



JURISDICTIONAL SCAN

HEALTHY ORGANIZATIONS

How do some **child protection agencies approach coaching?**

Coaching is a powerful tool for supporting the child protection workforce, as the work is complex and requires both technical knowledge and adaptive skills that are challenging to learn in a one-time training. Coaching can be used to reinforce knowledge and skills, connect caseworkers to agency practice models, and support professional development so that staff at all levels are more effective in their roles. Research indicates that coaching has significant positive effects on coping, goal-directed self-regulation, performance and skills, well-being, and work attitudes. Supporting staff in these areas may translate to improved retention, which is vital to effective child protection practice. High [turnover](#) can lead to decreased contact between caseworkers and families, impacting child and family outcomes such as time to permanency. While the evidence base for coaching is limited, coaching holds great promise as a tool for supporting staff and improving practice with children and families.

As part of an exploration into how coaching is being applied in child protection, representatives from 12 different child protection agencies and training academies were interviewed. Themes from these conversations are shared below, followed by implementation considerations for agencies that want to develop their own coaching programs. A description of each jurisdiction's approach to coaching is available in a companion appendix to this brief, Jurisdictional Snapshots: [How do some child protection agencies approach coaching? \(Appendix\)](#)



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Common elements

All 12 of the jurisdictions/training academies interviewed described different coaching models and structures, which are described in more detail in the appendix. While programs varied, many reflected the following common elements:

Voluntary participation

All programs described the importance of having staff engage in coaching because they had a goal and interest in coaching, not because they were required to participate. Some of the coaching programs started out mandating participation (especially for new caseworkers) but soon discovered that coaching was not effective for those who did not want to participate. In **Arapahoe County, Colo.**, coaching is offered to all new caseworkers while they are in their initial 12-week certification training in addition to experienced caseworkers, but no one is required to participate. Whether staff is new or seasoned, they and their self-identified goals drive the intensity and duration of the coaching.

Person-centered

Coaching focuses on the goals and interests of the individual being coached. The staff identifies the focus of the coaching session(s), which can range from a discrete skill or competency to ongoing and holistic professional development. The **Bay Area Academy** in Berkeley, Calif., uses both a person-centered approach that applies to the whole person and skills-based coaching that addresses particular skills. Coaches support staff in exploring where biases, assumptions, resistance, and expectations impact their work with children, families, and colleagues.

Goal setting

In every coaching relationship, the coach and the staff member set goals for the experience, identify a plan for achieving them, and create a contract with one another. Assessments are completed to ensure progress and identify when goals are accomplished. For each coaching session provided through the **Academy for Professional Excellence** (also known as the Southern Training Academy) in San Diego, Calif., the staff member determines the skill or goal to be explored

during the session and then walks through a standard set of steps with the coach, including identifying initial interest, establishing goals, observation and demonstration, self-reflection, feedback, evaluation, and action planning. Coaching sessions are not seen as a stand-alone learning opportunity, but as part of a larger professional development plan.

Relationship-based

The quality of the relationship between the coach and staff member is essential to the success of the coaching experience. Programs use various methods for creating matches, but all emphasize that the skill of the coach in building strong relationships with staff is key to successfully achieving goals. At the **Arapahoe County Department of Human Services**, all new caseworkers meet with the training and professional development coaching supervisor, who matches them with a coach. Matching is based on coaches' workloads, as well as the strengths and needs of the coach and caseworker. The coach and the new caseworker then meet to talk about the coaching program, understand the benefits and commitments, and lay the groundwork for a meaningful coaching relationship. After a few weeks, the caseworker and coach complete a coaching readiness assessment tool, which helps them decide together if the caseworker needs coaching and what the goals will be.

Reflective practice

The coaching experience provides staff with an opportunity to reflect on their practice. Coaches are responsible for asking questions and supporting staff through a process of reflecting on their behaviors and how they might be able to improve. At the **Allegheny County (Pa.) Office of Children, Youth, and Families**, all feedback is rooted in a philosophy that learning happens not just in practicing skills, but in reflecting on the action. In coaching sessions, staff consider an experience they have had and reflect on what was easy, what was hard, when they felt confident, and when they felt less so. Staff identify what worked well while also leveraging and recognizing what was tricky, which allows them to think about what they could do differently next time to more effectively engage and serve children and families.

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Peer support

In most of the jurisdictions interviewed, coaches were able to learn from one another and had opportunities for their own professional development and peer support. Some agencies utilized quarterly meetings with coaches from across the state, while others received group supervision within their local program. The **Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services** hosts monthly coaching roundtables, and **Jefferson County, Colo.**, coaches receive group supervision every other week in addition to individual supervision on alternating weeks. Colorado has implemented a statewide coaching collaborative, which provides a quarterly forum for county coaches to come together from across the state and participate in group supervision and consultation.

Implementation considerations

In keeping with recommendations from the [Capacity Building Center for States](#) and the [National Child Welfare Workforce Institute](#), successful implementation of a new practice, such as coaching, requires a phase-in approach. This includes full exploration of the needs and gaps that coaching could address, structured planning to identify specific coaching strategies, and evaluation in order to effectively implement and sustain the coaching program. Key considerations for effectively planning and implementing a coaching program, as identified by the 12 jurisdictions, include:

Program goals

When developing a coaching program, the goal of the program — and therefore the type of coaching offered — must be carefully considered. Some jurisdictions, such as the **Northern California Training Academy**, focus on skills-based coaching to support social workers in developing and applying a new skill. Others, such as the **Child Welfare Training System at The Kempe Center** in Colorado, specialize in development coaching, which is focused on transforming individuals and systems. Both types of coaching can play a role in child protection, so clarity regarding the purpose of the coaching program can help determine the type of coaching best suited for the program.

