

# **6 | EFFECTIVE SUPERVISION FOR YOUNG ADULT PEER PROVIDERS**

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## PRINCIPLES OF YOUNG ADULT PEER SUPERVISION

Supervision of young adult (YA) peer providers (“peers”) is effective when it is scheduled in advance and occurs regularly: the same time and place each week or bi-weekly. In order for them to be successful at their position, it’s important that YA peers have a specified time and place to process and reflect upon their work experiences. Ideally, YA peer providers partner with supervisors to set the supervision agenda. Time should be set aside at the start of supervision to follow up on anything identified as pertinent from the previous supervision meeting.

Supervisors must be aware of the concurrent need for reflective supervision and skill development when supervising young adult peers. Both individual and group supervision can be beneficial for young adult peer providers. Ideally, YA peers meet weekly for individual supervision with their supervisor for 30-60 minutes, and bi-weekly for group supervision for 60 minutes. In general, it is important to support YA peer providers in connecting with other YA peer providers whenever possible. Group supervision can be a particularly powerful experience for mutuality in peer-to-peer relationships, as well as a fantastic forum for skill development through mini-workshops hosted by supervisors, guest trainers, and the YA peers.

Beyond supervision competencies, it is critical for the YA supervisors to understand the content of the previous Toolkit chapters, particularly the purpose and responsibilities of YA peers (chapter 2), the impact of their introduction on non peer staff (chapter 2), and relevant organizational cultural elements (chapter 4).

You might be curious about how young adult peer provider supervision might differ from adult peer provider supervision. Below we have expanded on key identified adult peer supervision principles<sup>lxxi</sup> and describe how they can be interpreted for the supervision of YA peers

Young Adult Peer Supervision Principles	
Pillars of Supervision Principles	Expansion for YA Peers
1. Peer Specialist Supervisors are Trained in Quality Supervisory Skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Supervisors need additional training in developmental milestones of the transition to adulthood, positive youth development, and engagement techniques, in order to effectively supervise and empower YA peers.</li> <li>▪ Giving and receiving feedback to YA peers may look different based on the YA peer’s experience with supervision, direction, and guidance. Supervisors need to be flexible in their approach to supervision</li> </ul>
2. Peer Specialist Supervisors Understand and Support the Role of the Peer Specialist.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In addition to supporting continuing education and certification, supervisors must learn how to support the development of strategic sharing skills for YA peers.</li> <li>▪ Supervisors must be readily accessible and available for processing potentially traumatic or confusing situations that their YA peer providers could encounter while working.</li> <li>▪ Supervisors understand today’s young adult experience and culture, including trends in social media use (chapter 4).</li> </ul>
3. Peer Specialist Supervisors Understand and Promote Recovery in their Supervisory Roles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Recovery looks different for transition-age youth (TAY) – both YA peers and TAY clients. Rather than focusing on “recovery,” supervisors must focus on “discovery” and support YA peers’ efforts to engage YA clients in exploring their contexts, identity, and symptoms, through sharing their personal stories.</li> <li>▪ Supervisors must be trained in Positive Youth Development (chapter 4).</li> <li>▪ Supervisors must also teach YA peers how to monitor stress levels.</li> <li>▪ Supervisors should celebrate their YA peer providers’ milestones at work in young adult-friendly ways.</li> <li>▪ Supervisors must teach and model self-care to YA peers.</li> <li>▪ Supervisors should focus on the positive while addressing barriers/challenges.</li> </ul>

