospital - San Diego. Through this initiative, ACTS partners with county child welfare agencies and connected systems across California to advance trauma-informed care.



What can we do?

Both staff-focused and system-focused strategies can be used to support workforce safety, effectiveness, and resilience. Staff-focused strategies are the actions individuals can take to support their own well-being, such as engaging in self-care or taking time off. System-focused strategies are ways that the organization can change their practices to address STS, including implementing trainings or crisis debriefings. System-focused strategies can help to intervene and address STS before it impacts staff well-being. One system-focused strategy is reflective supervision. This intervention targets the supervisory relationship, which is a major source of support for child welfare workers.



Quality supervision is positively associated with job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and empowerment (Chen & Scannapieco, 2009; Cearley, 2004). Reflective supervision that is grounded in a trusting relationship can help supervisors recognize symptoms of STS and support workers in identifying, expressing, and reflecting on the emotional aspects of their work.

Reflective Supervision

Reflective supervision is a model of trauma-informed supervision that addresses the emotions generated as a byproduct of work with youth and families (Rankine, et al., 2018; Tomlin et al., 2014; Heffron et al., 2016). It includes active listening, introspection, collaboration, and regularity between the supervisor and supervisee (Parlakian, 2001) to examine thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Reflective supervisors create space for their staff to share the emotional impacts of the work, reflect on their own thought patterns, identify sources of resilience within themselves, and utilize appropriate coping skills. A reflective supervisor is able to convey to the child welfare professional the value they bring to the organization and therefore increase self-esteem and self-efficacy (Gibbs, 2001).

Based on its work with county child welfare agencies and connected systems in California, the ACTS project developed a reflective supervision model that includes four key elements. These elements are described in detail below:

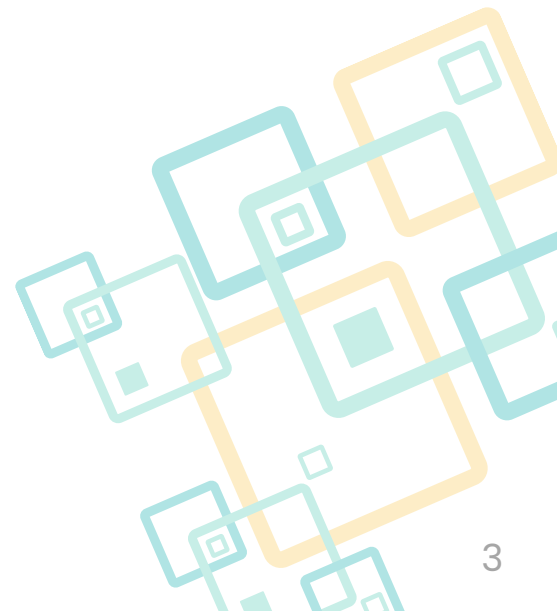


Table 1. Key Elements for Reflective Supervision

Element	Definition	Description	Example
<p>Emotion-Focused Questions</p>	<p>Asking questions that evoke feelings about the work</p>	<p>Ask a question that inquires about the emotional aspects of the job.</p>	<p>"What was that case like for you?"</p> <p>"What feelings are brought up for you when you think about this case?"</p> <p>"I'm noticing that there are a lot of feelings going on. Can we focus on the parts that affect your work and think about other people or supports you have to talk with?"</p>
<p>Reflective Listening</p>	<p>Listening, summarizing, and clarifying what you heard</p>	<p>Reflect back the emotion you heard and check in to make sure you heard correctly without trying to direct the conversation, jump in, or respond with problem solving.</p>	<p>"What I heard you say is ----- . Is that correct?"</p> <p>"It sounds like ----- . Is that about, right?"</p> <p>"I want to be sure I understand what you are telling me; can you please describe further what you were feeling?"</p>
<p>Supervisor Modeling</p>	<p>Sharing one's own emotions to normalize talking about feelings</p>	<p>Provide examples from personal experience related to the work to help staff feel understood and validated.</p>	<p>"When I was going into a similar case, I felt nervous about those home visits. I'm wondering if that is similar or different to what you were feeling."</p> <p>"When I have those types of cases, I know I feel really frustrated. I'm curious to see how you are feeling about this case?"</p>
<p>Compassion Satisfaction</p>	<p>Discussing the positive outcomes and emotions that come from the work</p>	<p>Focus on the positives and joys of the work so staff feel supported and confident in their abilities.</p>	<p>"Where do you find joy in your work?"</p> <p>"What were you proud of about this case?"</p> <p>"What did you feel was successful about today/this month?"</p>

