



SUPPORTING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS – INTERPERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF RELATIONAL HELPGIVERS

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Abstract

This CASEmaker presents evidence of essential relational helping characteristics when professionals deliver effective coaching support to early childhood educators. The literature suggests that the very nature of relational helping creates the emotional environment necessary to influence the development of teacher practices in the classroom setting. Within the CASEmaker are curated references to support the use of specific relational helping practices.

Caregiving Practices for Young Children

With the rising national focus on the need to provide high quality, developmentally appropriate care to young children (Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, & Knoche, 2009; Melmed, 2016; Chu, 2012), many early childhood educators are being assisted in developing their teaching skills on site with the use of early childhood coaches. Professional development for many teachers caring for young children has been elevated from the “make-and-take” workshop to sustained, targeted sessions with another more experienced early childhood professional often referred to as the coach (Jayaraman, Marvin, Knoche, & Bainter, 2015; Snyder et al., 2012). Federally-funded Head Start and Early Head Start programs are now mandated by the 2016 revision to the Head Start Program Performance Standards to provide coaching to educational staff (O’Keefe, 2017). Other forms of professional development used in the field include mentoring and consultation (Chu, 2012; Snyder et al., 2012). Through coaching, mentoring, or consulting, these experienced specialists provide relationship-based support through which teachers can gain both competence and confidence in their teaching practices. This CASEmaker defines the relational helping characteristics found in the literature to be essential in creating the relationship necessary to support ongoing adult learning. Several useful sources of information about the importance of relational helping skills include:

Chu, Marilyn. (2012). Observe, reflect, and apply: Ways to successfully mentor early childhood educators. *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, 40(3), 20–28.

- Jayaraman, G., Marvin, C., Knoche, L., & Bainter, S. (2015). Coaching conversations in early childhood programs: The contributions of coach and coachee. *Infants & Young Children*, 28(4), 323–336. <https://doi.org/10.1097/IYC.0000000000000048>
- Sheridan, S. M., Edwards, C. P., Marvin, C. A., & Knoche, L. L. (2009). Professional development in early childhood programs: Process issues and research needs. *Early Education and Development*, 20(3), 377–401. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409280802582795>
- Snyder, P., Hemmeter, M. L., Meeker, K. A., Kinder, K., Pasia, C., & McLaughlin, T. (2012). Characterizing key features of the early childhood professional development literature. *Infants & Young Children*, 25(3), 188–212. <https://doi.org/10.1097/IYC.0b013e31825a1ebf>

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The Common Thread

In their work on supporting families, Dunst and Trivette (1994) defined effective helping as an “act of enabling individuals...to become better able to solve problems, meet needs, or achieve aspirations by promoting the acquisitions of competencies that support and strengthen functioning in a way that permits a greater sense of individual...control over its development” (p. 162). As leaders in early childhood education seek ways to provide teaching staff with learning experiences that build these competencies, the need for productive on-site strategies must be considered. Throughout the literature, one common theme is present in discussions of providing effective professional development on a one-to-one basis in a classroom setting – relationships. This type of work has many facets, but the foundation is based on the relationship between two people and requires the person providing the support, the help-giver, to have an interpersonal relational skill set (De Haan, 2012; De Haan, Grant, Burger, & Eriksson, 2016; Garbacz, Lannie, Jeffrey-Pearsall, & Truckenmiller, 2015; Hudson, 2013). Five categories of attributes have been described in the literature as significant interpersonal skills that support adult helping relationships: conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, openness, and emotional stability (Rush and Shelden, 2020). Each of the following sections provide the literature foundation for these five relational helping characteristics.

Rx Prescription for Practice Rx

The prescription for practice lists four references especially important in the on-going research of fatherhood and inclusion of fathers in early childhood education programs.

de Haan, E. (2012). Back to basics II: How the research on attachment and reflective-self function is relevant for coaches and consultants today. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 7(2), 194-209.

Jayaraman, G., Marvin, C., Knoche, L., & Bainter, S. (2015). Coaching conversations in early childhood programs: The contributions of coach and coachee. *Infants & Young Children*, 28 (4), 323–336.

National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning. (2014). Practice-based coaching: Collaborative partnerships.

Rush, D. D., & Shelden, M. L. (2020). *The early childhood coaching handbook*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing Company.

Conscientiousness

Relational helpgivers have professional expectations associated with their roles, such as being punctual, organized, reliable, and dependable (Colorado Coaching Consortium, 2009; Hudson, 2013). They must practice discretion and be able to set personal boundaries (Colorado Coaching Consortium, 2009; Rush & Shelden, 2020). The effective relational help-giver demonstrates an appreciation of the early childhood educator’s perspective and gathers information in an open, honest, non-judgmental manner to seek understanding of any differing point of view. (Knoche, Kuhn, & Eum, 2013; National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning, 2014) In addition, they use authentic communication that is free of jargon, linguistically sensitive, and focused on creating an interpersonal context tying the experiences and knowledge of the help-giver to the early childhood educator (Chu, 2012; Colorado Coaching Consortium, 2009; Jayaraman et al., 2015; Rush & Shelden, 2020).

Chu, Marilyn. (2012). Observe, reflect, and apply: Ways to successfully mentor early childhood educators. *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, 40(3), 20–28.

