

Coaching vs. Mentoring in Early Childhood Programs

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Time Orientation: Where Each Helper Lives

PAST PRESENT FUTURE

Psychologist Coach Mentor

PART 1 - MENTORING

Sharing Experience to Light the Way Forward

What is Mentoring in Early Childhood?

*"None of us got where we are solely by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We got here because somebody bent down and helped us pick up our boots."
— Thurgood Marshall*

Mentoring in Early Childhood: Real Scenarios

NEW TEACHER ONBOARDING: *This is probably the most classic mentoring relationship. The new teacher doesn't just need professional development — they need a human anchor. Someone who's been there. The mentor's role is to say 'I got you' and then deliver on that.*

CAREER PATHWAY: *When someone is thinking about their future, a mentor can be transformational. They can say 'here's what the road looks like from where I've stood' in a way no training can replicate.*

NAVIGATING PROGRAM CULTURE: *This one is underrated. Every program has invisible rules — and a new person can flounder without someone to help them read the room. Mentoring here is deeply practical.*

SPECIALIZED AREAS: *This is where mentoring meets expertise transfer. Not training, not coaching — just: 'let me show you what I know.'*

What do all four of these have in common? The mentor's personal knowledge is the central asset.

Core Mentoring Skills for ECE Leaders

- 01 Active Listening**
Before you share your story, fully receive theirs. Ask: "Tell me more about what's been happening."
- 02 Story-Sharing**
Offer your experiences as gifts, not prescriptions. "What I did when I faced something similar was..." — not "you should..."
- 03 Opening Doors**
Introduce your mentee to people, resources, and opportunities they wouldn't access on their own.
- 04 Honest Feedback**
Real mentors tell the truth kindly. "I want to share something I noticed, and I share it because I believe in your potential."
- 05 Visioning**
Help them see a future for themselves. "Where do you want to be in 3 years?" And then hold that vision with them.
- 06 Boundary-Setting**
Great mentors know what they can and cannot offer. Refer to coaching, HR, or counseling when appropriate.

PART 2 — COACHING

Unlocking What's Already Inside the Practitioner

What is Coaching in Early Childhood?

A good coach can change a game. A great coach can change a life. — John Wooden

Coaching is an art... It takes courage to ask a question rather than offer up advice, provide an answer, or unleash a solution.
— Brené Brown

The ECE Coaching Cycle

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      C((Coaching Cycle)) --- 1((1. Build Relationship))
      C --- 2((2. Observe Practice))
      C --- 3((3. Reflect Together))
      C --- 4((4. Plan & Practice))
      C --- 5((5. Follow Up))
  
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The Coach's Most Powerful Tool: The Question

Great coaching questions are open-ended, non-judgmental, and return ownership to the practitioner.

PART 3 — SIDE BY SIDE

**Coaching vs. Mentoring:
Key Differences**

Coaching vs. Mentoring: At a Glance

Dimension	Mentoring	Coaching
Time Focus	Future (career & growth)	Present (current practice)
Knowledge Source	Mentor's experience & expertise	Practitioner's own insight
Primary Tool	Advice, storytelling, guidance	Powerful questions & observation
Agenda	Shared or mentor-guided	Practitioner-owned
Relationship	Hierarchical (wise → newer)	Collaborative & peer-like
Duration	Longer-term, ongoing	Goal-bound, cyclical visits
Success Looks Like	Career growth, network, vision	Shifted practice in the classroom

Common Mistakes — and How to Course-Correct

1. Prescribing Instead of Coaching
2. Mismatched Expectations
3. Monopolizing the Conversation
4. Applying a One-Size-Fits-All Approach
5. Driving the Train
6. Offering solutions too quickly

When to Mentor. When to Coach. How to Decide.

Ask yourself two questions:

QUESTION 1: Does this person NEED something I have — knowledge, experience, a contact, a specific skill? If yes, mentoring is often the right call.

QUESTION 2: Does this person actually have what they need, and what they need is to think it through? Then coach.

PART 4 — APPLICATION

Putting It Into Practice in Your Program

Scenario Practice: What Would You Do?

Maria is a 2nd-year teacher in your program. She's struggling with circle time — children are wandering, she looks stressed. After a classroom visit, she says: "I just don't know what I'm doing wrong. Maybe I'm not cut out for this."

Building a Coaching & Mentoring Culture in Your Program

Normalize Observations

Model it yourself

Scenario 1 — What's Your Move?

DeShawn has been a lead teacher for 6 years. He is excellent with children but struggles every year with the same issue: family engagement. Attendance at family nights is low, his written communications feel stiff, and a few families have told the director they feel intimidated approaching him. He comes to you and says: "I know family engagement is important, but honestly I've never been good at it. It's just not my strength."

Scenario 1 — The Answer & Why

Put your ideas into the chat

Scenario 2 — What's Your Move?

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Scenario 2 — The Answer & Why

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CLOSING

Bringing It All Together

What to Take With You Today

- 1 **Three helpers — one distinction**
Psychologist = past. Mentor = future. Coach = present. These aren't better or worse. They're for different moments.
- 2 **Mentoring gives. Coaching unlocks.**
Mentors offer their knowledge and experience. Coaches help practitioners access their own. Both are essential in early childhood.
- 3 **The coaching cycle creates change**
Real practice shifts happen through repeated cycles of observation, reflection, planning, and follow-up — not one-off conversations.
- 4 **Questions are the coach's superpower**
Resist the urge to answer. Ask instead. The insight a practitioner generates is more durable than the insight you give them.
- 5 **Be intentional about which hat you wear**
You can mentor and coach. Just not at the same time. Know which role you're in — and be transparent about it with your practitioners.

Thank You

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"The greatest good you can do for another is not just to share your riches, but to reveal to him his own."
— Benjamin Disraeli

Questions? Reflections? Let's keep the conversation going.
