

Practice
Tool

Observing practice in adult social care

Introduction

Observation is a way of understanding the strengths of a practitioner and their areas for development.

- > It enables practitioners to demonstrate what they do in practice and why.
- > It is the best method for understanding a practitioner's capabilities, as it is the method closest to 'real practice' (Ruch and Holmes, 2015). See Figure 1 below

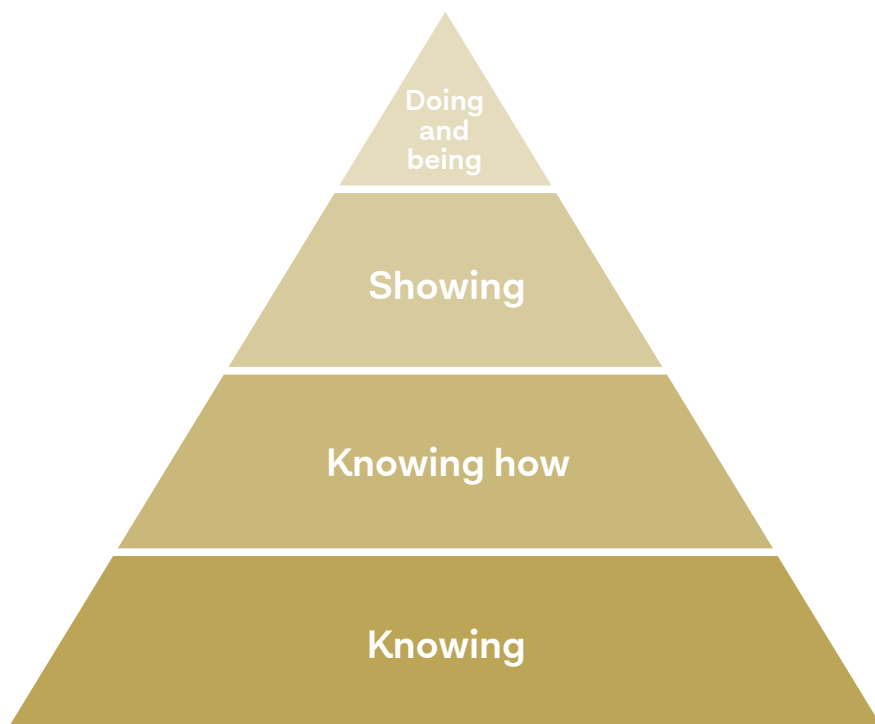


Figure 1: *Pyramid of professional capabilities*
(Ruch and Holmes, 2015)

Practice supervisors in social work are expected to conduct observations:

“Practice supervisors should make specific use of practice observations and feedback from individuals, carers and other professionals to reflect on and improve the social worker’s practice.” (DHSC, 2018, p.9).

However, all line managers and supervisors of people who undertake direct work with adults and carers can gain valuable insight and offer valuable support through observations.

The purpose of observation is to:

- > Ensure that essential standards of practice are met and identify where support is needed to meet these.
- > Look for what we consider to be effective practice and identify practitioners' strengths and areas to develop (Domakin, 2019).
- > Discover emerging or creative practice so that this can be shared within the organisation.

The benefits of observation include:

- > **For the person being observed**
- > To learn; identify areas to develop strengths and build capabilities; receive recognition of good practice.
- > **For the organisation**
- > To ensure essential standards are met, enhance understanding of practice; increase consistency; share good practice; identify new areas of practice to develop.
- > **For adults and carers**
- > To understand what good practice looks like; have the opportunity give feedback leading to improved experiences and outcomes. (Domakin, 2019)

This tool is for line managers and supervisors of any professional background, who are observing staff from any professional background and in any role that includes direct work with adults and carers. It will support you in observing and giving feedback to adult social care practitioners about their practice. The tool includes:

- > A summary of research findings to guide you in what to look for.
- > A template to capture your feedback when observing practice.
- > Points to consider when preparing for observations.

The aim is to ensure that observations are purposeful, helpful, and impactful.

What does good practice look like?

Observing practice prompts us to engage with two fundamental questions:

1. What does excellent practice look like? (What should we look for?)
2. How do we weigh up practice that we observe? (How good is the practice?)

(Domakin, 2019b)

Learning from evidence can inform our thinking about what to look for. The practice areas to observe and the questions set out in this tool are informed by evidence that highlights what makes a positive difference to adults, carers, and families. This includes:

- > An observational research project that shows how practitioner capabilities impact on older people's wellbeing (Tanner et al., 2024).
- > Tanner et al. (2024) highlight the importance of relational work, knowledge of the law and social care system, and empowering people to achieve outcomes.
- > An evidence review co-produced with adults with lived experience that shows the components of practice that contribute to an equal life (Bracher et al., 2023).
- > Bracher et al. (2023) emphasise collaborating with people who draw on services, sharing power as equals and people being able to live the lives they want to live.

Drawing on this evidence, we suggest that there are three key areas of practice to focus on in an observation:

1. **Relationship-based practice**
What is the person's experience like?
2. **Exchange of expertise**
How are the person's wishes and rights considered?
3. **Outcome focused**
How are the person's outcomes achieved?

Making sense of context when observing practice

Whittaker et al. (2017) highlight the need to consider the context when undertaking observation. For example, what has happened before, what else is going on for people and how the wider environment affects what is happening.

It is also important to remember that, depending on the situation that you are observing, different elements of practice may be seen at that time.

Relationship-based practice should always be present as this is about how any practitioner in any role uses her/his/their self as part of their work.

The **exchange of expertise** will be different depending on who is involved in the encounter and what they are working on together.

