Coaching in Child Welfare

Capacity Building
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Child welfare agencies and related human service organizations increasingly recognize coaching as a powerful workforce strategy for reinforcing knowledge and skills and improving implementation of desired practices (Akin, 2016; Hafer & Brooks, 2013; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). This issue brief supports child welfare administrators, managers, and supervisors in understanding the potential role of coaching and considerations for its use to support their workforce.

Drawing from available research, this brief discusses:

- Coaching basics: Definition, characteristics, and functions
- Effectiveness of coaching
- Coaching models and stages
- Coaching strategies and techniques to facilitate learning
- Coaches and coachees
- Considerations for developing and implementing coaching programs

> "Coaching is unlocking people's potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them to learn."
>
> — Whitmore, 2009, p. 10; Gallwey, 1974/2008

Coaching Basics

Knowing how to apply coaching in a child welfare agency begins with understanding what coaching is, what it looks like, and what role it plays.

Definition and Characteristics

While there is no single, standard definition of "coaching," many definitions—like the one below—emphasize the use of a structured learning process aimed at helping individuals achieve their goals. As reflected in the definition, coaching supports the coachee to set and achieve goals and aids the individual's performance as well as the agency's performance (National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement [NRCOI], 2012).

> "Coaching is a process by which the coach creates structured, focused interaction with learners and uses appropriate strategies, tools, and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the learner, making a positive impact on the organization."
>
> — Hafer & Brooks, 2013, p. 72, adapted from Mink, Owen & Mink, 1993; Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2010

The relationship between the coach and coachee is central to the coaching process and establishes a "working partnership" focused on addressing the specific needs of the coaching recipient (Gregory & Levy, 2010). Coaching typically occurs over time and is customized to facilitate self-directed learning (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute [NCWWI], 2013). Although the terms "coaching" and "mentoring" are sometimes used interchangeably, coaching is typically more task oriented and job specific while mentoring is often directed more generally to professional development over longer timeframes (Brittain & Potter, 2009).

While coaching takes many forms, it typically builds capacity through the following practices (Rush & Shelden, 2012):

- Joint planning to establish goals and expectations
- Observation
- Action/practice
- Reflection
- Feedback

Core Functions

Organizations generally use coaching to improve individual and organizational performance (American Management Association, 2008). More specifically, coaching supports the following interrelated activities:

- **Transfer of learning from training to practice.** As part of a continuum of learning, coaching can help child welfare staff link new information and skills to their everyday context and apply them while facing real-world challenges (NCWWI, 2013).

> Coaching supports individuals in moving from "new learner" to "master practitioner."
>
> — NCWWI, 2013, p. 5

- **Implementation of evidence-based practices.** Experts in implementation science consider coaching to be one of nine implementation "drivers" that are instrumental in bringing about needed behavioral changes (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015; Fixsen et al., 2005). Coaching may be particularly useful during early implementation stages in providing reinforcement when practitioners are just beginning to use new interventions and may easily become frustrated (Akin, 2016).
- **Skill building.** Coaching can support workers in developing specific skills and building competencies that lead to desired outcomes. Coaching can be used to build skills in specific practice responsibilities— such as conducting forensic interviews, engaging families, and implementing quality contacts—or for taking on new roles and building leadership skills.
- **Problem solving and staying on track.** Working as partners, coaches can provide feedback to help coachees identify and resolve challenges and explore solutions. Through reflection on strengths, coaches help coachees build confidence in their judgment and skills.
- **Modeling behaviors.** Coaches can demonstrate engagement and partnership approaches that workers can then use with families to support behavior change.

Effectiveness of Coaching

Literature reviews have documented the effectiveness of coaching across several disciplines, including education, health, mental health, and organizational management (Akin, 2016; Fixsen et al., 2005; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2014). For example, a meta-analysis of 18 organizational studies found that coaching by professional coaches from outside an organization contributed to improvements in staff functioning. Researchers identified significant positive effects across studies in performance and skills, self-regulated direction toward goals, general well-being, and work attitudes among the individuals coached (Theeboom, Beersma, & van Vianen, 2014).