<p>4. Peer Specialist Supervisors Advocate for the Peer Specialist and Peer Specialist Services Across the Organization and in the Community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Promoting mutual trust, respect, and collaboration between YA peers and other staff will be challenging, because of a combination of stigma toward both “peer provided services” and “youth culture.” When staff criticize YA peers, supervisors must champion efforts to explain that they are at the agency to work like anyone else, and we need to get to know them better</li> <li>▪ In order to demonstrate the value of YA peers, supervisors need to document the impact that they are having with their individual clients and on an organizational level (see chapter 2 for more detail on these benefits).</li> </ul>
<p>5. Peer Specialist Supervisors Promote both the Professional and Personal Growth of the Peer Specialist within Established Human Resource Standards.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Identity, relationships, and career exploration are key parallel processes for YA peers to experience as they guide and support their YA clients. Supervisors must be aware of this and promote YA peer exploration.</li> <li>▪ Supervisors must form a strong working alliance with YA peers to support exploration and safety on the job.</li> <li>▪ Supervisors must educate Human Resources about the value that YA peers bring to the organization and the reasons some general requirements for direct service staff may need to be relaxed.</li> </ul>

From: Pillars of Peer Support – VI: Peer Specialist Supervision (2015). [www.pillarsofpeersupport.org](http://www.pillarsofpeersupport.org).

In addition to the principles discussed above, here are best-practices for young adult peer provider supervision:

- **Balance the Negative with the Positive and Celebrate Small Successes.** Model strengths-based approaches for YA peers to use with clients. It is important to recognize the small successes of YA peer providers so they can learn how to recognize small successes in their YA clients. In addition, young adult peers are at high risk for feeling discouraged because they do not perceive their clients as engaging or progressing. By celebrating small wins, such as trying out new skills with young adult clients, young adult peer provider on-the-job discouragement can be averted. For example, when a peer and client establish a weekly meeting time and place and get together a few times in a row, a supervisor should recognize the peer for successfully engaging the client.
- **Supervisors/Senior YA Peers Must be Present and Available.** Frequent informal check-ins and supervisor/senior peer staff availability for impromptu check-ins are key for on-the-job young adult peer provider success. These check-ins foster security on and off the job site and can happen via in-person interactions, phone calls, or texting exchanges. An excellent practice that provides for YA peer leadership development is to have more senior young adult peers mentor junior young adult peers, while also providing effective on-the-job support. The check-in should not feel like “monitoring”, but instead like a consultation.
- **Outreach to Young Adult Peer Providers May Be Necessary at Times.** Check in with young adult peer providers whose behavior and communication has changed at work, resulting in on-the-job struggles, conflicts, complaints, or poor performance. If a colleague notices a YA

on-the-job struggles, conflicts, complaints, or poor performance. If a colleague notices a YA peer provider struggling on the job and relays this information to a supervisor, the supervisor should follow up with this as soon as possible. Sometimes, YA peers may start to experience symptoms while working and not know how to cope with them in their new role. They may feel ashamed because they perceive they made a mistake on the job and disengage. It is important to outreach to young adult peer providers if they are calling out of work and/or not showing up for work. Supervisors should meet the YA peer where they are at, identify the problem, and partner with him/her to trouble-shoot the situation and discuss potential accommodations (chapter 7).

- **Supervision Is Not Therapy.** If young adult peer providers consistently bring personal struggles to supervision, supervisors should encourage and support young adult peer providers to seek appropriate mental health support and/or treatment. However, supervisors do not want to prevent the sharing of ANY personal life experiences – they are how we connect as humans in the workplace! It is healthy to talk about hobbies, interests, and even personal struggles with coworkers at times. And an inherent part of the supervisor’s role is to support YA peer providers in reframing their life experiences, in order to better engage and motivate young adult clients; talking about past and current life experiences is important. However, if the majority of supervision is spent on processing the YA peer provider’s current personal life struggles, instead of focusing on how to use these experiences to increase client support and engagement, the supervisor needs to help the YA peer to understand that supervision is not the place for this and increase the structure of supervision meetings.
- **Embrace the Process of On-the-Job Skill Development.** Many young adult peers will enter their jobs without experience in managing complex projects and tasks. YA peers need support in organizing tasks, including managing their case load and designing interactive activities. YA peers will likely need coaching about how to articulate their ideas in team meetings. Service note documentation in particular may initially require extra structure and support, including templates with example phrasing and more senior YA peers to advise them on documentation.
- **Provide Specificity and Context for New Task Assignments.** TAY do not have much work (or school) experience and are often just learning workplace culture and terminology. When faced with an unfamiliar assignment, some TAY do not have the tools (often learned in school) to organize themselves toward developing a plan to engage the assignment. In such cases YA peers may freeze and not complete the work or provide something you’re not looking for. For these assignments, be very specific in terms of what you expect (e.g., length of report), the steps required to complete the task, and the due-date. For example, a supervisor might ask a YA peer to write a “report”, and report back” to him/her with “recommendations” on how to proceed. This kind of assignment raises questions for the YA peer about the