The **outcomes** that are identified will also be specific to the situation and the people involved.

However, if we aspire to co-production, then each encounter should involve an exchange and focus on the outcomes that matter to someone (Bracher et al., 2023).

Preparing for a practice observation presents you with an opportunity to talk to your supervisee about the following questions:

- > What is the context for this situation?
- > What does good practice look like in this situation (in terms of relationship-based practice, exchange of expertise and being outcome focused)?
- > What are the specific aims for the practice encounter which is to be observed?
- > How will you approach this encounter?

The answers to these questions will depend on the supervisee's role, the person and their situation, and the point they are at in working together.

Involving adults and carers

Ideally, reflection after the observation will draw on the views of the practitioner, observer, and adult/carer (Ruch and Holmes 2015). People who draw on social care welcome the opportunity to provide feedback and to highlight good practice (Nosowska, 2018, Carpenter et al., 2013). Their views should be a central part of considering practice, including practice observations.

People should be involved as fully as they wish and is practical. As a minimum, people will need to know that the observation is happening and give their consent to take part.

Aspects of involvement to consider are:

- > Informed consent to take part in an observation – information around who is being observed and why; how information will be captured and used.
- > How the person/people can provide feedback as part of the observation – when this will happen (before, during, after); how it will be used and responded to.
- > Gathering feedback separately that can be used to triangulate the observation – considerations around methods (e.g. call, written feedback); how it will be used and responded to.

Points to consider when preparing for a practice observation

The manager or supervisor who is undertaking the observation needs to have the right expertise and the right support in place from the organisation. They need to create a space where observation can be constructively planned, undertaken, and reflected on. This requires a relationship that enables trust (Pack, 2015). The observation is a developmental opportunity not a test.

How you undertake the observation should mirror the practice that you want to observe. In other words, it should be:

- > relationship-based
- > an exchange of expertise
- > focused on outcomes.

As with strengths-based practice, any difficulties and areas for development are not ignored but, rather, the supervisor works with the supervisee to co-construct solutions (Nosowska and Ford, 2019).

It is important to ensure that you have space and time to discuss a practice observation with your supervisee before undertaking this and after it has occurred. Beforehand, you will need to talk through:

- > The situation you will be observing – learning from the supervisee about the background, context, aims and approach.
- > What you will be looking for – i.e. the areas in this tool and anything that relates specifically to the supervisee's role or professional development.
- > How you will involve people in the observation – consent, information, feedback.

Afterwards, to be most helpful, discussion should draw on evidence from three sources:

- > Specific, constructive, and developmental feedback from you as an observer.
- > Your supervisee's reflection and learning from the observed practice encounter.
- > The views of the adult and their network (Ruch and Holmes, 2015).

It is also important to remember that there is a power imbalance between you as supervisor and your supervisee, and between them, the person being involved and their network. You will need to acknowledge this (Domakin, 2019b) and ensure that the views of the adult and network are centred (Nosowska, 2018) and that the supervisee is empowered. This requires the supervisee to experience the discussion as developmental rather than judgmental (Ruch and Holmes, 2015).

As well as observing the three key areas of practice (page 3), it is also important to be attentive to:

- > The **essential standards of practice** set out in the law and regulatory standards. The relevant standards will vary depending on the supervisee's role and the work being undertaken.

Does the practitioner:

- > Clearly explain their role and purpose?
- > Clarify consent and confidentiality?
- > Work within law and statutory guidance?
- > Uphold public law principles of being reasonable and transparent?
- > Any **emerging or creative practice**.
- > Does the practitioner act flexibly, creatively, or innovatively to improve experiences or outcomes?

A template for observing practice

You can use the template below to observe practice. Key questions for you to consider when observing practice are provided for each area.

Template for observing practice	Name:
	Date:
	Practice observer:

1. Relationship-based practice: Questions to consider

Does the practitioner:

- > Use clear, consistent, transparent, empowering, and inclusive communication?
- > Listen attentively?
- > Show respect, empathy, and kindness?
- > Uphold dignity and avoid assumptions?
- > Focus on what is important to the person and their network?
- > Ensure that the person knows what will happen next?

Strengths to build on

1

Capabilities require development and are not yet of an acceptable standard

2

Capabilities with a large number of areas for development

3

Good use of capabilities with areas for development

4

Very good demonstration of capabilities

5

Excellent demonstration of capabilities

Areas to develop

1

Capabilities require development and are not yet of an acceptable standard

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Capabilities with a large number of areas for development

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3. Outcome focused: Questions to consider

Does the practitioner:

- > Clarify their purpose and role?
- > Support the person to know their rights?
- > Promote the person's control and choice over what happens?
- > Recognise and build on strengths?
- > Recognise and collaboratively manage risk?
- > Help the person navigate systems and local services/resources?

Strengths to build on	
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1 Capabilities require development and are not yet of an acceptable standard

2 Capabilities with a large number of areas for development

3 Good use of capabilities with areas for development

4 Very good demonstration of capabilities

Areas to develop	
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Questions to consider

Does the practitioner:

- > Provide reassurance and advice?
- > Clarify what the person wants to happen?
- > Discuss options for change?
- > Identify actions to overcome barriers to the person's control of their own life?
- > Identify actions to promote wellbeing?
- > Identify how to join up actions with other agencies?

Debriefing after the observation

After observation, you can use the following template to guide your discussion.

The views of the adult
and their network

Your supervisee's
reflection and learning

Key points from your
feedback on strengths
and areas
of development

Action plan

Following the discussion, you can note down any actions here.

Actions for
your supervisee

Actions for you and
your organisation

Actions to feedback
to the adult and
their network

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