Research supports the use of coaching to extend the impact of training and the application of newly acquired knowledge and skills (Antle, Sullivan, Barbee, & Christensen, 2010; Fixsen et al., 2005; Joyce & Showers, 2002; NCWWI, 2013.) In one study, 120 child welfare workers learning about solution-based casework were assigned to one of three groups: classroom training only, classroom training with reinforcement through supervisory support and coaching, and no training. Researchers reviewed child welfare case records to examine the effect of the three approaches on assessment and case planning. They found that training with coaching resulted in a higher level of transfer of learning as compared with training alone or no training (Antle et al., 2010).

Studies also point to coaching as an effective strategy for supporting implementation of new programs and practices (Chaffin, Hecht, Bard, Silovsky, & Beasley, 2012; Fixsen et al. 2005; Meyers, Durlak, & Wandersman, 2012). In a qualitative study of child welfare workers who received coaching while delivering parent management training to families of children in foster care, recipients viewed coaching as beneficial to (Akin, 2016):

- Supporting practitioners through strengths-oriented feedback
- Promoting skill building through collaboration and active learning strategies
- Enabling problem solving for appropriate use and adaptation of evidence-based interventions
- Providing an accountability mechanism for high-fidelity implementation

Interviews in another small qualitative study revealed that long-term coaching was viewed as a valuable asset to child welfare caseworkers learning to implement motivational interviewing skills. Caseworkers reported that coaches were particularly helpful when they were "stuck" or frustrated in their efforts to engage families in change (Snyder, Lawrence, Weatherholt, & Nagy, 2012).

In an outcome study with a randomized experimental design, researchers examined long-term outcomes, including repeat maltreatment, of a home-based services program with a coaching component. Among cases of 2,175 parents with histories of child neglect, the study compared coached and uncoached implementation by home visitors and found support for services accompanied by coaching. Findings suggested that coaching was especially valuable in more challenging or unusual cases (Chaffin et al., 2012).

While the research base is growing and available findings are encouraging, there are several limitations. First, there is limited rigorous research examining coaching effectiveness specific to child welfare settings. Second, while the literature points to the importance of coaching, it is relatively sparse on specific coaching components or functions that contribute to coaches' effectiveness (Akin, 2016; Fixsen et al, 2005).

Coaching Models and Stages

Child welfare agencies and other organizations can choose from an array of different coaching models. Most models tend to emphasize setting goals and expectations, facilitating reflection, and assessing progress.

Coaching Models for Use in Child Welfare

Based on a literature review and interviews with child welfare professionals, Hafer, Hatton, and Brooks (2013) identified four models they considered appropriate for use in child welfare: Child Welfare Skills-Based Coaching, CLEAR, GROW, and Flow of Coaching. The models provide a structure for the coaching process and define specific stages or steps for coaches to use. Exhibit 1 provides a summary of the focus and stages of each of these models along with one other model developed by the Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center (ACCWIC), which has been applied in child welfare agencies in several states. While the models are generally similar, agencies and coaches are encouraged to find the right fit for their needs.[1]

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[1] For more information on coaching models, see "The Coaching Toolkit for Child Welfare Practice" at
https://ncwwi.org/files/Mentoring_and_Coaching/The_Coaching_Toolkit_for_Child_Welfare_Practice.pdf

Exhibit 1. Five Coaching Models[2]

Child Welfare Skills-Based Coaching Model

Focus: Skills-based coaching with emphasis on observations and demonstrations

Stages:
1. Initial interest
2. Joint planning
3. Demonstration, observation, and action
4. Individual analysis and self-reflection
5. Facilitated reflection and feedback
6. Evaluation

May be especially useful for: Building identified skills for a specific task or for a new position

Source: Hafer, Hatton, & Brooks, 2013, adapted from Rush & Shelden, 2006 and Gallacher, 1997

CLEAR Model

Focus: Performance or development coaching with emphasis on coaching discussions

Stages:
1. **C**ontracting (setting goals and ground rules)
2. **L**istening (asking questions for reflection)
3. **E**xploring (helping learners understand and create new possibilities)
4. **A**ction (supporting learners in moving forward)
5. **R**eview (reinforcing progress and planning for the future)

