



Tips and Techniques for Effective Coaching Interactions

Dathan D. Rush
M'Lisa L. Shelden

Coaching Characteristics

- Joint planning
- Observation
- Action/practice
- Reflection
- Feedback

INTRODUCTION

This *BriefCASE* contains strategies to assist individuals using a coaching style of interaction to refine their skills when supporting parents, care providers, and colleagues. Coaching is an adult learning strategy that is used to build the capacity of a parent or 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. Coaching has five research-based practice characteristics that lead to the intended outcomes: (1) joint planning, (2) observation, (3) action/practice, (4) reflection, and (5) feedback. Listed below are 25 tips and techniques designed to address common coaching challenges and ensure effective implementation of the five characteristics of coaching.

TIPS AND TECHNIQUES

- 1) Always begin a coaching conversation by reviewing the joint plan from the previous visit.
- 2) At the beginning of the visit, after reviewing the joint plan from the previous conversation, jointly determine the time constraints of the visit and prioritize how to best spend the time.
- 3) Primarily use open-ended questions rather than closed questions (i.e., questions that can be answered with a "yes" or "no" response).
- 4) Closed-ended questions that require only a yes/no response should be reserved for situations when you need to ask permission and/or avoid making an assumption. For example, "Would you be comfortable having me watch you feed him?"
- 5) Become comfortable with a few question stems from the Framework for Reflective Questioning that fit your style or personality. Write these question stems on a note pad that is easily visible during your coaching conversation. If you get stuck during your conversation, then you can quickly refer to your notepad for a few questions you know work. This will help avoid asking too many awareness questions and assist in moving to analysis, alternatives, and the joint plan (action questions).
- 6) Avoid embedding a suggestion in a question. For example, "What would happen if...? What about...? How about trying...? What do you think about trying...? How would you feel about...?"
- 7) Avoid asking questions in order to get the person you are coaching to agree with what you are thinking. This often involves the predetermination

BriefCASE is an electronic publication of the Center for the Advanced Study of Excellence in Early Childhood and Family Support Practices, Family, Infant and Preschool Program, J. Iverson Riddle Developmental Center, Morganton, NC. CASE is an applied research center focusing on the characteristics of evidence-based practices and methods for promoting utilization of practices informed by research.



of an answer or idea and a series of questions that lead the person being coached to this predetermined idea or answer.

8) Give the person being coached time to think and respond to the question being asked. Learn to be comfortable with silence. When faced with silence, you should not feel compelled to repeat the question, clarify the question, fill the quiet with talking, or immediately jump to making suggestions or sharing ideas.

9) Learn how to read non-verbal cues. When asking reflective questions, be aware of how the person you are coaching is reacting to the process. If you sense or perceive that the person is uncomfortable or even annoyed, reflect on your coaching skills. For example, are you drilling the person you are coaching, coaxing him/her to answer in the way you want, not allowing for thinking time, or not listening to the person's answers?

10) When the person you are coaching says, "Just tell me what I need to do" or "Don't coach me, just tell me," respond by letting the person know that in order to be most helpful, you at least have to get an idea of what s/he already knows or is doing so you can match the information you will share to his/her interests, needs, lifestyle, etc. People are more likely to act on information if they have a part in developing it and it is tailored to their specific situations, which is what you are trying to do.

11) When the person you are coaching responds to a reflective question by saying, "I don't know," you have two options: (a) If you think the person knows the answer to the question based on previous information the person has shared or an action on his/her part that you observed, then rephrase the question to ensure the person understands or point out the example; or (b) If

you do not know the person's level of knowledge related to the question being asked, share information, and then ask the person how that matches his/her current understanding, priorities, ideas, etc.

12) When coaching someone who is really quiet/shy, do not be intimidated or overly concerned by periods of silence. Individuals who are internal processors like to think about what they are going to say before responding. Learn to be quiet and allow silence for the other person to get his/her thoughts together. Be sure to ask open-ended as opposed to yes/no questions. Ask the person to give you specific examples or elaborate on his/her responses.

13) Coaching child care providers and preschool teachers must occur "on the fly" as they are preparing for the next activity, transitioning between activities, or involved in an activity in which you can take part and help with the other children while s/he interacts with the child who is the reason for your support. Since child care providers and preschool teachers are so busy, they must see the benefit of having you in their classroom and working with them.

14) If the person being coached has a tendency to jump from topic to topic, the coach should ask the coaching partner if (a) it would be alright to develop a plan around one topic before moving to the next, (b) he or she is ready to change topics or needs to finish the previous topic before moving on, (c) the coach could write the new topic down and then promise to come back to it upon completion of the previous topic, or (d) he or she prefers to come to resolution and a plan for all topics at the conclusion of the conversation.