**Guidance for New Task Assignment :**

- Put in writing
- Offer specifics
- Define terms
- Include examples for formatting, style and length
- Schedule a time to discuss shortly after assignment is made and/or send a follow-up email to support task completion.

necessary depth and comprehensiveness of the report, and the need to cite evidence of facts and research. Thus, assignment specifics might include: sources to consult, approximate length of the report, expected format, time line and due date, and sometimes specific steps to complete the task. Providing them with examples of what you expect is very useful. After a few such assignments, the YA peer will be fine without such specific guidance.

- **Effective YA Peer Supervision Must be Reflective.** Reflective supervision is an approach used in early childhood and family practice. Reflective supervision aims to increase empathy, integration of multiple perspectives, and practitioner self-awareness. The process of reflective supervision is an exercise in examining parallel processes between family member interactions, family-practitioner interactions, and practitioner-supervision interactions. **The supervisor supports the practitioner in reflecting upon their role with clients, including exploring the practitioner’s actions, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and reactions in their work with clients.** The process of reflective supervision focuses on the dynamics of relationships within client family systems, between peers and supervisors, and the systems these relationships exist in.

Building strong bonds with YA clients is a key task of YA peers. It provides the opportunity to be reflective about the qualities of these relationships, the impact they are having on YA peers, and how relationships must change in order to achieve desired outcomes. The Illinois Children’s Mental Health Partnership has a fantastic Reflective Supervision Guide with resources (<http://icmhp.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/ReflectivePracticeGuideR04-03-15.pdf> )

- **Additional Peer Supervision Resources:**
  - Peers in Action: <http://peer.hdwg.org/sites/default/files/PACT-SupervisionTools.pdf>
  - Building Blocks to Peer Program Success: [http://peer.hdwg.org/sites/default/files/6\\_SupervisingPeersComplete.pdf](http://peer.hdwg.org/sites/default/files/6_SupervisingPeersComplete.pdf)
  - SAMHSA Peer Support Whole Health & Wellness: [http://www.integration.samhsa.gov/Supervisor\\_Guide\\_to\\_Peer\\_Support\\_Whole\\_Health\\_and\\_Wellness\\_-c-2013.pdf](http://www.integration.samhsa.gov/Supervisor_Guide_to_Peer_Support_Whole_Health_and_Wellness_-c-2013.pdf)

## ESSENTIAL TOPICS

YA peer supervision must be multidimensional:

1. **Performance.** Supervision must incorporate “tasked-based” or administrative elements. When addressing on-the-job performance, always begin with identifying what is going well; discuss organization and time management; and any barriers to performing job duties. Use the SMART<sup>1</sup> framework to develop goals for annual performance reviews. Brainstorm ideas for addressing workplace challenges together. Encourage YA peers to advocate for clients and to speak up in meetings. Review any accommodations (chapter 7). This task- based element can be conducted by a supervisor who does not provide clinical supervision.

<sup>1</sup> A plan that is: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMART\\_criteria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMART_criteria).

2. **Skill Development.** Supervision must also integrate skill-based training, coaching, and reinforcement. Supervisors should support YA peers in taking inventory of their skills, as well as identifying skills that they can develop to increase client engagement. Setting aside one supervision meeting a month to focus on developing specific skills (such as motivational interviewing) is helpful. A supervisor can also use this time to share opportunities where YA peer providers can continue developing current skills or attain new ones (e.g., upcoming conferences and trainings).