May be especially useful for: Enhancing role performance or promoting growth

Source: Hawkins & Smith, 2006

Flow of Coaching Model

Focus: Performance or development coaching with emphasis on enrollment. Enrollment refers to the coachee's commitment and buy-in as a prerequisite of learning

Stages:
1. Establish relationship
2. Recognize openings for partnership
3. Observe and assess
4. Enroll
5. Coach (determine scope, offer support, provide feedback, facilitate reflections, and set new goals)

May be especially useful for: Creating a strong foundation for a coach and coachee to work together

Source: Flaherty, 2010

GROW Model

Focus: Performance or development coaching with emphasis on goal setting

Stages*:
1. **G**oal setting (help specify concrete goals)
2. **R**eality checking (examine situation)
3. **O**ption exploration (identify strategies to achieve goals)
4. **W**rap-up (also referred to as "way forward")
* Modified by Grant (2011) to include 5th step, of Review and Evaluate

May be especially useful for: Situations in which learning objectives are not predefined and attention is needed on goal setting and action planning

Source: Whitmore, 1992/2009

ACCWIC Coaching Model

Focus: Performance or development coaching with an emphasis on strength-based practice

Stages:
1. Center together (become present and focus attention without distraction)
2. Clarify the focus
3. Identify the goal (through listening, reflection, and questioning)
4. Develop an action plan
5. Assess progress (holding coach and coachee accountable)

May be especially useful for: Modeling behaviors that can be replicated by caseworkers in their work with families

Source: ACCWIC, 2013

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[2] Adapted from "Comparison of the Four Coaching Models" in Northern California Training Academy, Center for Human Services, and Casey Family Programs. (2012). *The coaching toolkit for child welfare practice*. CA: University of California, UC Davis Extension, Center for Human Services.

Common Coaching Steps

Regardless of the model used, coaching often includes the steps shown in Exhibt 2 (Bernotavicz, 2013). As shown, the coaching process typically begins with steps in which the coach and coachee clarify the focus and set clear goals, agree on expectations, and plan next steps. Following a deliberate learning process that often includes asking questions and other learning strategies, coach and coachee monitor progress toward goals. While the steps are illustrated consecutively, they do not always occur in a linear fashion and sometimes will "loop back" so that steps occur multiple times.

Exhibit 2. Core Steps in Coaching*

Monitor progress toward goals

Facilitate learning

Ask questions

Identify steps

Set expectations

Clarify focus
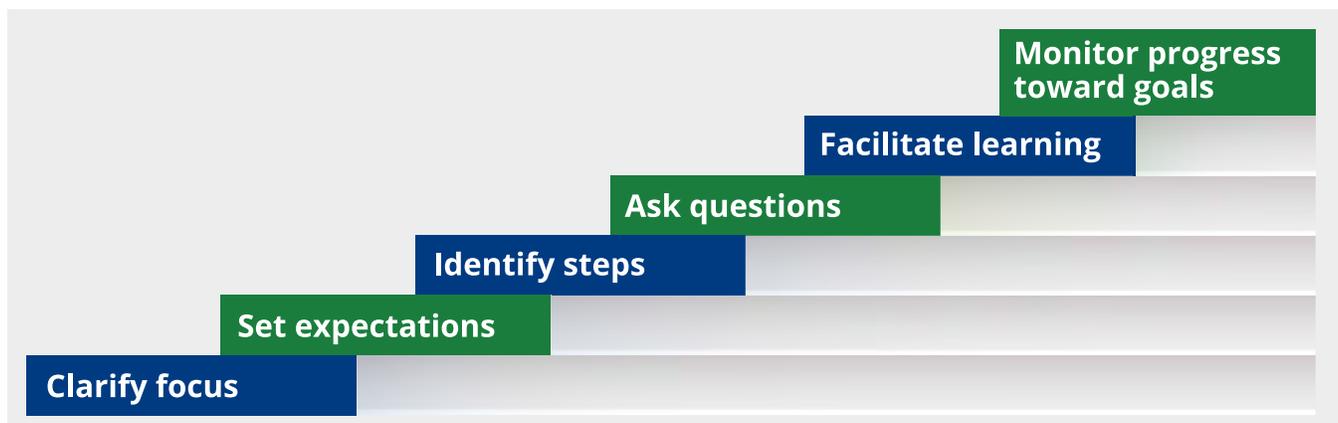
*Adapted from steps identified by Bernotavicz, 2013, p. 109.

