



# Resources & Connections

Supporting Quality Practices in Early Learning and  
Early Intervention for Infants, Toddlers, & Their Families

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**This Issue's Theme:**

## Coaching Colleagues

The theme of the previous issue of Resources and Connections (Vol. 3, Number 2, at [http://www.cde.state.co.us/earlychildhoodconnections/pdf/Newsletter\\_14.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/earlychildhoodconnections/pdf/Newsletter_14.pdf)) was *A Relationship-Based Approach to Early Intervention*. Relationship-based early intervention practices recognize the many interrelated relationships that create a web of support for children and their families, how important each relationship is, and how each relationship has the power to enhance other relationships. This issue continues this theme by focusing on relationships among early childhood practitioners.

Effective relationships among early childhood practitioners have long been recognized as important to supporting children and their families. As more and more communities provide the option for families to receive supports and services through transdisciplinary teams, relationships among practitioners are paramount. Transdisciplinary team members need to practice deep levels of interaction as they extend their own roles and support team members to do the same. Team members rely on learning from one another, sharing the knowledge, research base, and practice skills of their disciplines, and their personal expertise

### In this issue

- Coaching Colleagues by Barbara Hanft
- Article Review
- On the Web
- Contact Information

and experience. Coaching is an effective communication and adult learning strategy that can be used among colleagues to share knowledge and strengthen collaborative relationships to better support children and their families.

At the 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Early Childhood Institute this past October, occupational therapist, consultant, writer, and educator Barbara Hanft, MA, OTR, FOATA, presented an extremely well-received workshop on *Peer Coaching in Early Childhood*. We are grateful to Barbara and the gracious staff at Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. for permitting us to print the following excerpts from her *Coaching Colleagues* chapter that appears in *Coaching Families and Colleagues in Early Childhood*, the book Barbara recently co-wrote with Dathan Rush and M'Lisa Shelden.

What appears on the following pages is just a taste – only selected sections of the chapter appear in this issue due to space limitations. But the chapter and entire book are terrific and should be read by all early childhood practitioners. More information about it can be found on page 10 of this issue or at (<http://www.brookespublishing.com/store/books/hanft-7225/index.htm>).

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# Coaching Colleagues

Excerpts from Chapter 7, *Coaching Colleagues* by Barbara Hanft in Hanft, B.E., Rush, D.D., & Shelden, M.L. (2004). *Coaching Families and Colleagues in Early Childhood*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. Adapted by permission.

Colleague-to-colleague coaching, also known as peer coaching, has been employed since the early 1980s in education settings to help teachers integrate new information within their instructional practices (Joyce & Showers, 1982; Mello, 1984). One definition of peer coaching that is particularly relevant for early childhood practitioners and administrators emphasizes the collective nature of a coaching partnership:

Peer coaching is a confidential process through which two or more professionals work together to reflect on what they are currently doing, refine current skills and build new ones, share ideas with one another, or solve problems. (Robbins, 1991, p. 1)

An early childhood practitioner can assume a coaching role in interactions with colleagues to prompt their reflection on their daily practice, such as the effectiveness of their support for families and other adults caring for very young children. In addition, some early childhood programs use coaching as part of their professional development and encourage practitioners to formalize opportunities for coaching one another to learn specific skills and incorporate evidence-based practices in their daily work (Gallesich, 1997; Hendrickson, Gardner, Kaiser & Riley, 1993; Miller, 1994; Vail, Tschantz, & Bevill, 1997). Peer coaching helps colleagues:

- reflect on their actions/attitudes
- acquire and refine behavior/skills
- share ideas and problem solve

This chapter highlights the following six critical issues that can help establish and sustain effective peer coaching among colleagues:

1. Create a community of learners who support coaching as a way to acquire new skills and knowledge.
2. Develop a flexible format to meet the needs of all learners.
3. Promote spontaneous, as well as planned, opportunities for coaching.
4. Adapt peer coaching topics to address early childhood practitioner interests and experience.
5. Consider how to align coach and learner experience and knowledge.
6. Acknowledge and support early childhood practitioners' efforts to learn new skills

## Create a Community of Learners

Establishing a supportive climate for peer coaching provides the essential foundation for collegial relationships as part of a "companionship with peers" (Brandt, 1987). Learning from a respected peer who understands a learner's daily context is very different from attending an inservice or reading about a new practice in a professional journal.