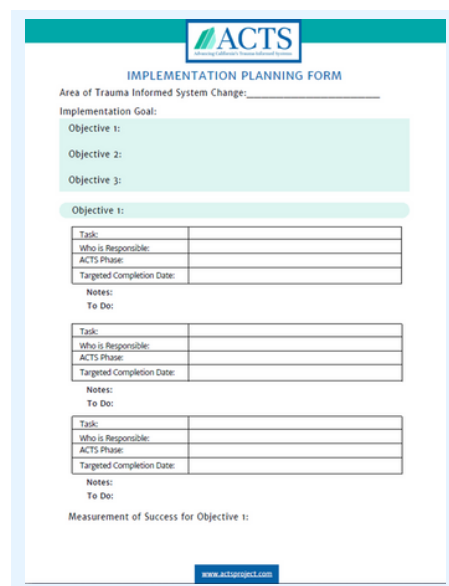
How to Implement Reflective Supervision

Implementing reflective supervision can look different for each organization depending on many factors, including the size of the workforce, current supervision practices, and the needs and buy-in of staff, supervisors, and leaders. To understand the key strategies to implement the ACTS reflective supervision framework, we highlight a typical child welfare agency that has partnered with ACTS.

This County was a mid-size county in California facing significant turnover in front-line staff. They reported that supervision was relatively inconsistent and largely focused on administrative tasks and day-to-day crises. Leadership identified turnover and stress as a significant problem for their workforce and staff stated that they needed more support to deal with the emotional stresses of their jobs.

Step 1: Getting Started

To start the process of implementing reflective supervision, the County created an **Implementation Team**. This team brought together leadership, supervisors, and staff to create an Implementation Plan with clear goals, objectives, and tasks to guide the process and keep the work moving forward. It was important for this team to include staff from all levels of the organization to build buy-in and ensure that the needs and concerns of all staff were reflected in the plan.



The image shows a document titled "IMPLEMENTATION PLANNING FORM" with the ACTS logo at the top. Below the title, it asks for the "Area of Trauma Informed System Change:". The form is divided into three sections for "Objective 1:", "Objective 2:", and "Objective 3:". Each objective section contains a table with columns for "Task:", "Who is Responsible:", "ACTS Phase:", and "Targeted Completion Date:". Below each table are "Notes:" and "To Do:" fields. At the bottom, there is a section for "Measurement of Success for Objective 1:" and a website URL "www.actsonline.com".

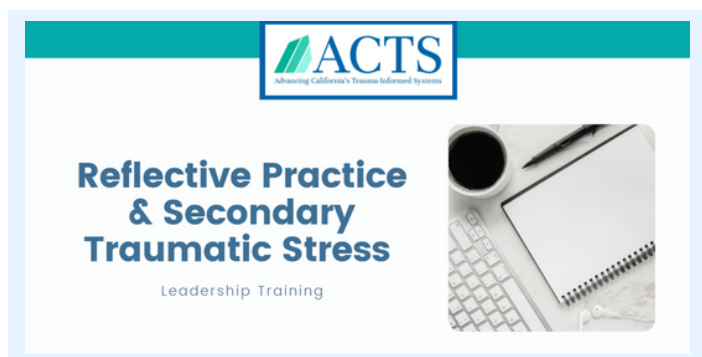
Implementation Planning Form

The County found that it was key to have active participation from leadership in the process to show their support and commitment to changing practice.