Coaching Strategies and Techniques to Facilitate Learning

Whether implementing a formal coaching model or employing coaching approaches informally (e.g., between supervisor and worker or between peers), coaches use a variety of techniques to facilitate learning, including:

- Asking questions and engaging in active listening, reflection, and discussion
- Demonstrating a skill, supporting practice, and observing
- Providing timely, specific, and constructive feedback
- Creating awareness of opportunities
- Recognizing past successes and contributions
- Encouraging self-directed change
- Connecting coachee strengths to skill development and addressing new challenges
- Reviewing progress against goals and encouraging accountability

During the coaching process, both coach and coachee may identify "coachable moments"—defined as "natural opportunities where the learner steps outside of the experience to examine the event with the goal of integrating knowledge or enhancing a skill" (Brittain & Potter, 2009, p. 286).

In addition, coaches frequently draw from other approaches commonly applied in child welfare practice, briefly described in Exhibit 3. In these practices, a coach does not directly offer advice but rather guides the coachee to identify their own solutions (Beasley, 2012).

Exhibit 3. Practices Integrated in Coaching

Practice	Description
Solution-Focused Practice	A strength-based approach that purposefully guides positive change through emphasis on personal resilience and resources. This approach focuses on future goals and solution building rather than problem solving (Grant, 2011; Northern California Training Academy, 2013).
Reflective Practice	An approach that encourages learners to reflect on their experiences and performance, apply meaning, and "drive their own learning process" (Northern California Training Academy, 2013, p. 130).
Motivational Interviewing	A "collaborative conversation style for strengthening a person's own motivation and commitment to change" (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p.12). Through an empathetic and collaborative relationship that supports self-efficacy, a coach helps the coachee explore ambivalence and motivates for change (Beasley, 2012).

Coaches and Coachees

The decision of who will provide coaching will vary with agency needs, circumstances, and preferences. Coaches may be:

- External experts contracted by the agency (e.g., trainers, technical assistance providers, or consultants)
- Experienced peers
- Supervisors or managers

Each approach has advantages and disadvantages. For example, external coaches may be perceived as more credible and objective, but they may be more expensive, and as outsiders to the organization they may not be as familiar with the environment. Experienced peers may offer insights from having "been in the same shoes," yet may have less availability and incentives for coaching. Finally, managers and supervisors can build on their existing roles and relationships at lower costs, but sometimes the lines of authority and investment in performance can make it difficult for them to provide a "safe space" for learning and growth (NRCOI, 2012).

Characteristics of Coaches

Four characteristics are especially valuable in the choice of coaches (NRCOI, 2012):

- Capacity to build relationships and trust
- Talent for listening, communicating effectively, and helping others learn
- Ability to coach in a flexible manner tailored to the recipient
- Shared knowledge base with the coachees

> The coach is not the expert or the judge, but [a] partner for learning and change.
>
> — ACCWIC, 2013, p.12

Supervisors as Coaches

In some agencies, child welfare supervisors serve as coaches for caseworkers in their units. This approach leverages the established relationship and interactions between supervisor and worker. Coaching supports the supervisor's educational role in helping workers learn new tasks, apply needed skills, and tackle challenges in their cases (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). In serving as coaches, it is important that supervisors devote dedicated time to coaching in addition to their regular supervision and make a clear distinction between coaching activities and performance evaluation activities (Rush & Shelden, 2012). In addition, supervisors should be mindful that while both coaching and supervision may support staff development, formal coaching specifically involves elements of joint planning, goal identification, and implementation of action steps to achieve goals (Siebel & Ouellette, 2014).

