Keeping children safe is the fundamental starting point for providing OSHC of high quality. Although your role includes much more than supervision, your most important task is to supervise children. The term supervise brings to mind other words such as manage, direct, and oversee. Supervision in OSHC includes making sure that children are safe, that they are interacting with one another in respectful and caring ways, that they are constructively engaged with the environment and with each other, and that they are feeling cared for. In short, supervision means ensuring children's wellbeing.

Below are some suggestions for ensuring effective supervision.

• Work as a team. Staff who talk to each other and work together rather than as individuals, each doing their own thing, provide better supervision. Have a system for deciding who is responsible for what. You may divide responsibility by parts of the room or outdoor area or by activities. You may each take particular responsibility for keeping an eye on certain children. However, division of responsibility still requires staff to have an awareness of the whole space and all of the children.

• Think carefully about experiences that are going to be offered simultaneously, and try to ensure that there is a balance between those needing close supervision and those that don’t. Too many activities happening at once that require an adult’s full attention, either because they are complex or involve an element of risk, are a recipe for disaster.

• Have a variety of reasonable choices to attract children. Although you can never predict with complete accuracy, try to ensure that the range of opportunities available will lead to children selecting different things, meaning that no one piece of equipment or activity will attract too many children. This will avoid creating a situation where accidents and unpleasant interactions are likely. This is a challenge when you have a new activity, a favourite crowd pleaser, or an exciting new piece of equipment. It’s important to plan other things that will compete with it for children’s attention so that children spread out. When there is something that is much more popular than other things on offer, devise a system that will give every interested child a turn eventually. Keep your promise about this, so that children build up trust and confidence that it will work out fairly.

• Don’t get so caught up in an activity that you lose sight of what’s going on around you. One of the many challenges of being an OSHC worker is engaging with children in meaningful ways while always being aware of the big picture. It’s hard to do both, especially when it’s an activity that you really enjoy or when you are new and building up your supervision skills. Being able to do this well comes with experience and increasing confidence.

• Place yourself so that you can continuously scan the environment, including activities or children that are not in your area of responsibility. Always try to face outward, into the space, rather than having your back turned. Move around the space over time, touching base with most children.

• Be aware of difficult times of the day, when children are tired or at loose ends and accidents or unpleasant interactions may occur. Take these into account in planning. For example, relaxing individual or small group activities may be more appropriate at the end of the day, and vigorous outdoor games and activities earlier when children are fresher.

• Identify children who may have a particular short-, medium- or long-term need for supervision. This may be because they are unwell, are having difficulty operating in a group, have limited English, have a disability, do not find it easy to get involved in activities, are going through a period of being particularly aggressive, or are new to the service. Make provisions for these children in a helpful and respectful way, without communicating that you are expecting them to do something wrong, have an accident or need help. Ensure that these children get helpful supervision that supports them to deal constructively with opportunities.
• Use your ears as well as your eyes. Tones of conversations can be a clue that something unpleasant is about to happen.

• Remember that prevention is much better for you and for the children than dealing with a near or actual accident, incident or fight. Try to anticipate difficulties and work against them. Keep in mind that sometimes just your presence nearby helps children to stay on track.

• Ensure that there are a number of interesting, enjoyable and appropriate things for children to do. Not having enough equipment, requiring a higher level of sharing than children are capable of, or only having the same old tired things to do creates a need for greater supervision.

• Think about how the environment affects the need for supervision. Are there problem spaces? Is there enough space? Is there too much space? Is there just one big space so that children are ‘all in together’ too much of the time? What can you do about problems created by the environment?

• Eliminate unnecessary waiting, or too much regimentation, as these increase the need for supervision. Children with nothing to do or children not given sufficient freedom are likely to engage in undesirable behaviour.

• Get children on-side and informed. Are children clear about the rules and guidelines? Do they feel some ownership of them? Some supervision issues can arise simply because children aren’t clear about the rules. Supervision is more than keeping bad things from happening. It also involves adding to children’s play, gathering information about what children are interested in to inform future planning, making suggestions, helping to solve problems and overcome obstacles, and redirecting children as required. If you find yourself feeling like a prison guard, pacing around, standing over children, and issuing orders, consider this as a sign that you and your colleagues need to look closely at your service and rethink what you are doing.

It’s important for children to know that the adults are looking after them. Being appropriately supervised supports feelings of security. Children need to know that they can get help when they need it and that adults are interested in what they are doing and their wellbeing. This supports appropriate and desirable behaviour.

Links to Shared visions
Chapter 4: A profile of children five to twelve
Chapter 5: Relationships, pp. 59, 60
Supervision

Questions and reflections
1. What arrangements do you and your colleagues make to ensure that children are adequately supervised? Are there ways that this could be improved?

2. What are the main problem times or areas that require you to intervene to ensure children’s wellbeing? Why is this so? Is there anything you can do about it?

3. Are you able most of the time to combine supervision with interacting in a warm, supportive way with children? If not, what help do you need to do this?