



# enhancing program quality and care through supervision

by Heather Olsen and Christopher L. Kowalski

In this age of accountability, afterschool programs are increasingly held responsible for providing youth with quality care and education. Afterschool programs play a critical role in helping youth develop their intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, often by engaging them in activities in which they interact with their peers. Such

activities require afterschool program staff to carefully supervise children and youth in order to manage risk and ensure the young people's safety. Relationship building and mentoring are also part of such supervision.

The *supervision* we explore in this article is the watchful guidance provided by staff members to program participants rather than the mentoring a senior staff member provides to a less experienced youth worker. This article explores the "best practices" of this kind of supervision in afterschool programs, outlining programs' responsibilities and suggesting practical supervisory techniques. A framework of supervision for small- and large-group activities outlines the respon-

sibilities and duties of supervisors and can help afterschool programs develop their own supervision plans.

## Is Supervision Necessary?

The question itself may seem unnecessary, but discussion of supervision in the afterschool literature is limited. Afterschool programs have a legal obligation and responsibility to ensure the safety of participating youth. Supervision is one of the most important connections between physical activity and risk man-

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agement; it has been raised in nearly every negligence lawsuit (Dougherty, 1993; van der Smissen, 1990).

*Supervision* is a broad term implying responsibility for the safety of physical locations and of program activities. According to Gaskin (2003), supervision includes “coordinating, directing, overseeing, implementing, managing, superintending, and regulating” (p. 138). Supervisors are alert, competent professionals who are confident in intervening when youth behave inappropriately.

According to van der Smissen (1990), approximately 80 percent of legal cases involving program situations in park and recreation, leisure service, and afterschool agencies allege lack of supervision or improper supervision. The implication may be that afterschool programs can be found negligent if they are not properly monitoring youth. For instance, a negligence claim may arise if a staff member is indoors gathering activity supplies when an incident occurs among unsupervised children outdoors. A “reasonable and prudent” person would have known that the children should not be left unsupervised; thus, such action would generally qualify as negligence under the law (Black’s Law Dictionary, 1978, p. 930).

Afterschool youth workers should be able to make good decisions when assessing situations, including those that involve resolving conflicts. Organizations and their staff members can be found negligent if four conditions are met (van der Smissen, 2007):

- Deviation from the **duty** of the supervisor
- An **act** that is not in accordance with the **standard of care**
- **Proximate cause**, or a connection between damage or injury and the failure to act properly
- **Injury or damages** that result from the failure to act properly

Understanding these four elements of negligence is the beginning of minimizing risks in an afterschool program.

Staff members of afterschool programs have a legal *duty* (van der Smissen, 2007) to supervise students in their care; they and the programs are liable for injuries and damages that occur in the absence of adequate supervision. The primary duty of the staff member in the example above is to supervise the children who are outdoors.

The *act* refers to actions of the afterschool worker. In our example, the question would be whether the staff member who stayed indoors to prepare for the next activity was negligent. Negligent conduct may occur because of the manner in which the leader acted or failed to act (van der Smissen, 1990). Another example of an act that is not in accordance with the standard of care has to do with the design of program spaces. In a handful of situations, we have seen unlocked storage units in afterschool classrooms, where children had unsupervised access to cleaning supplies, chemicals, and sharp objects. Such programs may need to consider their obligation to provide a safe physical environment for children.

In discussion of negligence, the supervisor’s *standard of care* is the standard that a reasonable and prudent professional maintains (van der Smissen, 1990). The legal system determines the standard of care required of afterschool programs. This standard is usually based on the recognized practice of local and state programs. Organizations such as the National Afterschool Association (2009) have developed standards for quality school-age care that provide guidance on how to act as a school-age care professional.

*Proximate cause* refers to the actual cause of the damage or injury (van der Smissen, 2007). For negligence to occur, it must be proven that the damage or injury was the direct result of the action of the supervisor. For example, if a child was injured because, when an afterschool worker left the classroom, other participants pushed the child into a storage unit and knocked it over, lack of supervision may be considered the proximate cause of the injury.