Researchers have explored variables that contribute to supervisor-staff coaching relationships. One study of 155 supervisors and 729 direct reports who completed an online survey identified the following strategies as particularly important to quality coaching relationships (Gregory & Levy, 2011):

- Building trust
- Demonstrating empathy
- Devoting attention to each worker's individual needs
- Creating a positive feedback environment

In their work with children, youth, and families, frontline staff also rely on these strategies as well other coaching techniques, such as active listening, exploratory questioning, and building shared accountability for change (North Carolina Division of Social Services, 2011). As a result, supervisory-worker coaching can serve as a valuable model for caseworker coaching of family members.

Characteristics of Coachees

To be effective, coaches need coachees who are willing to learn (Bernatovicz, 2013). Whether participation in coaching is voluntary or required, participants must want to participate, be open to reflection and feedback, and be motivated to improve (NRCOI, 2012). Coachees also must feel comfortable sharing their strengths and challenges with the coach.

Considerations for Developing and Implementing Coaching Programs

At the beginning stages of planning and developing a coaching program, child welfare administrators and managers should consider three key areas and related aspects (NRCOI, 2012):

- **Program**
  - What is the purpose of coaching? What are agency goals for coaching?
  - What coaching model or structure will be used? How will recipients receive coaching? Over what time period will coaching occur? Will coaching be done one-on-one, in groups, or both?
  - What are the roles and expectations?
  - How will success be defined? What type of evaluation will assess coaching?
- **Coaches**
  - Who will serve as coaches (e.g., internal managers/supervisors, experienced peers, or external experts)? What are the relationships between coach and coachee?
  - What characteristics and skills should coaches have?
  - What training and support will coaches receive?
- **Coachees**
  - How will willing and motivated learners be selected?

Effective coaching also requires a favorable coaching culture. This culture reflects a "safe and supportive environment that provides a place to reflect and think" (Hafer & Brooks, 2013, p. 75). In such a culture, leadership embraces growth and development and there is an atmosphere of trust and experimentation (Bernatovich, 2013).

Conclusion

Coaching can be a valuable tool for building capacity of the child welfare workforce to improve their skills, transfer learning into practice, and enhance performance. This brief provides a foundation from which agency administrators and managers can build to inform the development and implementation of tailored coaching solutions that meet their agencies' needs. Agency staff can access additional information and insights on coaching from the resources listed below, the Capacity Building Center for States, and the experiences of peers in other jurisdictions. As agency leaders build a coaching culture and introduce coaches in selected areas, there is a potential "domino effect" as the coaches model coaching behaviors to coachees who can then become coaches themselves for other agency staff or families in their caseloads. Ultimately, coaching can support performance improvement and improved agency outcomes.

> Creating systemic change with coaching requires:
> • Coaching mindset
> • Coaching skill set
> • Coaching culture
> — ACCWIC, 2013

Resources for More Information

Coaching Resource Search
National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (ongoing updates)
http://ncwwi.org/index.php/component/jak2filter/?Itemid=396&isc=1&searchword=coach
Provides links to training guides, webinars, reports, and other resources related to coaching and mentoring in child welfare.

Coaching Strategies
National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, Leadership Academy for Supervisors, Take the Lead! Series
https://ncwwi.org/index.php/take-the-lead-series
Offers information, tips, and exercises to improve supervisors' knowledge of the coaching process and strategies.

Coaching Toolkit for Child Welfare Practice
Northern California Training Academy and Casey Family Programs (2012)
https://ncwwi.org/files/Mentoring_and_Coaching/The_Coaching_Toolkit_for_Child_Welfare_Practice.pdf
Describes research on coaching, coaching tips, and skill development and offers videos featuring demonstrations on coaching.

Coaching in Child Welfare Resources [webpage]
National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement (2012)
http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/coaching.htm
Links to state coaching documents including coaching agreements, plans, and resources for coaches.

Development, Implementation, and Assessment Toolkit, Section 7, "Develop or Adapt Implementation Supports—Coaching to Build Knowledge and Skills" [online module; registration required]
Permanency Innovations Initiative Training and Technical Assistance Project (PII-TTAP) (2016)
https://learn.childwelfare.gov/toolkit/section-7
Describes coaching methods and strategies to support implementation of an innovation.

International Coach Federation [website]
http://coachfederation.org/
Provides information, tools, and a blog for coaches in multiple settings.

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