Colorado Coaching Consortium. (2009, March). Coaching competencies for Colorado early childhood education. Colorado Coaching Consortium. http://www.cocoaches.net/Coaching_Compencies.html

Hudson, P. (2013). Developing and sustaining successful mentoring relationships. *Journal of Relationships Research*, (4), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jrr.2013.1>

Knoche, L. L., Kuhn, M., & Eum, J. (2013). More time. More showing. More helping. That’s how it sticks: The perspectives of early childhood coaches. *Infants & Young Children*, 26(4), 349-365. <https://doi.org/10.1097/IYC.0b013e3182a21935>

National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning. (2014). Practice-based coaching: Collaborative partnerships. US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Office of Head Start.

Rush, D. D., & Shelden, M. L. (2020). *The early childhood coaching handbook*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing Company.

Extroversion

The extroversion characteristic in relational helping does not refer to an exuberant personality of the professional providing support, but rather it is demonstrated by a passionate response to the people, content, and context of the experience (Office of Child Care & Office of Head Start, 2011). Being a help-giver to early childhood professionals within a relational context requires being responsive in a warm, friendly, yet sensitive manner to the subtle as well as obvious cues of the teacher's pleasure, discomfort, or resistance (Colorado Coaching Consortium, 2009; Crawford, Zucker, Van Horne, & Landry, 2017). Active listening is core to relational helping as it demonstrates full engagement in interactions, prevents misunderstandings, and supports solutions during conflicts (Boyd, Claire, & Dare, 2014; Garbacz et al., 2015; Office of Child Care & Office of Head Start, 2011). Another essential aspect of this helping characteristic is the ability to create a safe haven where there is a mutuality in the relationship with the early childhood teacher that is demonstrated through honesty, respect, and cultural competency (Chu, 2012; de Haan et al., 2016; Hudson, 2013; National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning, 2014). The most effective learning takes place when the coach and coachee are willing and able to learn from one another.

- Boyd, C., & Dare, J. (2014). Interpersonal skills. In C. Boyd & J. Dare, *Communication skills for nurses (1)*, 47–54. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Chu, Marilyn. (2012). Observe, reflect, and apply: Ways to successfully mentor early childhood educators. *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, 40(3), 20–28.
- de Haan, E., Grant, A. M., Burger, Y., & Eriksson, P. O. (2016). A large-scale study of executive and workplace coaching: The relative contributions of relationship, personality match, and self-efficacy. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 68(3), 189–207. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000058>
- Garbacz, S. A., Lannie, A. L., Jeffrey-Pearsall, J. L., & Truckenmiller, A. J. (2015). Strategies for effective classroom coaching. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 59(4), 263–273.

- <https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2014.942835>
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- Office of Child Care, & Office of Head Start. (2011). *A guide to effective consultation with settings serving infants, toddlers, and their families*. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/resource/effective-consultation>

Agreeableness

When building a relationship that sustains helping practices, early childhood coaches exhibit generosity and selflessness (Rush & Shelden, 2020). In this regard, relational helpgivers are willing to give credit or recognition to reinforce the early childhood teacher's self-efficacy (Sheridan et al., 2009). With the relationship foremost in all interactions, it is essential, in the relational context, to be able to influence change while appreciating and acknowledging the positive aspects of the early childhood educator's current practice (de Haan et al., 2016; Jayaraman et al., 2015).

- de Haan, E., Grant, A. M., Burger, Y., & Eriksson, P. O. (2016). A large-scale study of executive and workplace coaching: The relative contributions of relationship, personality match, and self-efficacy. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 68(3), 189–207. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000058>
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Openness

Successful relational helpgivers are risk-takers who are open-minded to new ideas and other points of view. (Hudson, 2013). They must be flexible in thought and action, viewing new experiences as opportunities for learning (Rush & Shelden, 2020). In supporting the early childhood educator, a key ingredient of successful helping relationships is recognizing and building upon what educators already know as well as adaptability to conditions and personalities with the ability to be innovative with new strategies when needed (Office of

Childcare & Office of Head Start, 2011).

- Hudson, P. (2013). Developing and sustaining successful mentoring relationships. *Journal of Relationships Research, (4)*, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jrr.2013.1>
- Office of Child Care, & Office of Head Start. (2011). *A guide to effective consultation with settings serving infants, toddlers, and their families.* <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/resource/effective-consultation>
- Rush, D. D., & Shelden, M. L. (2020). *The early childhood coaching handbook.* Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing Company.

Emotional Stability

Emotional stability is also an essential relational helpgiving characteristic (Boyd, Claire, & Dare, 2014). Remaining relaxed and even-tempered during a range of situations is important when providing support, particularly in the classroom setting (Office of Child Care & Office of Head Start, 2011). Presenting an appropriate demeanor to express an emotion such as concern or pleasure should be balanced with a basic calm and trustworthy nature that the early childhood professional can rely upon (National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning, 2014). The proficient relational help-giver is resilient and maintains stability in the face of disruption and chaos; recovering poise and moving forward in an effective manner (Colorado Coaching Consortium, 2009; Office of Child Care & Office of Head Start, 2011).

- Boyd, C., & Dare, J. (2014). Interpersonal skills. In C. Boyd & J. Dare, *Communication skills for nurses, 1*, 47–54. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
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Conclusion

While a variety of factors can contribute to the successful implementation of on-site professional development for early childhood educators, research shows that the formation of a strong relationship between the teacher and the help-giver is critical. Without this base of trust and mutual respect, the early childhood professional has no safe haven in which she can feel confident taking risks in utilizing novel techniques and strategies. Strong relational helpgiving practices pave the way for repeated attempts at utilization of new practices and innovations. The successful application of new knowledge and practices leads to the consistent implementation of evidence-based practices and stronger outcomes for educators and the children they teach.

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