For a clinical supervisor, starting on the right foot requires knowing some of the basic principles and being familiar with the terminology related to the various components of clinical education.

The clinical supervisor’s functions

Clinical supervision refers to the process by which a student and an experienced practitioner work together with the goal of improving the student’s competencies. It is a complex process consisting of three elements: administration, education and support.

Administration:

This element is crucial to supervision because it is where the clinical supervisor sets the stage for creating an effective learning environment. More specifically, the clinical supervisor puts in place a structure that will enable the student to learn effectively. The supervisor helps the student to understand roles and responsibilities, to learn the boundaries of the profession and to develop an awareness of scope of practice. The clinical supervisor is responsible for the effectiveness of the process. The supervisor ensures the student complies with professional practice standards and rules of ethical conduct.

The clinical supervisor performs various administrative tasks, including determining the policies and procedures of the clinical setting that apply to the practicum, planning the progress of the practicum (schedule, patient case load, work space, communications, etc.) and other organizational tasks (Morton Cooper & Palmer, 2000; Sood & Driscoll, cited in Driscoll, 2010; Villeneuve. 1994).
Education:
This element covers the support provided by the clinical supervisor so that the student can integrate knowledge to practice and develop professional skills. The focus here is on the skills, behaviours and values required to ensure safe and effective clinical practice. In short, the role of the supervisor is to facilitate the student’s learning, to help identify resources and learning strategies, stimulate the generation of knowledge that in the end will enable the student to be part of the health care team. To this end, the supervisor adopts a structured environment that encourages reflection by the student. The clinical supervisor’s role also involves teaching the student about the profession, developing the student’s ability to respond to the needs of the patient, and explaining to the student the impact his behaviour has on others (Morton Cooper & Palmer, 2000; Malik, 2007; Sood & Driscoll, cited in Driscoll, 2010; Villeneuve, 1994).

Support:
The purpose of the support provided to the student in his clinical education experiences is to create an atmosphere where the student feels comfortable discussing his concerns and able to try new things and to make mistakes, without compromising patient safety. Support contributes to a positive learning climate in the new environment. In this way, the clinical supervisor improves the student’s ability to organize and accomplish his work and manage the stresses associated with learning in a new setting. The supervisor serves as a mentor. He teaches the student to build therapeutic relationships with patients with the goal of optimizing outcomes. He teaches the importance of maintaining good working relations with colleagues. The emotional support provided by the clinical supervisor should not be personal in nature, but should be offered during times of greatest stress (Morton Cooper & Driscoll, 2000; Bishop, 2007, Haynes, 2003; Malik, 2007; Sood & Driscoll, cited in Driscoll, 2010; Villeneuve, 1994).
The supervisor’s roles

The supervisor is a role model for the student as well as a resource and an advisor. Supervision of students requires the clinical supervisor to adopt several roles to optimize the student’s learning (Boutet & Rousseau, 2002).

The clinical supervisor adopts these different roles depending on student’s needs and learning progress. Therefore, the clinical supervisor is at times:

- Educator
- Coach
- Mentor
- Advisor
- Confrontationalist

CNFS, 2011 (adapted from Hagler and McFarlane, 1995)

We present these different roles while asking the following questions:

- When is the best time to use each of these roles?
- How does one provide clinical supervision that highlights these roles?

Educator

The supervisor teaches the student to make connections between practical situations and theoretical concepts.

When the student has . . .

- a theoretical base or limited or non existent experience
- already acquired basic skills but is in a new setting
- low confidence

How? The supervisor should . . .

- focus on learning and motivate the student to use specific new knowledge
- explain and demonstrate what to do or offer a model
- provide opportunities to practice under direct supervision
- provide specific rather than general skill related instructions
- suggest supplementary reading and resources
- provide frequent, specific and direct feedback
**Coach**

The clinical supervisor coaches the student so that he develops independence and improves his ability to problem solve independently.

When the student . . .

- must work on basic skills
- is able to identify problems but needs assistance
- is losing momentum
- asks for assistance because he is aware of his own weaknesses

How? The supervisor should . . .

- provide guidance by suggesting solutions
- increase the challenges through increasingly complex situations
- ask the student to set clinical objectives
- facilitate self-evaluation by asking questions
- encourage the identification of various options
- collaborate on planning and problem solving.

**Mentor**

The clinical supervisor mentors the student to contribute to the development of his professional responsibility and specific skills.

When the student . . .

- demonstrates mature professional thinking
- demonstrates an ability to find assistance
- is able to handle complex situations (adversity)
- makes a special contribution
- demonstrates collegiality

How? The supervisor should . . .

- refine and enhance the student’s abilities
- enable the student to work independently
- offer unique experiences
- offer more management experiences
- put the focus on the student’s contribution and development in the long term
Advisor

The clinical supervisor “advises” the student to foster increased commitment that could resolve a situation.

When . . .
- the roles of educator and coach have failed
- the student’s difficulties are interfering with performance
- rapid resolution of the situation is required
- the student requests it because he knows that he is having problems changing his behaviour

How? The supervisor should . . .
- focus on the problem and not the person
- be positive by encouraging and offering support
- be structured in his approach
- meet with the student for discussion where the student can talk freely

Confrontationalist

The clinical supervisor confronts the student to make him aware of the delicate situation that he is in and to get him to fully commit to finding solutions to correct the situation.

When . . .
- there are persistent performance problems
- the student appears unable to meet expectations
- the student is failing the clinical placement experience

How? The supervisor should . . .
- highlight the contradictions
- maintain a positive, supportive and determined attitude
- remain calm

The following sites offer additional useful information on the importance of supervision, the student’s responsibilities and the steps in supervision, as well as many useful tools for clinical education activities including how to write a learning objective, a competency checklist, an observation grid, etc.: www.mcgill.ca/hssaccess/two/supervision, www.practiceeducation.ca and www.preceptor.ca.