



## Evidence-Based Definition of Coaching Practices

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*CASEinPoint*, 2005  
Volume 1, Number 6

*CASEinPoint* 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.

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### ABSTRACT

This *CASEinPoint* includes an operational definition of coaching practices based on research in the human learning, professional development, and helping practices fields. The definition of coaching focuses on the relationship between the characteristics of coaching practices and intended consequences, as well as the processes that are used to produce desired changes. The characteristics of coaching are described to illustrate how coaching strengthens and builds the capacity of a parent or colleague to improve existing abilities, develop new skills, and gain a deeper understanding of evidence-based practices.

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this *CASEinPoint* is to describe an operational definition of coaching practices based on current research in the human learning, professional development, and helping practices fields. 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 (Hanft, Rush, & Shelden, 2004; Rush, Shelden, & Hanft, 2003).

The use of coaching as an adult learning strategy has been described by early childhood special educators, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech-language pathologists as a practice to support families of children with disabilities as well as practitioners in early childhood programs. Campbell (1997) defined the role of the early intervention practitioner as that of a *coach* rather than a direct therapy provider. Hanft & Pilkington (2000) encouraged early childhood practitioners to reconsider their role “to move to a different position alongside a parent as a *coach* rather than lead player” (p. 2) since this allows for more opportunities to promote development and learning than direct intervention by the therapist or educator. Rush (2000) noted that a practitioner-as-coach approach provides the necessary parent supports to improve their child’s skills and abilities rather than work directly with the child. Dinnebeil, Mc-

Inerney, Roth, & Ramasway (2001) examined the role of itinerant early childhood special education teachers and concluded that teachers “should be prepared to act not simply as consultants to early childhood teachers but as *coaches*” (p. 42) because this offers a more structured system for jointly planning new learning and engaging in feedback as well as modeling by a coach.

Despite the fact that there have been increased calls for use of coaching as an intervention practice, surprisingly no attempt has been made to define coaching and identify its characteristics. This article includes an operational definition of coaching and background information on the purpose and use of coaching practices. The information illustrates that coaching practices are consistent with research evidence about how people learn (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999) and that coaching can be used in multiple contexts and settings. The characteristics of coaching practices are also described followed by a brief explanation of how the practices are used.

## BACKGROUND

### *Findings from How People Learn*

The National Research Council (NRC) recently published a research synthesis on human learning that included three key findings as well as implications for teaching and the design of adult learning environments (Donovan et al., 1999). The purpose of the NRC’s synthesis of available research on learning was to identify teaching practices and environments that promote successful learning (Bransford et al., 2000). The research included in the NRC report indicated that in order for a learner to gain deep knowledge of a particular content area, he or she must develop an understanding of how the knowledge may be used in a specific context and also generalized to other situations (Bransford et al., 2000).

The NRC identified three key findings from the research synthesis on human learning. First, the learner enters a learning environment with preconceived ideas about a subject matter. Accordingly, the learner may not develop an understanding of new information and skills being taught if his or her current understanding is not recognized and made explicit. Second, to develop a deeper level of understanding in a particular area, the learner must: (a) have a solid base of factual knowledge, (b) understand these facts within the context of a conceptual framework, and (c) organize the information to facilitate easy recall, use, and transfer to other situations. Third, the learner must acquire a metacognitive approach in which the learner assesses his or her own level of understanding, establishes learning goals, and measures

progress (Bransford et al., 2000; Donovan et al., 1999). Results of a practice-based research synthesis of coaching as an adult learning strategy (Rush, 2003) indicate that the characteristics of coaching are consistent with the NRC findings, and especially those related to the metacognitive approach to learning and linking information back to a conceptual framework.

### *Overview of Coaching*

Historically, coaching has been a term used primarily in athletics. More recently, coaching can be found in the field of business (Doyle, 1999; Flaherty, 1999; Kinlaw, 1999). Coaching emerged as an accepted practice in the development and supervision of educators in the 1980s (Ackland, 1991; Brandt, 1987; Kendall, 1983).