The fourth element of negligence is actual *injury* to a person or *damage* to property. Dougherty, Auxter, Goldberger, and Heinzmann (1994) reviewed numerous law cases involving injuries that required medical attention. These injuries occurred while young people were involved in activities that might be included in an afterschool program, such as playing basketball, football, softball, baseball, and soccer, as well as roller and in-line skating and exercising with equipment or weights. In each case, the question arose whether lack of proper supervision was the reason for injury. The courts examined the actions and behaviors of the leaders and programs (Dougherty, Auxter, Goldberger, & Heinzmann, 1994).

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This emphasizes the importance of supervision in minimizing injury in afterschool programs.

### Practical Techniques

A critical ingredient for quality youth-serving programs is that supervisors be trained to interact with program youth. The actions and behaviors of managers and staff are vital to program success and sustainability. Research in the sports and leisure literature concludes that supervision goes beyond simply watching youth; it encompasses several common components (Appenzeller, 2005; Hronek, Spengler, & Baker, 2007; Kaiser, 1986; van der Smissen, 2007). Kaiser (1986) has suggested that supervision duties include:

- Inspecting the facility
- Planning for an activity
- Providing adequate and proper equipment
- Evaluating participants' abilities and skills
- Warning participants of inherent dangers in an activity
- Instruction on proper techniques
- Closely controlling the conduct of activity
- Providing first aid and access to medical facilities

Afterschool leaders protect youth from unreasonable risks of harm by assessing the program area for safety, deciding on age-appropriate activities, interacting with youth, instructing proper techniques and skills, and closely monitoring conduct during the activity. Too often, once youth become engaged in an activity, supervisors become stationary.

Afterschool programs can be creative in designing and implementing multiple activities that can occur simultaneously in a variety of environments. Although each program component or activity has its unique setting, a standard of supervision must apply. For instance, in programs that have small spaces, the room may be designed so that all children can fully participate and enjoy the experience. Creative planning among staff may aid in rearrangement of the room to offer enjoyment and a safe environment.

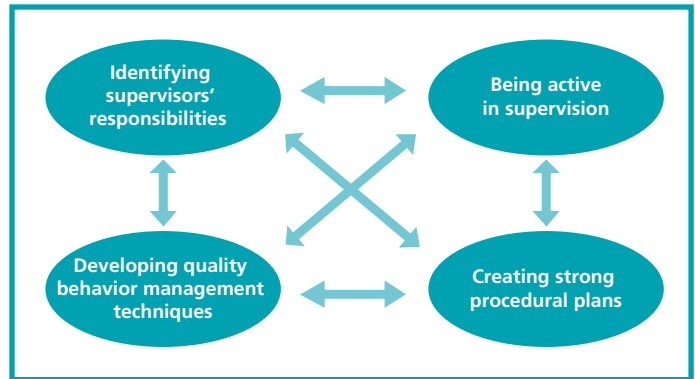
Based on our review of the literature, we suggest four practical components that can result in quality supervision in afterschool programs:

- Identifying supervisors' responsibilities
- Being active in supervision
- Developing quality behavior management techniques
- Creating strong procedural plans

Rather than being hierarchical, these four components interact with one another, as shown in Figure 1, to result in appropriate supervision. For example, a super-

visor who is actively monitoring children but does not know what to do in an emergency can be held responsible for resulting injury or loss. Afterschool administrators should take an active role in their programs' supervision practices and train staff members to properly observe and guide program youth.

Figure 1. Framework for appropriate supervision



### Identifying Supervisors' Responsibilities

The first component of quality supervision is the supervisors' awareness of their responsibilities. According to van der Smissen (1990), there are three types of supervision in which leaders may need to engage: *general*, *transitional*, and *specific* supervision.

*General* supervision includes overseeing a group of youth involved in an activity. General supervision occurs when a supervisor manages the behavior of youth engaging in an activity in a specific area (van der Smissen, 1990). Disagreements and arguments do arise among participants in afterschool programs. Supervisors who oversee large-group activities need to facilitate positive and appropriate behavior. For instance, a supervisor who catches a student using inappropriate language should pull the student aside and remind him or her about better choices of words. Such preventative techniques during general supervision can prevent inappropriate behavior from escalating.