Mutual respect and nonjudgmental support among early childhood practitioners and administrators with various professional and personal perspectives provide the critical atmosphere for voluntary participation in peer coaching (Gingiss, 1993; Robbins, 1995). Observing one another and reflecting together is a natural, although more public, way to interact with and learn from others. Despite the benefits of receiving on-site support for learning a new practice, some early childhood practitioners may feel anxious about being observed by a colleague and may need to watch others engage in coaching before trying it themselves (Donegan, Ostrosky, & Fowler, 2000). Educators and therapists historically have provided isolated intervention and instruction alone in a therapy room or classroom. Although they may not be familiar with coaching, early childhood practitioners value the opportunity to identify effective strategies for supporting a family and enhancing a child's development. Many professions whose members work with children, and their families promote life long learning for continuing competency (AOTA, 1999; Sandal, McLean & Smith, 2000; American Nurses Association, 1993).

Early childhood practitioners are likely to keep and use new strategies and concepts if they participate in coaching while trying out these new ideas and practices. Personal enthusiasm, knowledge of theory, and watching a demonstration are not sufficient reinforcers to ensure that practitioners can use new information to change their professional behavior. Repetition, with reflection and feedback about one's actions, are also critical components of the process of transferring training to daily practice (Gordon, Nolan & Forlenza, 1995; Showers, Joyce & Bennett, 1987).

Support from program leaders is essential in establishing a learning climate where team members are encouraged to share their knowledge as well as reflect on a program's mission and how it incorporates recommended practices (Pellicer & Anderson, 1995; Robbins, 1991; Strother, 1989). An active leader (e.g., an administrator, early childhood practitioner, program supervisor) promotes colleague-to-colleague coaching as an effective strategy to decrease the isolation that comes from providing itinerant intervention, facilitating an independent group, or teaching in a classroom. Peer coaching is also effective in helping groups come up with creative options to program challenges. Rather than "muddle" through challenges alone when they inevitably arise, coaching encourages early childhood practitioners to seek others who have experienced the same issue or are currently facing similar challenges. Colleague-to-colleague coaching can help early childhood practitioners:

- Ensure that initial interviews are family-friendly
- Involve family members in a child's evaluation and assessment in a variety of active roles
- Assist parents in identifying functional outcomes for their children
- Support a parent's or child care provider's efforts to help a child participate in daily activities at home and in the community
- Incorporate a program's guiding principles within all interactions with colleagues and families

## Develop a Flexible Format

When peer coaching is valued as a worthwhile strategy for continued professional development, attention can then be focused on deciding how to deliver it to best meet early childhood practitioner needs and experience. Two approaches to peer coaching identified in the literature, expert and reciprocal, provide opportunities for varying levels of coach expertise in a specific area of practice (Ackland, 1991; Robbins, 1991). Both approaches can be used separately or in combination and complement the coaching process presented in this book for early childhood practitioners.

In the **expert** approach, peer coaching is provided by a practitioner with acknowledged content expertise in a specific area such as experience with young children with autism or supporting children and families in natural learning environments. An early childhood practitioner who assumes the role of an expert peer coach has specialized knowledge and may be a member of a particular group of practitioners or may be brought in as an external consultant.

An experienced practitioner serving as an "expert coach" observes a colleague who would like to improve skills in the coach's area of expertise, then encourages self-reflection, shares feedback and information as appropriate, and provides encouragement as the colleague practices new actions (Ackland, 1991; Swafford, 1998). One school district designated an experienced teacher as an expert coach to facilitate collaboration and communication between special educators, regular classroom teachers and therapists as they implemented an inclusion project in a second-grade classroom (Kovic, 1996). Another used an early childhood special education consultant as the expert coach to provide initial follow-up support to attendees of a staff development workshop on including children with autism in a community child care center (Donegan et al., 2000). Lessons learned from these coaching projects emphasize that:

- New strategies require significant time for early childhood practitioners to master. A learner typically experiences plateaus, peaks and valleys as he or she integrates unfamiliar techniques into practice.

