Mentoring for Program Improvement

An important part of your manager's or trainer's job is to provide you with effective mentoring. The following information is based wholly on the article: *Expanding Quality for Infants and Toddlers: Colorado Implements Touchpoints* by Wendy Watson, Jo Koehn, and Lisa Desrochers in the September 2012 issues of Young Children.

The positive impact of Brazelton Touchpoints on caregivers, home visitors, families, and young children is far-reaching. This strengths-based approaches focuses on a child's strengths to best support their development. Common themes that guided the work of the authors include:

- **Build strong, healthy relationships.** The field of early childhood education makes clear the importance of relationship-based care. But applying its practice isn’t as easy. A key method in this effort is to focus on a strengths-based model instead of focusing on deficits. Instead of seeing the glass half-empty, notice what is working well and expand on it (as opposed to pointing out what isn’t working and trying to fix it). This approach applies to all: children, families, co-workers, and coaches. For example, when a coaching conversation begins with identifying what is working well, it helps bolster the relationship. This lets the coach and caregiver clarify their understanding (including what might not be working) to help identify what to do next.

- **Observe and understand children’s behavior.** To do this well, pay attention to children in a way that allows you to be present. Notice patterns. Observe what children are telling you through their behavior. Partner with families to deepen your understanding and better support a child’s development. For example, if a child begins having toilet training accidents after recent strides in toilet training were made, talk to the parents. Together, you can find a way to best fit the present state of the child’s needs. When you discuss the meaning of children’s behavior with co-workers, you may identify your own blind-spots, and gain another perspective.

- **Respect children’s relationships with their families.** Acknowledge that families are a child’s first teacher. Work to strengthen your bond with parents, and understand that the relationship you have with a child’s family is related to that child’s outcome. Strong partnerships with parents encourage children’s healthy outcomes, including school readiness.

- **Recognize families’ strengths and expertise.** When you acknowledge that families have strengths—in addition to being experts about their child—you further support a strength-based partnership with parents. Sometimes this means you will want to shift your interpretations to find alternative explanations for behavior. For example, a caregiver may first assume that a father who carries his perfectly-able-to-walk 3-year-old into the program is not doing right by the child. However, the caregiver may later discover that the father is attempting to soothe the child by offering comfort and closeness before saying goodbye. When we allow our role to shift from that of an expert to an authentic partner with parents, we open the door to helping children develop optimally.
- **Respect each child and family's unique culture.** Culturally-competent caregivers appreciate—and celebrate—the richness of home life. Caregivers are open to learn more about each family, including aspects of caregiving that are obvious or implied elements of a family’s culture.

- **Use reflective practice.** Make sure you consider both the how and the why of your practice. This helps you use the information you learn about children and put it to good use during your daily interactions with them. You can consider what you did, how others responded (children, parents, co-workers) and how you feel about the day. When you begin to use the feedback loop that you gain using reflective practice, you can meet goals as you adjust approaches, or monitor improvement.

- **Consider children’s home experiences.** Remember to consider the whole child as you interact with them. Think about aspects of their life, such as family job changes, family moves, and family health issues.

- **Partner with other professionals.** To broaden your knowledge and network, remember to seek out collaborations that strengthen you and your vital and important practice. Research shows that the quality of collaborative relationships has a ripple effect and can influence even stakeholders not directly in a network.


Reflect on the common themes in the excerpt above: building strong, healthy relationships; observing and understanding children’s behavior; respecting children’s relationships with their families; recognizing families’ strengths and expertise; respecting each child and family’s unique culture; using reflective practice; considering children’s home experiences; and partnering with other professionals. Choose two of these themes and discuss how your manager or trainer has mentored you in these areas.

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