15) Coaching through an interpreter requires explaining the process of coaching to the interpreter preferably before the coaching conversation. The interpreter must understand that you need him/her to interpret everything you say to the parent and everything the parent says back to you.

16) Supervisors may use coaching with the people they supervise and a coach can also be the supervisor of a person s/he is coaching. When using coaching, a supervisor must be clear with the other person whether the present conversation is intended to be a coaching or supervisory conversation. Coaching conversations are for the purpose of learning and development, whereas supervisory conversations are about specific job performance in relation to expectations as well as program policies and procedures.

17) Observation of the parent or care provider practicing or using recently discussed ideas and strategies is a critical characteristic of the coaching process and provides an opportunity to promote further reflection and provide feedback. Some questions and comments to prompt an opportunity for observation are: "Let's try it. Can we try that now? Would you mind showing me how you do that? How would that look/how does that look when you do it? How about you try? How about you take a turn? Let's see the two of you do it? Would you be comfortable trying this while I watch?"

18) Modeling a behavior or activity with the child for the parent or care provider may be done to determine how a jointly developed idea or strategy might work or



to show the parent or care provider how what you are talking about might look. Prior to modeling, (a) explain to the parent or care provider what you are going to do and why, (b) give the parent or care provider something specific to watch for or to do, (c) debrief with the parent or care provider what you did with the child, (d) invite the parent or care provider to try what you modeled, (e) reflect on how this worked when the parent did it, and (f) develop a plan for how this can happen when you are not present.

19) Affirmative feedback is non-committal acknowledgement used to let the person you are coaching know that you hear and understand what s/he is saying without agreeing, disagreeing, or making any other type of judgment. Examples of affirmative feedback include, but are not limited to: "I see, I understand, I know what you mean, I hear what you are saying, What I am hearing you say is _____, You seem really (label the emotion you are perceiving)."

20) Evaluative feedback is a judgment of what you see the person doing or hear the person saying. Examples of evaluative feedback may include, but are not limited to: "Great, Good job, That's a good idea, You're really smart to think of that, Excellent thinking, Way to go, mom!, That's just super, I like the way you _____, I would agree with that, That's how I would do it, You are really a good dad." Practitioners should avoid overuse of positive evaluative feedback.

21) Directive feedback involves telling the person what to do in situations where clear and present danger exists



and the coach does not have time to engage the other person in a coaching conversation.

22) Informative feedback is sharing knowledge and information with the person being coached that is directly related to an observation, action, reflection, or direct question. Sharing information prior to reflection may be necessary when you know without a doubt that the person you are coaching has no prior knowledge of the content or situation, thereby has no foundation on which to be coached. In most instances, however, informative feedback follows reflection.

23) The joint plan can be developed either (a) as you proceed through the coaching conversation by noting with the person you are coaching what you each agree to do as a result of a conversation item or (b) at the end of the conversation by reviewing all of the actions, observations, and topics discussed, then determining together what could occur between coaching conversations.

24) Instead of the coach summarizing the joint plan, ask the person you are coaching: "What would you like to focus on between now and our next visit? Based upon all that we've discussed today, what is your plan? What would you like to accomplish between now and the next time we talk?"

25) When the joint plan from the previous session was not the priority of the person being coached, thus not completed between visits, you should first ask yourself if the plan was truly a joint plan or if it was really your suggestion or recommendation. If the former, then you may ask the person at some point during the conversation if the previous plan is still a priority and if so, when/how s/he will go about implementing it. If the joint plan never seems to be a priority for the person being coached, you may need to have an upfronting conversation similar to, "I've noticed that we have developed a joint plan every week for the past three weeks, but so far you haven't been able to implement the plan. Is this still a priority for you? (If so) How can we modify the plan so that it will be useful for you?"

AUTHORS

Dathan D. Rush, Ed.D. is Associate Director, Family Infant and Preschool Program and Investigator, Center for the Advanced Study of Early Childhood and Family Support Practices, J. Iverson Riddle Developmental Center, Morganton, North Carolina. M'Lisa L. Shelden, Ph.D. is Director, Family Infant and Preschool Program and Investigator, Center for the Advanced Study of Early Childhood and Family Support Practices, J. Iverson Riddle Developmental Center, Morganton, North Carolina.

Take A Closer Look:

Read or download the CASEinPoint on the operational definition of coaching and characteristics of coaching practices at www.fippcase.org; Rush, D. & Shelden, M. (2005). Evidence-based definition of coaching practices. CASEinPoint, 1(6), 1-6.