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Coaches must understand that changing behavior takes time, and assist the learner in finding ways to stay on task despite any setbacks.

- Early childhood practitioners are not always comfortable about being observed and often feel they are being evaluated because their coaches are helping them change their behavior. Coaches have come to help learners become comfortable with observation by noting and encouraging all positive behaviors observed, and taking time to help learners analyze the effectiveness of their actions in making a difference for a family and child.
- Differences in perspectives and expectations between a coach and a learner must be acknowledged, particularly when the partners are from different disciplines. Reflection is invaluable in helping colleagues look at their deeply held convictions and assumptions about their practices before suggesting actions for behavior change.

In the **reciprocal** approach to peer coaching, a pair or small group of early childhood practitioners observe one another, reflect afterwards and share their feedback regarding a specified topic (Sparks & Bruder, 1987). The reciprocal approach is most effectively used by early childhood practitioners who decide to refine their skills in a defined area of evidence-based practice. Colleagues are at similar levels in learning and applying the specified practice. This does not mean practitioners must have equal early childhood experience and knowledge to engage in reciprocal coaching, or be from the same discipline.

Reciprocal peer coaching uses scheduled sessions for early childhood practitioners to periodically exchange coach and learner roles. Each spends time being observed as well as observing others. In one education program, two or three practitioners who desired to work on similar strategies set up reciprocal observation, reflection, and feedback sessions with one another (Rogers, 1987). In another, “peer observation teams” of two people met periodically as a support group to discuss strategies and challenges encountered in their daily teaching (McREL, 1983; Mello, 1984). Three interdisciplinary staff members in a third early childhood program agreed to use

spontaneous coaching among themselves as opportunities arose during the day to prompt predetermined behaviors; they met in weekly support meetings to discuss their observations and provide feedback to one another (Miller, 1994).

## Promote Spontaneous and Planned Opportunities for Coaching

Expert and reciprocal peer coaching can occur as either a planned or spontaneous practice. Planned peer coaching grows out of a early childhood practitioner’s desire to expand his or her knowledge and skills in a specific area. This is accomplished by scheduling observation and reflection sessions with a colleague who possesses the desired expertise (expert approach), or by arranging for colleagues to observe one another implement a new practice or modify a current one, then reflect together on its impact (reciprocal approach).

When an atmosphere of trust has been established among colleagues, spontaneous peer coaching is possible – and desirable – for implementing and sustaining changes in practice. Spontaneous occasions for coaching colleagues provide valuable opportunities for shorter rounds of reflection and dialogue than planned coaching sessions. Spontaneous coaching is initiated by one practitioner who is skilled in recognizing both an opportunity for reflection and a colleague’s willingness to engage in reflective dialogue. Such opportunities typically occur when one team member poses a question for a teammate’s consideration, thus initiating a time for reflection and feedback. This can simply be a 10-minute discussion in a formal setting, such as a team meeting or an informal “coming together” in an office, parking lot, or lunch room.

## Adapt Peer Coaching to Practitioner Interests and Experience

Coaches who use either an expert or reciprocal approach to peer coaching must have effective communication skills to establish rapport with learners, help them develop a coaching plan, then prompt their

reflection and self discovery while learning new skills. While there is no perfect way to implement peer coaching, it is important to take the time to identify the roles and define the interests of a particular group of practitioners, as well as plan for when and how to schedule coaching sessions. When coaching colleagues, a coach must consider the roles (e.g., clinical coordinator, supervisor, friend) that either a coach or learner may assume outside their coaching relationship. Colleagues who interact as coach and learner are equals with different spheres of knowledge. Surveying practitioner interests and skills helps target areas for peer coaching by identifying those areas in which practitioners could possibly coach a colleague and/or participate in as a learner. Three categories to start this discussion are identified below:

