

Mentoring for Program Improvement

An important part of your manager's or trainer's job is to provide you with effective mentoring. Read the following summary, which is wholly based on the following article: **Instructional Coaching: Helping Preschool Teachers Reach Their Full Potential**, by Sheila Skiffington, Sue Washburn, and Kimberly Elliott (Young Children, May 2011). Then, answer the questions that follow.

Many preschool teachers not familiar with *instructional coaching* may have reservations about its use for many reasons, including:

- They may feel very uneasy about the process of being videotaped
- They may mistakenly assume that coaches are there to point out things they did wrong
- They may reason, 'I know a lot about teaching! Why don't we focus on the children, not me!?'

While these reservations are normal and make perfect sense to some, preschool teachers who have benefitted from instructional coaching actually find that:

- The process of being videotaped is useful because it can capture many facets of classroom interactions (what was said, how children responded, etc.) that may go unnoticed when teaching
- Successful coaches never talk about the 'right' and 'wrong,' but instead work as partners with teachers to help them accelerate learning goals
- Many teachers who have participated in instructional coaching gain new insights and teaching strategies, and they become excited about developing their practice because they see direct, positive changes in children's learning

Instructional coaching is a three-part process, and works best when supported by your administrator and/or program director.

Phase 1. The Pre-Observation and Planning Conference. In this phase, the teacher set goals for children's learning, discusses why goals were selected, talks about the teaching strategy they plan to use, and plans an activity to meet these goals.

Phase 2. Observation and Analysis. In this phase, the coach video records the teacher carrying out the activity that was planned in Phase 1. The teacher and coach watch the video recording separately before they meet in the next step. It's important to understand that notes at this point are objective and factual only. There is no attempt to point out what the teacher did "right" or "wrong."

Phase 3. Reflective Conference. The coach and teacher view the video together. The teacher reflects whether activity goals were met. The coach encourages the teacher with open-ended questions to talk about and identify strategies that work, and helps identify ways to make the activity even more effective for children.

Tips to remember about instructional coaching:

- **Teachers have differing abilities to reflect on their practice.** Reflective practice is new for many. Often times, the coach meets silence when a teacher feels overwhelmed by the reflective coaching process and doesn't know how to respond. Coaches must be flexible to meet teachers where they are. Coaches need to be patient, respectful, humorous, and positive. One reluctant teacher was able to warm up to the reflective process by first responding in writing to guiding questions. It can take time for trust to cement in the relationship.
- **Teachers can take steps to ensure they get the most out of instructional coaching and the reflective conferencing process.** Teachers will want to approach the process with an open mind; motivation to grow their practice and increase their learning; curiosity about how children learn; and a desire for children to get the most from their classroom.
- **Coaches can help teachers overcome “video recording anxiety.”** There are many ways for coaches to help teachers relax about this aspect. Coaches can experiment (i.e., start by video recording only the children first, or the classroom environment) before teachers build up confidence and no longer worry about the camera.
- **Coaches support teachers in changing their practice by helping them learn how to make meaning of data.** Instructional coaching can make use of data from standardized instruments and observational data from videos to demonstrate how children's learning is evolving and the kinds of support they need. Useful tools examine classroom environments, teacher-child and child-peer interactions, and tools that assess vocabulary and prereading skills.
- **Successful coaches have core competencies.** Successful coaches have deep understanding of child development and the content area in which they work with teachers. They use best practices in adult learning, and are skilled at the practice of reflective listening. They can focus on teacher's strong points, but also address areas that can grow. They respect teachers, and encourage a sense of pride in teachers' practice.
- **Coaches need ongoing training, support, and supervision.** Coaching programs work best when an administrator is assigned to support each coach and time is scheduled for them to meet at least once a week. The administrator is a sounding board and observes the coach coaching the teacher. They offer resources and help the coach meet their goals. All coaches benefit from being observed, getting feedback from administrators and coaching peers, and reflecting on their work with teachers. When coaching sessions are videotaped, coaches can learn how to improve their practice. One coach learned she didn't wait long enough for teachers to answer after posing questions.

- Professional development experiences provide a useful framework for instructional coaching.**
 Instructional coaching turns classrooms into laboratories by giving teachers a system within which to reflect on their practice as they gain new knowledge. Through this practice, the effects of professional development is extended as teachers are supported as decision makers and problem solvers.

Comments from Teachers

“Coaches make sure you’re teaching to the best of your ability and make sure you’re always thinking, ‘Are the children learning what they need to learn?’”

—Christina Silveira Gonzalez

“My coach helps me stay focused on what I’m trying to do. A lot of times I have in my head what I want to do. I might not lose focus but try to just get the job done, and my coach brings it back to ‘Why do you want to do this, what’s your intention for these children, what is the basic premise you want them to go away with?’”

—Joan Martin

“My fellow teachers and I are looking a little bit deeper into a topic of study, and I think what I’m seeing a lot more now is writing. The children’s writing has really taken off. We’ve put up charts and graphs, and the activities are really promoting language and literacy. We’re digging deeper . . .”

—Shelese Johnson

Comments from Coaches

“Be prepared. If you haven’t ‘done your homework’—if you haven’t watched the videos, if you miss what the teacher wanted to look for, if you let the batteries in your camera run out, if you’re late—it sets up a bad dynamic. When you’re prepared and you are doing what you told the teacher you were going to do, it means you’re valuing the teacher and modeling how you want her to behave with children.”

—Lori Coletti

“Tell the teachers what coaching is and what it is not. Many don’t know! Some teachers think the coach is going to make stuff for their classroom. Or they may try to use a coaching session as a time to complain or vent. The tone is important, and you need to set the right tone from the get-go.”

—Sherri Penney

“Keep in mind how busy a preschool teacher’s life is. You can’t expect to be welcomed with open arms if you have the attitude that you’re there to ‘fix’ teachers. Know that you’re coming to support teachers in being their very best; recognize that all teachers bring a lot of skills that you’ll help build on; and always exude that attitude.”

—Cindy Hoisington

Source: Skiffington, S., Washburn, S., & Elliott, K. (2011). *Instructional coaching: helping preschool teachers reach their full potential*. *YC Young Children* 66(3), 12-19.

1. In what areas would you like to receive instructional coaching?

2. Do you find it difficult to reflect on your practice?

3. What steps can you take to ensure you get the most out of instructional coaching?