Most often, YA peers need support in developing intra-office communication skills. Many YA peers will use brief and immediate modes of communication through social media messaging platforms (e.g., Facebook) and texting, rather than sending detailed emails or making phone calls and leaving voice mail messages. Supervisors are instrumental in supporting YA peers in communicating with their older co-workers professionally and in the ways that meet agency guidelines. Supervisors can do this by developing context-specific communication practices with email, phone calls, and in-person exchanges. For written communications the Memo format provides that context (template at Appendix D). But written communications are often insufficient when there is disagreement or conflict, and in this case supervisors will need to encourage verbal support, often in-person exchanges. In addition, YA peers may need to be reminded of professionalism in the workplace – and that looking at one’s smartphone to check social media feeds must be minimized during work hours.

3. **On-the-Job Relationships.** Supervision must also support the development of healthy YA peer relationships with youth and young clients, peer and non-peer coworkers, and supervisors. The supervision should review how relationships in the workplace are progressing, highlight positive relational experiences, discuss healthy relational boundaries, review social media policies, and model appropriate relational boundaries.

Managing YA peer-YA client relational boundaries gets tricky in small towns and neighborhoods, because YA peer and client social networks may naturally overlap. YA peers and supervisors must discuss the potential for community run-ins or off-hours client interactions. YA peers must directly ask their clients how they prefer to describe their relationship when these run-ins happen. Supervisors must systematically remind YA peers about confidentiality. Discussing off-hours interactions is necessary to support healthy YA peer relationships with their clients; YA peers will need coaching and support in maintaining healthy boundaries, especially with clients they are likely to interact with regularly outside of work.

4. **Wellness.** Supervision must support YA peers in building on-the-job resilience through engaging in self-care, processing challenging workplace situations, and providing resources for maintaining health and wellness on the job. When personal mental health issues and/or an inability to cope with on-the-job stress continually gets in the way of job performance, supervisors should work with the peer to develop an effective accommodation, and/or support him/her to identify an appropriate treatment program, often through referral to the agency’s Employee Assistance Program. For more information see chapter 4.
5. **Vocational Development.** Supervision must support YA peer career development. The YA peer role cannot be held forever. YA peers are also in the midst of their own vocational development – an experience that they can share in real-time with their clients. Supervisors must support YA peers in exploring and developing their own career plans, support any additional education engagement (including university, college, and/or certificate programs), and support vocational next-steps in relation to skill development and opportunities for future peer and non-peer roles at the agency or beyond. Most importantly, supervision meetings should review the practice of healthy, professional employment and relationship termination.

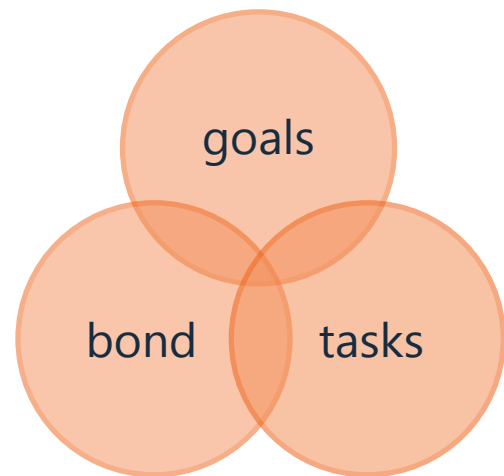
## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE YOUNG ADULT PEER-SUPERVISOR WORKING ALLIANCE

Peer support is based on the premise that the possession of lived experience with a serious mental health condition (SMHC) is the foundation for a strong working alliance.<sup>lxxii</sup> The working alliance is a collaboration based on the development of an attachment bond and a shared commitment to goals and tasks.<sup>lxxiii</sup> Stronger working alliances are associated with better outcomes and are found to be stronger predictors of outcomes than a therapeutic approach.

The goal of the YA peer supervisor is to be a coach, mentor, and sounding board for YA peer innovation and on-the-job struggles. Supervisors must build a strong working alliance with their YA peers in order for YA peer supervision to be effective.