- Child/family (e.g., helping families to identify their child's interests and assets; assisting parents in identifying functional outcomes for their children)
- Programmatic (e.g., understanding the federal/state requirements of the IDEA or Early Head Start related to transitioning from early intervention to community-based preschool programs)
- Coaching specific (e.g., developing listening skills or sharing helpful feedback; understanding how to interact with adults and incorporate the principles of adult learning)

Once potential coaching topics are identified, the educational background and experience of early childhood practitioners, their communication skills, and their understanding of the principles of adult learning should also be considered. Effective peer coaching is dependent upon a thorough understanding of the principles of adult learning (discussed in Chapter 2). The observation, action, and reflection process that is the cornerstone of coaching depends on a coach's interpersonal communication and ability to apply the basic principles of adult learning to developing collegial relationships with another adult. In particular, a coach must possess skill in integrating new information and practices with what an adult learner already knows in a way that honors individual learning styles.

## **Align Coach and Learner Experience and Knowledge**

Regardless of whether a coach and learner in early childhood share disciplinary backgrounds and professional experiences, they must explore what a learner already knows during the initiation component of coaching as a baseline for acquiring new knowledge and skills. This discussion must include an analysis of what a learner hopes to learn or do and how both a coach and a learner will know that a learner's goals have been accomplished. Sometimes, a coach and/or learner will realize during this discussion that a coach's expertise is not sufficient for helping a learner realize his or her objectives. Several options are then available: 1) a learner can request a different coach, 2) a learner can modify his or her objectives, or 3) both a coach and learner can decide to learn the new skill together, essentially switching from an expert to a reciprocal approach to coaching.

A coach must understand what knowledge/skills a learner wants to acquire, and how she or he will use the particular information or practice. A coach has the additional responsibility of translating his or her knowledge and experience to provide alternative perspectives and strategies for a learner, appropriate to his or her knowledge, experience, and role with a particular child and family (Hanft & Place, 1996). How a coach translates his or her knowledge/experience requires a careful analysis, with a learner of the following contextual variables: what the learner would like to learn/do; confirmation that a coach is the right choice for a specific learner; and how to assist a learner in acquiring knowledge or skill.

## **Acknowledge and Support Efforts to Learn New Skills**

Learning a new practice such as coaching requires that early childhood practitioners find time to observe it, try it out, then evaluate its impact on their own personal and professional lives (Gersten et al., 1995). Strategies for encouraging early childhood practitioners to engage in coaching will vary according to practitioners' availability, encouragement from administrators and other program leaders, and

interest and willingness of practitioners to modify their current practices.

While peer coaching offers a low cost and effective method for providing practitioners with additional knowledge and skill to support children and families, it does require time and effort by both the coach and learner to:

- Observe each other's actions, and/or those of other colleagues
- Reflect, analyze, and discuss a learner's anticipated and past actions, including what occurred while a learner practiced specific actions between coaching sessions
- Evaluate the coaching process, assess a learner's progress towards achieving his or goals and readjust the coaching plan, as necessary, to continue moving forward

Colleague-to-colleague coaching takes place within early childhood practitioners' work environments during the course of their work day. Peer coaching must have the endorsement of program administrators and leaders because coaching sessions may take time away from contact with family members and other caregivers when a coach and learner meet for reflection and feedback. Coaching takes place during the workday, unlike other options for professional development (e.g., evening and weekend seminars and workshops, independent study), which all can generally be fulfilled outside of the workday. Program leaders, including administrators, supervisors, coordinators, and respected practitioners, are also important role models and set professional standards for a particular group of early childhood practitioners. If these leaders engage in coaching themselves, both as coaches and learners, early childhood practitioners will have the opportunity to observe how these leaders benefit from their coaching experience, and will be more likely to give coaching a try themselves (Rogers, 1983).

Early childhood practitioners' interest and willingness to learn new practices is crucial. Both learners and coaches must voluntarily engage in coaching if a learner is going to acquire or refine specific knowledge and skill to use in daily professional interactions with colleagues and families. Coaches contribute

support and information to the coaching process; learners also play a proactive role in coaching and must believe that they can ultimately learn and implement new evidence-based practices. Even when a learner indicates great interest in acquiring new skills, the nature of the behavior change will have a dramatic impact on how quickly he or she implements a new practice, particularly if it is different from the status quo. Disenchantment can easily occur if the process of changing practice is not understood and accepted.

