

# Coaching and mentoring – Building bridges to best practice

*Effective coaching helps educators become more intentional in their practice, helps facilitate use of best practices, moves educators toward a better understanding of children’s overall development and needs, helps educators develop a better understanding of ways to have rich interactions with children, and provides a platform for supporting children’s positive outcomes in all developmental areas.*

Providing quality professional development through coaching is a key factor in improving the knowledge and practice of those caring for children, and in improving outcomes for children. The ultimate goal of supporting educators in their work with young children is to strengthen their skills and practices so that they become better educators.

Research shows that the rich interactions teachers have with children are critical in helping children develop. Educators, who provide high quality interactions from a strong, consistent base of social and emotional support, are better equipped to help children develop and succeed. For example, educators who consistently interact with and respond to children in a sensitive way by talking about and modeling feelings, by supporting children’s discussion of feelings, and by supporting the process of problem solving, significantly contribute to children’s overall social and emotional development. So, how do we help equip educators with the skills they need to succeed in their roles with children? One of those ways is by providing effective coaching and mentoring.

## What are coaching and mentoring?

Coaching and mentoring have been defined in a variety of ways. Coaching has been referred to as “an adult learning strategy that is used to build the capacity of a colleague to improve existing abilities, develop new skills, and gain a deeper understanding of his or her practices for use in current and future situations.” (Rush and Shelden 2005) Mentoring is defined by NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) as “a relationship-based process between colleagues in similar professional roles, with a more-experienced individual with adult learning knowledge and skills, the mentor, providing guidance and example to the less-experienced protegee or mentee.” Mentoring refers to a general practice, while coaching implies the use of a more specific set of skills and processes that are used to help teachers move from understanding to practice.

### It all starts with building relationships

Building and maintaining strong relationships is a key component to effective coaching and mentoring, whether you are a co-worker or a supervisor. Educators who are supported in their work with young children are better able to focus their energy on improving and developing their skills.

**Building relationships begins with listening and asking open-ended questions.** When educators feel that they are heard and supported, they are more likely to accept feedback and more likely to move toward positive change.

**Approaching relationships in a collaborative way builds trust and sets the tone for open discussion.** When educators view the coaching relationship as a partnership, they are more likely to engage in the learning process and to seek an active role in improving their skills.

**Identifying and supporting the educator’s existing strengths provides a platform for improving practice.** When educators view their skills as an asset, they are more empowered to make positive changes.

## Why is coaching important?

Effective coaching helps educators become more intentional in their practice, helps facilitate use of best practices, moves educators toward a better understanding of children's overall development and needs, helps educators develop a better understanding of ways to have rich interactions with children, and provides a platform for supporting children's positive outcomes in all developmental areas.

When thinking about effective coaching, consider the goals for coaching. For example: Is coaching intended to

move educators toward general best practice, such as supporting children's development of emergent literacy skills? Is coaching intended to teach practices and strategies related to a specific developmental domain like social-emotional development; for example, how an educator supports children's development of self-regulation and problem solving? Is coaching intended to support a specific curriculum or instructional content like Creative Curriculum or HighScope? When coaches understand the reasons for their coaching, they can provide clear and specific information about what is expected in practice.



## What's involved in coaching?

Helping educators to improve their practice involves intentionally thinking about the processes that are in place to support effective coaching. Observation and assessment, reflection, feedback, and development of an action plan are all part of a supportive coaching process. The coaching process is cyclical, with educators receiving support and feedback on a regular basis. Support may come in a variety of forms including: feedback and discussion with a specific focus, such as how to improve transitions in order to avoid behavior challenges; coach modeling such as leading an engaging, short transition; problem solving around challenges such as discussing the specific details of a child who has difficulty transitioning; or written information about specific topics or strategies such as sharing a tip page on ways to help minimize transitions and improve existing transitions.

### 1. Begin with observation and assessment:

Coaches use specific examples from observation to frame discussions around the educator's strengths or challenges, and to start discussion with educators about reflecting on their own practice. For example, what happened during the observation, what went well, and what might be done differently. Observations can be made using informal and formal assessment. The type of assessment used may vary depending on program goals and individual educator goals, but coaches should use some type of assessment to provide clear and specific feedback to educators.

### 2. Feedback sessions with reflection:

During a feedback session, the coach provides supportive feedback first, before reflecting with the educator on challenges. Encouraging educator reflection during a feedback session helps educators think about their classroom practices and interactions with children, and helps educators to become more engaged in the collaborative process. Specific examples from observation are used to highlight positives, or as a springboard for discussion of challenges and how to problem solve those challenges. For example, a coach observes an educator reading interactively with children and involving the children in book discussion to support language development. The coach also observes the educator during lunchtime, and notes that she is not talking much with the children. During the

feedback session, the coach praises the educator for her interactive book reading. She points out the specific strategies the educator used during book reading to support language development. She then asks the educator if she has noticed other times of the day when she might be able to use those same strategies to support language development. The educator shares that she could use more of the strategies during center time, but does not mention mealtimes. The coach praises and supports the educator's reflection. The coach also points out that mealtimes provide another opportunity for conversation and building children's language skills.

### 3. Develop an action plan:

The educator and coach jointly develop an action plan based on specific information from observations and assessment. The plan includes clear, attainable goals, and has a focus on specific strategies or practices to reach those goals.

Effective coaching helps educators develop as professionals so that they can support children. Coaching takes time and commitment, but reaps rewards with benefits for both educators and children. And it all starts with building relationships.



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