The Implementation Team also helped with **assessing current practices**. The team used a measure developed by the ACTS Project to get a baseline measurement of supervision consistency, use of reflective supervision, self-reflection in staff, job satisfaction, and turnover intent. These domains correspond with key outcomes that the team hoped to target through implementing reflective supervision. Collecting a baseline measurement also provided a more comprehensive view of current supervision practices and culture so that they could create a structure for reflective supervision that felt accessible and appropriate for their organization.

Step 2: Building Skills

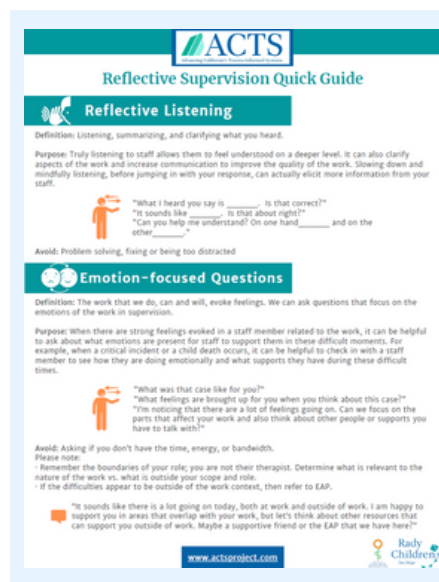
The County's implementation plan began with **training for leadership, managers, and supervisors**. The training provided basic education on trauma and STS, as well as an overview of reflective practice. The training also featured a demonstration of a reflective conversation and a discussion of the key skills for reflective supervisors (see Table 1).



[Reflective Practice & Secondary Traumatic Stress Leadership Training](#)

Leaders and supervisors were trained prior to staff to allow them time to practice reflective supervision and become more comfortable answering questions or providing guidance to staff on reflective practice. The structure of the training will depend on the size and structure of the organization's workforce. As they were small, this county chose to train all leaders, managers, and supervisors together. Larger counties may want to train leaders and managers separately from supervisors to allow for smaller groups with greater participation.

The County also utilized **reflective supervision resources** from ACTS, including a Reflective Supervision Quick Guide and a list of [Reflective Questions and Compassion Satisfaction prompts](#). These were given to leadership, managers, and supervisors after the training to use as a reference when starting to practice reflective supervision day to day.



[Reflective Supervision Quick Guide](#)

Step 3: Keeping it Going

Following this training, the Implementation Team determined that it was a priority to reinforce the skills and provide managers and supervisors with targeted support. The ACTS Team held four, one-hour **Coaching Calls** with this group so they could engage in in-depth training, share successes and challenges, and receive professional and peer support. The county did find that reinforcing practice change was important for the success of the project, as it provided managers and supervisors with more support and accountability when trying new skills. However, there are many different models of coaching depending on the size of the organization, the resources available, and the needs of the staff.

The county held a **training for staff** after both managers and supervisors completed the Coaching Calls and were implementing reflective supervision. This training was meant to ensure staff had the same knowledge of trauma and STS as their supervisors and present how engaging in reflective supervision could support them in addressing the emotional impacts of their work.

From the start of implementation, the County was thinking about and **planning for sustainment**. Using the ACTS “Building the Structure for Sustainment” worksheet, the Implementation Team held a series of facilitated discussions to decide what sustainment strategies made sense for their county and would meet their needs. These strategies were then added as objectives and tasks in their implementation plan, including:

- Continuing the Implementation Team after their engagement with the ACTS project ended. They renamed the team the ‘Trauma-Informed Care Team’ and met once a month to oversee implementation and long-term sustainment.
- Dedicating thirty-minutes in existing meetings for managers and supervisors to hold Reflective Supervision Peer Groups. These peer groups reinforced the skills learned in the training and gave participants an opportunity to learn new skills from each other. They also allowed managers and supervisors the opportunity to share both the joys and challenges of being a reflective supervisor. To support peer facilitators, the ACTS project offers a sample agenda to structure the group and Reflective Practice Activity Cards to guide early conversations.



ACTS

Reflective Practice Peer Group Facilitation Guide

I. Feeling Word Activity
Begin the group by having everyone go around and say one or two words to describe how they are feeling today.

