

**Supporting Staff with Professional Boundaries
Supervisor Forums
September 24-25, 2024 (notes combined from both days)**

Facilitators: Ellen Butowsky and Carmen Rosario, PCANY

Participants (40): Albany x 3, Brookdale x 4, Sullivan, Rockland, Chenango, Orange, North Country x 2, Oswego, Herkimer, Tioga, Jefferson, Montgomery, Oneida, Chautauqua, Onondaga, Staten Island, Otsego, Monroe, St. Lawrence, Niagara, Steuben/Livingston x 3, Schuyler/Tompkins, Schenectady x 2, Putnam, Seneca/Ontario/Yates, Wayne, Madison x 2, Nassau, Suffolk, Morris Heights

Number of programs:30

Large Group discussion:

Even for the most experienced home visitor or supervisor there is always something new under the sun that can give us pause or challenge us when it comes to professional boundaries.

The group shared reasons for that being the case including:

- Many supervisors are promoted from within and that can make it hard to hold staff accountable when you had a prior relationship as peers
- Sometimes the line between friendship and being a supportive home visitor can be hard to see or maintain (“Looks like friendship, smells like friendship, but it’s not friendship.”)
- Many home visitors had things occur in their own lives that drew them to this type of work. Making a difference is part of what motivates them but it can also blind them to when they are overstepping or functioning outside of their role.
- We’re in relationship based programs so sometimes there are not clear rules about every situation that comes up when working with families, the way you interact can change depending on the context.
- Sometimes a boundary crossed with a family makes it harder to transition the family along through the program if we are becoming their only support or it feels to the family that we are more of a friend. This can keep the family from progressing, and perhaps that has a parallel with those we supervise.

Trainers shared useful definition of professional boundaries in our work setting:

Boundaries are the limits that allow for a safe connection based on a participant’s needs. These limits create a sense of safety and predictability.

Trainers shared: Home visitors have the privilege to be invited into the intimate spaces of families' lives, witnessing their joys and challenges firsthand. This unique position underscores the importance of maintaining clear, professional boundaries to ensure that they provide the best support while safeguarding their well-being and integrity.

Small group discussions:

- What are some common challenges you have encountered with home visitors related to professional boundaries? This might include boundaries with both families and with co-workers.
- What are some uncommon challenges you've encountered?
- Share how you have supported staff? You may choose to share your successes, and also where you don't feel you were successful.
- How has the shift to remote work impacted professional boundaries?
- Where do you find support to help you with this aspect of your work and what more do you need?

One thing that stood out from each group:

- Many groups shared how supported they felt in their breakouts, appreciating their fellow supervisors, feeling affirmed that they are not alone or a "bad supervisor" because they have these boundaries challenges with staff.
- We processed that helping staff maintain their boundaries is part of staff retention; when you help someone function 'in their lane' they are being supported by you to avoid burnout
- Discussions about supporting staff with boundaries related to families wanting to share food, gifts, etc. and how to be culturally-attuned in a relationship based program
- Considering social media and its impact on boundaries (families wanting to be on Facebook with their home visitor, etc.)
- The difficulty staff have with saying "no"
- As a supervisor, knowing staff triggers, maintaining a safe space in supervision
- Respecting the fact that people are adults and how this impacts our view on micromanaging
- Dealing with different personalities and when we can have flexible responses and when that is not possible
- Using language of appreciation
- Supervisors can share how they are feeling too, that transparency can be helpful, "supervisors are people too."
- Using the word "vision" for supervision
- It is OK to let staff express themselves freely and having separate views
- Being strength based, reflecting, and setting professional goals, utilizing the TOL more

Resources

TOL activities on Professional Boundaries for sups and home visitors, under Essential Skills

- <https://tol397.wixsite.com/transferolearning>

Ending quote: "Over-empathy is the eraser of role-boundaries."

- Victor Bernstein, Doctor of Psychology, University of Chicago