*Transitional* supervision includes observing and overseeing youth as they move between activities (van der Smissen, 1990). The supervisor's level of involvement in transitional supervision will vary depending on the interaction among youth between activities, the amount of movement by groups of youth in the facility, and the resources needed for the activities. For instance, after spending 30 minutes in the gymnasium (using general supervision techniques), supervisors conduct transitional supervision when guiding youth to put away equipment and helping them move to the next activity.

*Specific* supervision includes constant and continuous monitoring of youth, either in a one-on-one relationship or in a small group. This type of supervision is common when the supervisor is giving instructions to the youth, the activity performed is high risk, or there is a potential for serious injury (van der Smissen, 1990). Specific supervision would be appropriate if a program adopted a beginning inline skating activity or if a science experiment included Bunsen burners or electrical wiring. Administrators must ensure that staff understand specific supervision and employ it when supervising participants who are trying a new activity or skill for the first time (Tillman, Voltmer, Esslinger, & McCue, 1996).

### **Being Active in Supervision**

The second component for successful supervision is to remain active. Supervisors should constantly be moving when observing children: looking up and down, right and left, over and under, inspecting and viewing all aspects of the equipment, the facilities, and the activities (Bruya, Hudson, Olsen, Thompson, & Bruya, 2002). Edginton, Hudson, and Scholl (2005) define *supervision* as more than simply being present. They explain that supervisors need to actively monitor participants by changing directions frequently and making random passes throughout the area. Supervisors cannot fully observe participants if they stay rooted in one place.

Another aspect of being active during supervision is understanding the layout of the environment. The area must be organized so that supervisors can view what children are doing at all times. The American Red Cross (2007) defines the importance of active supervision at aquatics facilities. Lifeguards are trained to maintain open lines of sight so they can view the entire area with no blind spots. In afterschool settings, staff should ensure that all parts of the activity area are visible. They should practice good scanning techniques to maintain oversight while moving throughout the area.

### **Developing Quality Behavior Management Techniques**

The third component includes using proper behavior management techniques. Jordan (2007) identifies three kinds of behavior management techniques: *unobtrusive*, *discernible*, and *obtrusive*.

*Unobtrusive* techniques include methods that gently remind children of the program's expectations. Examples of unobtrusive techniques include eye contact ("the look"), redirecting a child into another activity, or complimenting a child who does something positive.

When unobtrusive techniques fail, supervisors turn to *discernable* techniques, which model appropriate behaviors. For example, in order to set clear and appropriate expectations, an afterschool worker might demonstrate how to work with others when resources are limited. Positive discipline, outlining reasons for existing rules and standards, positive phrasing of directives related to safety, and positive reinforcement emphasize appropriate behavior in a manner that is effective and long lasting.

*Obtrusive* techniques, which are visible to all the children, are appropriate only when the supervisor has exhausted both unobtrusive and discernable techniques. The supervisor, seeing an inappropriate or unsafe behavior, wants the child to correct the behavior immediately so that all participants see the importance of appropriate behavior. An example of an obtrusive technique is having a child go to a quiet zone or take a time-out.

For behavior management techniques to be successful, children should be involved in their planning and implementation. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2009), America's leading advocacy organization focused on infusing 21st-century skills into education, suggests that youth need to build life and career skills. Afterschool programs can prepare youth to make meaningful contributions to their own safety and development. Afterschool supervisors have daily opportunities to guide youth towards positive decision-making, helping them to understand potentially unsafe situations and showing them how to resolve conflicts. Children will remember and be able to explain the expectations associated with safe and appropriate behaviors if they take part in developing the rules. Safety can be enhanced when all participating youth are empowered to address unsafe behaviors.

### **Creating Strong Procedural Plans**

The fourth component of quality supervision involves creating a procedural plan to regulate daily program

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operations. A procedural plan includes organizational routines for participants and program staff. For example, tools such as a sign-in/out sheet or check-in area help ensure the safety of youth during arrival and departure times.