Strong working alliances between YA peers and supervisors:

- Increase the likelihood that a YA peer will discuss any on-the-job struggles with their supervisor, thus allowing for opportunities to assess, develop solutions, and discuss accommodations.
- Increase the likelihood that YA peers will feel comfortable discussing the pros and cons of supervisor **suggestions and directives**.



**Essential Elements in the Working Alliance**



- Model relationship building skills with YA peers on how to work with YA clients. In order to build strong YA peer-supervisor working alliances, supervisors must engage in the following practices:
- Make transparent their personal desire to support YA peers in their work and development. Supervisors must be genuinely motivated in their role as a coach to keep YA peers engaged, challenged, and feeling supported.
- Express intention from day one, to support YA peers in building a foundation of skills that will benefit them far beyond their current role – and that career development and self-care will consistently be part of supervision.
- Be present when meeting with YA peers. Do not check emails and text messages during formal or informal supervision meetings. Put a sign on the door to ensure the meeting is not disrupted.
- Practice mutuality by sharing personal early employment experiences, as well as what you do to stay healthy on-the-job. Be honest. Practice doing what you expect YA peers to do on a daily basis. Recognize that mutuality is challenging, and role model healthy boundaries.
- Be accessible during the workday. When unavailable, provide names of colleagues that YA peers can connect with. This ensures a feeling of on-the-job support among YA peers.
- Recognize that not all YA peer-supervisor relationships result in strong working alliances. Support YA peers in connecting with a colleague with whom they can form a strong working alliance.
- Balance directives with open-ended discussion in supervision. Supervisor directives are key at times when agency policies directly dictate staff action (e.g., in the case of client confidentiality), and processing situations is important in supporting YA peer development. Open-ended questions include:
  - How should you respond/intervene? Why? How will the client likely respond to this approach: best-case scenario response vs. worst-case scenario response?
  - How would a more senior YA peer or other colleague respond/intervene? Why would they take that approach?
  - What are the pros and cons of responding in the way that you proposed?
 By asking these process questions in supervision rather than providing answers, YA peers develop problem solving skills and confidence in their role.

**Validation followed by solution-focused planning** is key in supporting the on-the-job success of YA peers. Supervisors must continue to normalize how working with vulnerable populations can impact worker wellbeing and share their personal stories of on-the-job resiliency. Supervisors can share how they have coped (well and not so well) with challenging work situations, how they acclimated to shifting job tasks and roles, and how they practice self-care on-the-job – all of which can aide in developing a strong working alliance with YA peers.

Following validation and sharing is solution-focused planning. Supervisors and YA peers must partner to develop solutions to challenging work situations. The agreed upon plans should have clear action steps for both the YA peer and the supervisor. By focusing on solutions after validation YA peers experience a mutual sense of agency in generating change, which will serve to strengthen your working alliance.

## BOLSTERING YOUNG ADULT PEER ON-THE-JOB RESILIENCY

All YA peers need support and coaching around how to maintain their own mental health and wellness while working. Individual and group clinical supervision provide excellent forums for processing on-the-job challenges. Supervisors should remain open to hearing about the perceived impact that the YA peer role has on YA peer's mental health and wellness. This is especially important, since remaining well at work may have little to do with the YA peer's capacity to manage stress and remain resilient. It may be agency-related issues that are contributing to YA peer health and wellness deterioration (see chapters 3, 8).

On-the-job resiliency for YA peers can be achieved through the fostering of “psychological capital”. Psychological capital is a positive psychological state of mind often characterized by a person's optimism, self-efficacy, optimism, perseverance, hopefulness and resilience.<sup>lxxiv</sup> It generates motivation to succeed, accomplish goals, and overcome barriers. One can be diagnosed with a SMHC and even be struggling with mental health symptoms, but also possess self-confidence and stress management skills to perform their peer job duties. Supervisors play a key role in supporting the development of psychological capital in YA peers. To boost YA peer psychological capital, the agency must embrace a culture of health and wellness, with a range of options to prevent and address work-related stress. For more information see chapter 4.