## Conclusion

Peer coaching is a professional development strategy that incorporates the same process described in Chapter 3 (Hanft et al, 2004) [Editor's Note: the five steps of coaching — initiation, observation, action, reflection, and evaluation] for supporting families and other adult caregivers. In peer coaching, however, both a coach and learner are colleagues who interact with varying regularity in early childhood settings. Administrators, early childhood practitioners, child care providers, preschool and nursery school personnel, and family advocates can all use this process to share their knowledge and experience with their colleagues.

Peer coaching is a valuable part of a continuum of professional development activities that include summer coursework at a university, weekend workshops and conferences, in-service sessions during the work week, and independent study. The essential qualities of peer coaching — learning from and with colleagues — also highlight the unique opportunities provided to help practitioners transfer learning from formal training into daily practice. Early childhood practitioners are likely to keep and use new strategies and concepts if they engage in either expert or reciprocal coaching while they try out new strategies and skills (Showers, et al., 1987). Effective professional development links theory, research, and demonstration with on-site opportunity for a learner's observation, action, and reflection about new strategies and practices. ■

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## Resources

Donegan, M., Ostrosky, M., & Fowler, S. (2000). Peer coaching: Teachers supporting teachers. *Young Exceptional Children*, 3(2), 9-16. This article illustrates peer coaching in early childhood, and describes a coaching process focused on joint planning, observation and feedback used by practitioners in an inclusive child care center. Guidelines for establishing a peer coaching program and sample forms are also included.

Gallacher, K. (1997). Supervision, mentoring and coaching. In P. Winton, J. McCollum and C. Catlett (eds), *Reforming personnel preparation in early intervention* (pp. 191-214). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. This chapter provides a succinct overview of coaching in relation to mentoring and supervision, gives examples of how coaching was used in early intervention and details practitioner/coach tasks during the six steps of coaching (initial interest, planning, information gathering, analysis, conferencing, and review).

Gersten, R. Morvant, M. & Brengelman, S. (1995). Close to the classroom is close to the bone: Coaching as a means to translate research into classroom practice. *Exceptional Children* 62(1), 52-66. This study explores the effectiveness of using coaching to bring research-based teaching practices into general education classrooms to improve the quality of reading instruction provided to students with learning disabilities. The process of expert peer coaching was analyzed to better understand how practitioners make changes in their practices.

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## Article Review

By Ann Grady

Pilkington, K. and Malinowski, M (2002). The natural environment II: Uncovering deeper responsibilities within relationship-based services. *Inf Young Children* 2002; 15(2): 78-84.



Providing a transdisciplinary early intervention program in natural environments through relationship-based services traverses a fluid and dynamic course. New responsibilities emerge through the recognition that provider relationships exist beyond daily interactions with infants, toddlers, and their families. Identifying and exploring these relationships enables providers to support the new level of service delivery required in everyday routines, relationships, activities, places, and partnerships.

Providers discover the deeper implications of teamwork in natural environments as they depend on their mutual relationships to discover the possibilities for coordinated intervention and creativity imbedded in the strength of their relationships with each other as a team as well as their relationship with a family. Effective team members embrace the complexity of the interpersonal relationships that drive the team's success and team members' satisfaction with the process. Team relationships are based on the inclusion of individual differences, awareness of others' perspectives, and ability to engage in the improvisational dance that bonds members in the responsibility for creating cohesive team functioning. Team decisions about member roles and responsibilities are made behind the scenes and created out of a goodness of fit among staff members' strengths.

Maintaining the "fit of the team" is each member's responsibility; conflicts may arise as a natural aspect of learning to work together in new relationships. Conflicts that are resolved by team members' direct communication with each other rather than outside intervention by a supervisor or consultant contribute to the cohesion of the team. The team's ability to use its own strengths to solve problems deepens the members' personal growth and the team's relationships. Establishing strong team member alliances based on exceptional relationships requires both time and motivation.