The coaching models that have been used in professional development programs have focused on building collegial relationships, solving specific instructional problems, learning new skills, and refining skills previously mastered (Joyce & Showers, 1982). Coaching has been used successfully by general educators and administrators (Delany & Arredondo, 1998; Kohler, Crilley, & Shearer, 1997; Kohler, McCullough, & Buchan, 1995; Munro & Elliott, 1987; Phillips & Glickman, 1991; Roberts, 1991; Sparks, 1996), and special educators (Kohler et al., 1997; Miller, 1994; Miller, Harris, & Watanabe, 1991), and as a strategy to promote collaboration between special and general educators (Gerston, Morvant, & Brengelman, 1995; Hasbrouck & Christen, 1997; Tschantz & Vail, 2000). Coaching has also been found effective in preservice preparation programs for special and general educators (Cegelka, Fitch, & Alvarado, 2001; Kurtts & Levin, 2000; Morgan, Gustafson, Hudson, & Salzberg, 1992).

### *Coaching in Early Childhood Intervention*

Coaching in early childhood may be conceptualized as a particular type of helping practice within a capacity building model to support people in using existing abilities and developing new skills to attain desired life circumstances (Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Dunst, Trivette, & LaPointe, 1992; Rappaport, 1981; Trivette & Dunst, 1998). As part of early childhood practices, coaching promotes self-reflection and refinement of current practices by the practitioner being coached. This results in competence and mastery of desired skills for the early childhood practitioner and both the children and families with whom the early childhood practitioner interacts (Doyle, 1999; Dunst, Herter, & Shields, 2000).

Coaching builds the capacity of family members to promote the child’s learning and development. This includes being with the people the child wants and needs

to be with and doing what the child likes and needs to do (Shelden & Rush, 2001). The key people in a child's life gain competence when a coach supports them in blending new or existing knowledge, skills, and experience to interact with a child in everyday situations, and then assess and perhaps improve upon the results (Flaherty, 1999) noted that coaching is "not telling people what to do, [but] giving them a chance to examine what they are doing in light of their intentions" (p. xii). For example, the early childhood practitioner who uses coaching facilitates a dynamic exchange of information based on the parent's intentions and current level of skills necessary to promote the child's participation in family, community, and early childhood settings (Bruder & Dunst, 1999; Hanft et al., 2004).

#### OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF COACHING PRACTICES

The definition of coaching described next differs from previous descriptions found in the business and education literature by its focus on the operationalization of the relationship between coaching practices and the intended consequences as well as the processes that are used to produce the observed changes (Dunst, Trivette, & Cutspec, 2002). Based on a synthesis of research on coaching practices (Rush, 2003), coaching may be defined as:

*An adult learning strategy in which the coach promotes the learner's ability to reflect on his or her actions as a means to determine the effectiveness of an action or practice and develop a plan for refinement and use of the action in immediate and future situations.*

Coaching can be used to improve existing practices, develop new skills, and promote continuous self-assessment and learning. The role of the coach is to provide a supportive and encouraging environment in which the learner (parent, colleague, etc.) and coach jointly examine and reflect on current practices, apply new skills and competencies with feedback, and problem-solve challenging situations. The coach's ultimate goal is sustained performance in which the learner has the competence and confidence to engage in self reflection, self correction, and generalization of new skills and strategies to other situations as appropriate (Flaherty, 1999; Kinlaw, 1999).

#### *Coaching Characteristics*

Understanding the characteristics of a practice is important in order to inform a practitioner of what to do in order to achieve the desired effect. The coach-

ing research synthesis by Rush (2003) was guided by a process that focused on the extent to which the specific characteristics of the practices are related to differences in their outcomes or consequences (Dunst, Trivette, & Cutspec, 2002). More specifically, the research synthesis examined the characteristics of coaching that were related to variations in the use of newly learned practices or improvement of existing skills. Although the steps in the coaching process vary (Doyle, 1999; Flaherty, 1999; Hanft et al., 2004; Kinlaw, 1999), the coaching research literature suggests that coaching has five practice characteristics that lead to the intended outcomes: (1) joint planning, (2) observation, (3) action/practice, (4) reflection, and (5) feedback (see Table 1). The definitions in the table are based on descriptions in the coaching research literature and highlight the characteristics used to improve existing abilities, develop new skills, and deepen the understanding of evidence-based practices of the person being coached.