What do you do when you and a participant wait 45 minutes after the program has ended and no guardian shows up to take the child home? If you asked this question of 10 afterschool professionals, you would get different answers. Scenarios like this are common in afterschool programs, and what may be “common sense” for one person is not “common sense” for another. Therefore, afterschool programs need to develop procedural plans to help create consistency among staff, participants, and guardians.

Creating a strong procedural plan may begin with stakeholders coming together to form a leadership team that will spearhead staff training in supervision techniques. As part of such a leadership team, program leaders can bring together key stakeholders, including administrators, staff, support staff, parents and guardians, and participants. The roles of these stakeholders in building a strong procedural plan are outlined below.

**Administrators**, including directors, risk managers, board members, and site coordinators, manage the afterschool program. Their support is critical to the implementation of staff development on supervision. They have the ability to allocate funds to initiate or expand trainings. They are responsible for keeping children safe and are concerned with potential liability.

**Staff**, including front-line workers and site coordinators, know the activities, behaviors, and events that happen during the afterschool program. They are some of the most important stakeholders because they are the ones actually supervising the children. They will have good ideas on how to improve safety and supervisory behaviors as well as on professional development.

**Support staff**, including maintenance workers, consultants, or school-day staff, may not work directly in the program, but they do play a part. Maintenance staff are essential to the supervision committee because they can make physical changes to the program environment. Consultants are likely to have a good understanding of supervision problems and inconsistency among programs; some may be responsible for examining injuries and lawsuits. If the afterschool program operates at a school, it is important to have a school representative on the supervision training program. The school representative can inform the group of the policies and procedures of the school.

**Parents and guardians** are an invaluable resource because they are invested in their children’s safety and education. Some parents may bring financial resources that allow supervisors to carry first-aid supplies, a whistle, or bathroom and drink supplies.

**Participants** can also be involved in developing the supervision procedural plan for a program. Edginton, Kowalski, and Randall (2005) point out that adolescents can take an active role in constructing safety procedures and building awareness. As young people mature, self-regulation of their own behavior is a long-term goal. With guidance from staff, such self-regulation may be incorporated into a supervisory plan. Younger children may not have reached a level of cognitive development that would allow them to self-regulate (Montessori, 1967), but it never hurts to begin introducing self-regulation techniques so that children can get used to them.

Developing supervision procedural plans takes a great deal of time and effort on the part of administrators, program leaders, and front-line personnel. To start a discussion of appropriate supervision, the program director may develop a list of situations that have actually occurred in the program. The resulting training would allow all program staff to be consistent.

A supervision procedural plan includes a number of key components, including a well-rounded staff of individuals who are aware of their responsibilities when supervising youth. Supervision procedural plans are necessary for every afterschool program so that every staff member understands program responsibilities and expectations. Based on the literature, we suggest that afterschool programs consider including the following components of a supervision procedural plan:

- Staff training
- Emergency procedures
- Annual evaluation

### **Staff Training**

Effectively designed afterschool programs include training in supervision in order to ensure consistency in staff interactions with children and their caregivers. Supervision training should focus on accountability, alertness, flexibility, and attitude (Thompson, Hudson, & Olsen, 2007).

• **Accountability.** If program goals include helping children develop into responsible adults, supervisors need to hold youth accountable for their actions, behaviors, and words. All participants should be in tune with the program’s expectations, respect both people and property, and engage in activities during the scheduled time.

- **Alertness.** Supervisors who are constantly alert may prevent unsafe behaviors by staying one step ahead of the children.
- **Flexibility.** Well-trained supervisors know how to make adjustments to children's needs. For example, a child who does not want to play a game might keep score, be a "referee," or engage in drawing in the same general area where the other children are playing.
- **Attitude.** Positive attitudes in program leaders can inspire youth to achieve their dreams.

These four elements should be discussed in supervision training programs.