In addition, supervisors can:

- Role model and practice self-care at work and in supervision;
- Recognize small successes systematically;
- Remind peers that we are all learning through doing our job tasks and will occasionally have off-days where we are not performing at 100%; and
- Ensure that YA peers utilize paid time off, including personal, vacation, and sick days.

YA peers are especially at risk for compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, and burnout. There are two ways to prevent these negative work experiences through supervision:

1. Help YA peers set reasonable personal expectations for their personal capacity at work and the for impact that they desire to have on program clients; and,
2. Support YA peers in creating on-the-job self-care plans. Regularly discuss self-care plans and personal self-care practice during supervision.

There are many self-care resources available online for the helping professionals. One excellent resource is: <https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/resources/self-care-starter-kit.html>.

In order to prevent burnout and feelings of not being effective, YA peers need to understand that their job efforts have a purpose and are having an impact, even if it is not quite the impact a YA peer is personally envisioning for clients. For YA peers to directly observe the impact of their work with youth and young adult clients, it is beneficial to engage in exercises where they

concretely plan their intervention and then evaluate its impact on client. The following activity is simple and based on the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Worksheet (Appendix E).

First, in order to plan the intervention, the supervisor and YA peer must specify the following:

- **Activity Goal:** Individualized client goal that the YA peer is working with the client on;
- **Activity Description:** What the YA peer and client do together in order to make progress on the goal (include details like where, when, who, and how);
- **Goal Achievement Indicators:** How a YA peer and client will know that the activity was successful in making progress or achieving the goal (ideally defined in client's own words).

Then, the YA peer implements their activity with a client. In their next supervision meeting, the YA peer will discuss and document. For many mental health practitioners, this exercise may seem juvenile. However, the process of truly planning actions and evaluating them can be incredibly educational and empowering for YA peers who are new to service planning and delivery.

- **Reality Check:** What actually happened when the activity occurred? (What was the quality of the activity and the client's response to the activity?)
- **Goal Achievement:** Describe the measured results based on the planned goal achievement indicators.
- **Next Activity:** Based on what was learned through the activity delivery, experience, and impact, what will the next planned activity with the client be?

## TRAINING, SUPERVISION, AND SUPPORT FOR YOUNG ADULT PEER SUPERVISORS

Supervisors have a unique role where they are overseeing and mentoring YA peers, many of whom will be new to this type of professional role. YA peers may not be prepared for the nature of a role that demands connecting with and motivating YA clients through self-disclosure. The YA peer supervisor role should not be taken lightly – and those who are hired/appointed to this role must recognize the complexity of the role and be ready to address stigma, crisis, and trauma on a daily basis. Also, the YA peer supervisor may experience vicarious trauma during the process of developing their stories for strategic storytelling. It is important that agency administrations are aware of the unique role that YA peer supervisors have, as both champions of YA peers in the workplace, and as individuals who support YA peer on-the-job success through reflective supervision and coaching.

YA peer supervisors benefit from regular individual and/or group supervision – especially the opportunity to personally process their on-the-job struggles with supervising YA peers. If supervision for YA peer supervisors is not offered formally, supervisors must seek out mentorship from an individual with experience supervising peers. Also, YA peer supervisors benefit from

connecting with one another at state and national conferences, which can result in mutually beneficial relationships for processing YA peer supervisory experiences.

Agencies must provide training and on-going support for YA peer supervisors. Currently, there are few trainings available for supervising the work of YA peers; however, Dr. Klodnick has developed such a training for the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health, which can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

## **MOVING ON**

YA peers will not stay young adults forever. It is important that organizations focus on the development of YA peers, so that they can eventually move into adult peer/non-peer roles within the same organization, or transition to employment at a new organization or in a different field. Providing opportunities for former YA peers to network (for example, through annual reunions, conferences, or trainings) is a fantastic way for them to remain connected to a community where they are valued greatly. Individual supervisions should systematically include planning for future employment positions and review the practice of healthy, professional employment and relationship termination.