Because building relationships requires time for sharing ideas, values, information, and creating new ways for engaging children and families, it is critical to provide time for teams to develop these vital areas of quality transdisciplinary work. Teams that are cohesive, and both clear and improvisational with their roles and responsibilities can reach out to their communities and other organizations. Such collaboration helps teams adopt a strengths-based process for team assessment in a natural environment, yielding one complete document that reflects work across disciplines and partnerships among providers.

Competencies for team members extend beyond discipline specific skills and knowledge to the personal attributes of listening, reflection, dialogue, and support for each other, all of which are used to establish a cornerstone of effective team, and family relationships.

**Editorial Comment:** This article emphasizes important ideas about the evolution of transdisciplinary practice in natural environments. The initial focus of practice tends to be on service delivery and environments. As providers and teams evolve, the emphasis needs to be on the depth of relationships within the teams, and ways in which relationships are more transparent and effective in promoting the creativity inherent in working well together. ■

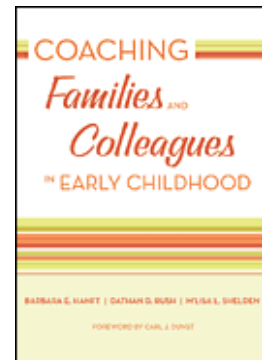
# Resources Related to Collegial Relationships

## In Print

### Coaching Families and Colleagues in Early Childhood

By Barbara E. Hanft, M.A., OTR, FAOTA, Dathan D. Rush, M.A., CCC-SLP, & M'Lisa L. Shelden, Ph.D., PT

In this practical guide, early intervention professionals will find a groundbreaking model for supporting those who support families with young children in natural settings — coaching. Beginning with a thorough introduction to the concept of coaching, the book shows professionals how to help colleagues acquire new knowledge and skills and support families and other caregivers as they take an active role in promoting a child's development and participation in home and community activities.



Using the five steps of coaching — initiation, observation, action, reflection, and evaluation — readers will learn to support colleagues or caregivers so they can successfully handle situations in a wide variety of settings, from homes and communities to preschools and child care programs. Readers will learn about essential qualities such as objectivity and adaptability; cultivate communication skills such as observing, listening, and planning; consider key issues such as ensuring administrative support; and reinforce what they learn with engaging anecdotes, reflection questions, points to remember, and practical forms.

An ideal book for professors, administrators, and practitioners in early childhood programs, this invaluable guide will help create coaches who improve the communication between professionals and families — and improve outcomes for the children in their care. To order this book and get acquainted with Brookes' other wonderful publications, please visit: (<http://www.brookespublishing.com/store/books/hanft-7225/index.htm>).

## On the Web

### The TeamTalk Project <http://www.public.asu.edu/~ajain8/cdrom/index/index.htm>

Developed by Suzanne Lamorey, Assistant Professor in the Division of Curriculum and Instruction, Early Childhood Program at Arizona State University, TeamTalk is a way of analyzing and improving team interactions by paying attention to the language that we hear and use during team meetings. Through explanations, videos, case studies, self-assessment, reflective journal-writing, meeting minders, and changes planners, this site provides a rich description of TeamTalk and you will have a variety of opportunities to practice its application in your day-to-day teaming experiences. After completing the learning experiences included in this CD-ROM, you will have an improved understanding of effective team functioning, implement more strategies for effective teaming, and report a higher level of self-efficacy as a team member.

### ZERO TO THREE <http://www.zerotothree.org/>

Readers to R & C know that we think that ZERO TO THREE is an incredible organization and that its web site is an indispensable resource. In addition to all of their resources on early development, there are many useful guidance documents on reflective supervision and team/meeting communications. Once at their site, follow this path: Professionals > Professional Topics > then scroll down to Reflective Practice/Relationship-Based Work.

# Contact Information

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Remember to periodically check out the **Early Childhood Activities Calendar** for training opportunities and other events:

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Send your ideas to Larry Edelman at [edelman.larry@tchden.org](mailto:edelman.larry@tchden.org)

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