Supervision training should also include discussion of the activities and behaviors that are and are not appropriate for staff to use when working with children. Staff training could include a discussion surrounding expectations for general, transitional, and specific supervision, as well as the rules for and expectations of the youth. Afterschool workers need to develop rules for activities, games, free play, and outdoor play; staff should also learn to facilitate discussions with youth to empower them to develop rules and standards for safety. Rules should be consistent among all staff members and should be communicated clearly to youth and caregivers.

Other supervision topics that are discussed at training should be determined by the program. Gaskin and Batista (2007) recommend that programs keep files on supervision training that outline the training date, content covered, and names of participants who attended.

### Emergency Procedures

Unfortunately, emergencies do happen. Afterschool professionals have to be prepared. An effective emergency plan, which includes how to handle emergencies and to document inappropriate behaviors and injuries, can be tailored to specific afterschool programs. Participants can also be involved in developing emergency procedures. For instance, youth can be directly involved in practicing fire and tornado drills and in planning how to deal with the presence of an unknown adult.

An emergency plan is a crucial component in program risk management, as it helps to prevent negligence. The emergency plan should be shared with administrators, staff, parents and caregivers, and participants. Training also helps staff focus on the important aspects of care by

providing a basic plan of action that can be used in an emergency (American Red Cross, 2007). All staff and participants need to know what to do in an emergency. Taking immediate action can save lives, prevent injury, and minimize property damage.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2007), emergency plans should address both natural and human hazards. Schools and communities are encouraged to have a plan in place for natural disasters (earthquake, tornado, hurricane, flood), severe weather, fires, chemical or hazardous spills or smells, bus crashes, shootings or weapons in the program, bomb threats, medical emergencies, student or staff deaths, acts of terror or war, and outbreaks of disease or infections.

Emergency plans should be regularly reviewed and updated. As in fire, tornado, or hurricane drills, staff and participants need to know what to do in case the situation arises. Practicing with staff and children on how to deal with emergencies enables everyone to assist in working through unsafe situations.

Even under the best circumstances, injuries and inappropriate behavior do occur. Supervisors need a system for reporting and documenting injuries and inappropriate behaviors

in order to prevent further liability, to help communicate with administrators and caretakers, and to record the actions that were carried out after the incident. Injury report forms should include not only the types of injuries and procedures, but also the exact location where the situation occurred, who was involved, the staff present, and procedures carried through after the incident. The courts, as well as administrators and guardians, will want to review accurately maintained documentation of any situation. Staff must be trained to follow these procedures.

### Annual Evaluation

The purpose of evaluation is to determine whether or not supervision practices are enhancing the program. We recommend that program administrators evaluate staff supervisory practices at least once a year. Annual evaluations should be conducted by site coordinators or administrators who are familiar with the program and are aware of the site's supervision policies and procedures. Evaluations should examine the incidence of injuries or inappropriate behaviors, the accuracy of documentation forms, and the consistency of supervision duties. Evaluations should also investigate concerns of front-line personnel, asking staff how they feel the program is doing in regard to supervision practices.

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Annual evaluations can strengthen staff morale; they can also allow staff to share their successes and failures, address issues, and settle conflicts with administrators and program partners. There is no universal step-by-step approach for conducting annual evaluations, since each program has its own way of doing business. Evaluations need to be tailored to meet the needs of the program and its administrators, staff, parents and guardians, and youth. Fortunately, developing an evaluation procedure can be one way to strengthen supervision practices.

### Why Supervision Matters

Youth workers have a great responsibility in providing care and bringing about positive experiences for youth. All can play a role in providing quality afterschool programs through supervision. Program leaders are encouraged to provide supervision training opportunities so that staff members are confident and competent in their supervision activities. Staff members can support one another in their daily supervision actions and behaviors. They must engage in understanding supervision responsibilities, being active, incorporating behavior management techniques, and adopting to the program's procedural plans. Program participants must also be supported in learning appropriate and safe behaviors.

Afterschool supervisors play a key role in providing a safe, high-quality environment for children. Developing a supervision procedural plan, including staff supervision training, is well worth the investment for afterschool programs.

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