Relationship-building

Strong relationships across program areas and local offices are key. In the early planning stages, leaders should seek to build trust by actively and meaningfully engaging with stakeholders to ensure that everyone involved in implementation is focused on shared goals and has the opportunity to co-design the program to meet individual and collective needs. **Alabama IV-E Stipend Program** has a coaching model that requires strong relationships between the University of Alabama and the Alabama Department of Human Services (DHR) so that faculty, staff, and students all share the same goals and expectations for coaching. The coaching program director builds a strong relationship with Title IV-E staff and the training department at DHR, and with the [Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development](#).

Communication

Active communication loops should be instituted when the coaching program is being explored and developed. Implementation teams should engage with caseworkers, supervisors, and managers to learn about their ideas and hopes for coaching. During planning and implementation, leaders also need to be open to honest feedback, listening for improvement recommendations with a goal of incorporating them into the program. In creating the coaching program in **Jefferson County, Colo.**, managers solicited supervisor input so that the program met the needs of county staff.

Collecting ongoing staff feedback also helps inform program modifications and ensure everyone is on the same page. Communication plans need to clearly identify audiences and means of communication so that the right information is conveyed to the people who need it, at a time when it is most useful to them. The **Ohio Regional Training Centers** are in constant contact with directors, supervisors, caseworkers, and foster parents in their respective regions to make sure that the available learning opportunities continue to meet identified needs. Ohio Child Welfare Training Program staff collaborate with the Public Children's Services Association of Ohio to infuse county

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perspectives in the coaching program and promote training, development, and learning across all counties.

Learning culture

Agencies need to make learning and growth an essential element of organizational culture in order to operate successful coaching programs. In a punitive work environment, coaching is seen as a means of discipline or performance improvement, rather than a helpful professional development opportunity. In a learning culture, it is understood that staff at all levels need to grow professionally and personally, including skilled and experienced staff and leaders, and that coaching is an essential tool to support that process. The **Academy for Professional Excellence** in San Diego, Calif., worked closely with county leadership to shift the use and perception of coaching so that leadership and staff could embrace coaching as a support rather than a performance management tool.

Supervisory support

When developing a coaching program, agency leaders must also consider and build effective mechanisms for supervisor support. One strategy is to provide coaching for supervisors in order to help them understand how to continue supporting caseworkers after coaching ends. In **Philadelphia**, for example, the practice coach supervisor is responsible for both supervising practice coaches and providing coaching to casework supervisors. This provides casework supervisors with access to coaching by a coach familiar with both casework practice and supervision.

Role delineation

When using external (non-agency) coaches, clear role delineation is important so that coaches do not interfere with the relationship between staff and their supervisors. Programs offer various levels of communication with supervisors; however, all 12 of the jurisdictions/training academies interviewed indicated that external coaches' roles and responsibilities should be clearly outlined and articulated at the outset. Regular program-level conversations also help reduce any potential turf issues that might arise. In **Arapahoe County, Colo.**, supervisors can receive coaching to help them better understand the benefits of coaching as well as the difference in the roles and responsibilities of supervisors versus coaches. Coaching of supervisors is provided by the Training and Professional Development Coaching Supervisor, rather than the coaches that support caseworkers, to eliminate conflicts of interest or concerns about confidentiality.

Organizational structure

Agencies need to consider where coaches and the coaching program best fit within the overall organizational structure. In some jurisdictions, coaching is part of the training department. In others, the coaches are embedded in local offices. Some coaches are full-time employees, while others are contracted to coach only a few staff at a time. At the **Central California Training Academy** in Fresno, Calif., all coaching is delivered within the context of implementation (implementation of the Core Practice Model, Safety Organized Practice,



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or other practices), and the academy's team of eight to 10 coaches are members of the academy's implementation support team.

Other structural considerations are whether coaches must have casework experience and whether they must be internal staff in order to be considered for the position. In **Jefferson County, Colo.**, a coach is equal to a lead caseworker position and only internal staff are eligible to apply. In other agencies, such as the **Bay Area Academy**, some coaches already may be certified as coaches, while others have more experience in training. Agencies need to fully assess the vision and goals of the coaching program in order to identify the structure that will work best to achieve that vision and those goals.

Impact and evaluation

While few of the interviewed jurisdictions evaluate their coaching program, most indicated that they would like

to know more about impact and outcomes. Building in an evaluation at the start of the program will allow an implementation team to identify what is working, assess whether the program is meeting its goals, and adjust as needed. The **Northern California Training Academy** recently conducted a series of focus groups and interviews regarding its coaching program. It found that the counties new to coaching (less than two years) had enthusiastic and positive feedback on the coaching experience, but satisfaction decreased after two years. Further analysis revealed that the counties felt more supported during the initial coaching phases, but when coaching became an ongoing service, it was no longer recognized as special. There was also some evidence that the counties that utilized coaching while implementing Safety Organized Practice (SOP) have implemented SOP more robustly than those that did not utilize coaching — for example, caseworkers are teaming more with clients and are more focused on engagement.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

1 Theeboom, T., Beersma, B., & Van Vianen, A. E. (2016). The differential effects of solution-focused and problem-focused coaching questions on the affect, attentional control and cognitive flexibility of undergraduate students experiencing study-related stress. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 11(5), 460–469.

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