*Joint planning.* Joint planning ensures the parent's active participation in the use of new knowledge and skills between coaching sessions. Joint planning occurs as a part of all coaching conversations, which typically involves discussion of what the parent agrees to do between coaching interactions to use the information discussed or skills that were practiced. For example, as a result of the coaching conversation with the practitioner, a parent may decide to offer her child choices during each mealtime.

*Observation.* Observation does not necessarily occur during every coaching conversation, but is used over the course of several coaching visits. Observation typically occurs by the practitioner directly observing an action on the part of the parent, which then provides an opportunity for later reflection and discussion. An example of observation would be when a practitioner observes the parent reading a book to his child. Observation may also involve modeling by the practitioner for the parent. In this instance, the practitioner may build upon what the parent is already doing and demonstrate additional strategies (e.g., allowing the child to choose a book) and then reflect with the parent how the example matches the parent's intent and/or what research informs us about child learning.

*Action.* The characteristic of action provides opportunities for the learner to use the information discussed with the coach or practice newly learned skills. Action may occur during or between coaching interactions. For example, when a parent reads a book with the child before bedtime, the parent encourages the child to select the book, describe the pictures as she reads, and then pauses to give her child a turn if he would like to take one.

Table 1

*Definitions of the Five Key Characteristics of Coaching*

Joint Planning	Agreement by both the coach and learner on the actions to be taken by the coach and/or learner or the opportunities to practice between coaching visits.
Observation	Examination of another person's actions or practices to be used to develop new skills, strategies, or ideas.
Action	Spontaneous or planned events that occur within the context of a real-life situation that provide the learner with opportunities to practice, refine, or analyze new or existing skills.
Reflection	Analysis of existing strategies to determine how the strategies are consistent with evidence-based practices and may need to be implemented without change or modified to obtain the intended outcome(s).
Feedback	Information provided by the coach based on direct observations of the learner by the coach, actions reported by the learner, or information shared by the learner to expand the learner's current level of understanding about a specific evidence-based practice.

*Reflection.* Reflection on the part of the person being coached is what distinguishes coaching from consultation, supervision, and training. Reflection follows an observation or action and provides the parent an opportunity to analyze current strategies and refine her knowledge and skills. During reflection, the practitioner may ask the parent to describe what worked or did not work during observation and/or action followed by generation of alternatives and actions for continually improving her knowledge and skills.

*Feedback.* Feedback occurs after the parent has the opportunity to reflect on her observations, actions, or opportunity to practice new skills. Feedback includes statements by the practitioner that affirm the parent's reflections (i.e., I understand what you are saying) or add information to deepen the parent's understanding of the topic being discussed and jointly develop new ideas and actions. Sharing additional ideas for potty training following the parent's reflection on what she has tried and found to be either successful or unsuccessful is an example of informative feedback.

*Use of the Coaching Characteristics*

Knowledge and understanding of the characteristics of coaching are useful for any number of purposes. First, the characteristics can help determine the extent to which coaching practices are being used by practitioners. Practitioners can use the characteristics to determine if they are engaged in coaching. In order for a practice to be labeled coaching, all of the characteristics must be used during the course of multiple coaching sessions.

Second, references to coaching in the literature should include these characteristics as descriptors of the practice. In order for a practice to be accurately described as coaching, the characteristics must be present. Otherwise, outcomes claimed or refuted as a result of coaching may be attributed to something other than the coaching practices.

Third, the characteristics may be used for research purposes to further examine the conditions under which coaching practices are most effective. The characteristics should be especially helpful in studies for reliability purposes to assist in collecting data regarding adherence to the practice.

## CONCLUSION

The coaching characteristics described in this paper are currently being used in a number of studies to investigate the use of coaching as a strategy for supporting parents and other caregivers in early intervention programs in three states. In these same programs, coaching is being studied as a strategy for practitioners to support each other in a primary coach model of teaming practices. The characteristics of coaching are also being studied in an Early Head Start program to examine teachers' use of coaching to promote parent competence and confidence in supporting their children's learning and development.

The purpose of this *CASEinPoint* was to describe an operational definition of coaching. The characteristics of coaching were also delineated and further establish coaching as a practice to build the capacity of a parent,



caregiver, or colleague in developing new skills, refining existing abilities, and gaining a deeper understanding of their actions. Operationalizing coaching and defining the characteristics further establishes coaching as an evidence-based practice for adult learning.

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