II. Reflective Supervision

- Ask if anyone has an experience or story of using reflective supervision that they want to share with the group. It could be successes or challenges.

Process Questions to facilitate the discussion:

- What was it like asking that question?
- What was it like to hear that from your staff?
- Did you notice any changes due to the conversation?
- How did it feel taking time to focus on the feelings?

Reflections to support the discussion:

- Thank you for sharing that, you're not alone in those feelings
- Sounds like things are really hard right now, thank you for acknowledging those feelings.

- Ask if anyone wants to share an experience of receiving reflective supervision from their manager.

Process Questions to facilitate the discussion:

- What was it like to share with your manager?
- How did it feel when that question was asked?

III. Optional Reflective Activity

- Choose a reflective practice activity from the Reflective Practice

ACTS

Reflective Supervision Activity

Prompt: Describe a time a staff member came to you upset or frustrated.

Question: How did it feel to support them through that? What skills did you use (or would you use now) to address it?

Process Check: What is your mood like after this activity?

Tips

- Practice reflective listening by summarizing what they said and asking if that sounds right.
- Use supervisor modeling to normalize the experience.

ACTS

Reflective Question Activity

Prompt: Think about the types of cases that are most difficult for you.

Question: What makes these cases especially hard? What is the skill/knowledge you wish you had to make them easier to deal with?

Process Check: What is your mood like after this activity?

Tips

- Practice supervisor modeling by sharing your own feelings when dealing with difficult situations.
- Ask an emotion-focused question: "What feelings does this bring up?"

ACTS

Compassion Satisfaction Activity

Prompt: Describe what brought you to work in this system and role.

Question: Where do you find joy in your work? What is something that makes you feel proud or successful in your role?

Process Check: Did answering this question change your mood?

Tips

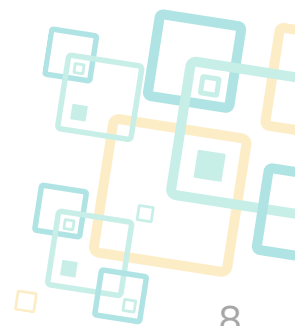
- Summarize back what they said to show you are using reflective listening.
- Ask an emotion-focused question: "What feelings are brought up when you talk about this?"

Reflective Supervision Peer Group Facilitation Guide

- Integrating training on STS and reflective supervision into onboarding for all new staff, including those being promoted to supervisor or manager.
- Adding a reflective question as a standing agenda item for team meetings to acknowledge the emotional impact of the work and give all staff space to check-in and consider their emotions before discussing tasks.

Reflective Practice Activity Cards

In addition, other counties may want to consider whether they would like outside support for implementing reflective supervision. The County worked closely with the ACTS project for nine months, which gave them access to subject matter experts and resources. Other organizations have contracted with outside trainers or partnered with their local behavioral health department to support training and coaching on reflective supervision.



Tips for Leadership

Leaders can use the larger construct of reflective practice to:

- Create an environment of transparency and trust in their communication with staff by acknowledging the emotional impact of the work in meetings and emails
- Encourage a focus on the positive feelings and outcomes associated with the work by talking with staff about compassion satisfaction
- Reinforce and model reflective practice skills during meetings by including reflective questions and taking time to ask how staff are feeling.

Start Small & Think Big

1. Add an emotion-focused or compassion satisfaction question as a standing agenda item for meetings.
2. Use a Reflective Practice Activity Card during individual supervision.
3. Connect with your local behavioral health partner to see what reflective practice resources they use and how they might be able to support your staff.

Reflective supervision is only one piece of the puzzle to address STS in child welfare; however, it is an important place to start. The goal of reflective supervision is to provide space to address the emotional impacts of the work, so that staff feel supported in addressing challenges. By consistently using reflective supervision with staff, organizations can help to address STS before staff experience significant symptoms or disruption.

The framework and resources developed by the ACTS project present a simple model that can be implemented with individual staff or at an organization wide level. While implementing reflective supervision can feel like it requires a huge shift, it can start with small changes and sustained effort over time.

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