

## Coaching in Home Visiting

Coaching refers to individual professional development shaped by collaborative goal setting between a coach and a professional to promote the professional's attainment and implementation of skills (Walsh et al., in press). The coach typically has expertise or experience with these skills focused on and may, but typically does not, have an ongoing relationship with the professional (e.g., as the professional's supervisor). The coach and professional typically meet at regular intervals to discuss the professional's skill development, and performance-based feedback is often used.

The University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) Home Visiting Training Center has developed and delivered two coaching programs, one for supervisors of home visitors and one for home visitors themselves. The supervisor coaching program focuses on the use of reflective practice and building the home visitor's parent-child interaction coaching skills (<https://homevisitingtraining.umbc.edu/curriculum/supervision-coaching>). The home visitor coaching program focuses on family goal planning (<https://homevisitingtraining.umbc.edu/curriculum/goal-planning-strategies>). Funding for our Training Center and these coaching programs has come from the Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) funding program via the Maryland Department of Health. In this paper we highlight research findings related to coaching, summarize some of the principles that guided the development of our coaching programs, and highlight some lessons we've learned from them.

### 1. Coaching works.

Trainings and workshops are popular ways to introduce new knowledge and skills to a workforce. Research with a variety of early childhood professionals, particularly teachers, demonstrates that coaching develops professional competencies beyond what training alone engenders (Campbell & Milbourne, 2005; Pianta et al., 2008). In fact, workshops often do not have any lasting impact on professional practice (Andrews, Bobo, & Spurlock, 2010; Snyder & Wolfe, 2008). The more frequently coaching occurs, the greater the observed competency development (Pianta, DeCoster, Cabell, Burchinal, Hamre, Downer, LoCasale-Crouch, Wiliford, & Howes, 2014). The provision of performance-based feedback within the coaching relationship may account for much of this benefit, as a wealth of research finds performance-based feedback improves professional practice (Artman-Meeker, Fettig, Barton, Penney, & Zeng, 2015; Casey & McWilliam, 2011; Casillas et al., 2016; Hemmeter, Snyder, Kinder, & Artman, 2011; Pianta et al., 2008).

Despite the strong support for coaching, the major national home visiting models have little observation and coaching built into their professional development plans. Relatedly, the Mother and Infant Home Visiting Program Evaluation (MIHOPE) is a longitudinal study of MIECHV-funded home visiting. MIHOPE has found that coaching is infrequently used with home visitors (Duggan et al., 2018). The limited evidence that exists, however, suggests that coaching has a similar impact on home visitors as other early childhood professionals. For example, Patti Manz and colleagues provided performance-based feedback about a parent-child book sharing curriculum entitled Little Talks and found that it improved program fidelity (Manz et al., 2017). In another project, three home visitors received coaching with performance-based feedback following training (Krick Oborn, 2016). Their use of parenting coaching skills increased after receiving performance-based feedback. When this coaching ended, however, for two of the three home visitors the use of learned skills decreased, suggesting the powerful reinforcing effect that coaching can provide. At UMBC, 81% of home visitors who participated in the goal planning coaching program reported that it improved their goal planning skills. And, although preliminary, anecdotal feedback from the pilot of our supervisor coaching program was similarly positive. After completing coaching with supervisors, we asked home visitors to reflect on any changes they've noticed in their supervisors. A majority of home visitors reported their supervisors used greater reflective

practice. For example, one home visitor reported, “I feel less overwhelmed and stressed! I feel like my supervisor is more engaged and is providing more.....feedback and suggestions when I am struggling.” It’s noteworthy that these positive comments came not just from the home visitor whose supervision sessions were recorded but also from other home visitors supervised. Supervisors seemed to transfer strategies learned during coaching focused on one supervisory relationship to all their supervisory relationships.

**2. Ensure you have willing and able coaches, identify goals important to them, and emphasize what they do well.**

Establishing professional development goals and emphasizing successful skill implementation is implicit in many coaching definitions and models. For example, in their definition of coaching, Bridget Walsh and colleagues state it is “...a relationship- and strengths-based process shaped by collaborative goal setting...” (Walsh et al., in press). In Dathan Rush and M’Lisa Shelden’s early childhood coaching framework, they similarly include joint planning/goal setting and affirmative feedback in their five key characteristics of coaching (Rush & Shelden, 2011).

It remains unclear how consistently goal setting and a strengths-based approach occur in coaching with home visitors. In our research, we interviewed many home visitors and supervisors on their prior experiences with coaching. We were surprised to hear how negative some of the experiences of practice-based coaching have been. The main complaint was that home visitors felt criticized and received suggestions from someone who didn’t take the time to understand the context of the home visitor’s behavior (Shanty & Schultz, manuscript in preparation).

In our coaching programs at UMBC, we try to ensure a positive coaching experience in three main ways. First, during recruitment we talk to not only potential coaches but also their program managers about all training, coaching, and evaluation activities required and the time commitment involved. Ideally participation is voluntary. It has been in our supervisor coaching program, as we have communicated with supervisors individually about participation. In our goal planning coaching program, however, program managers and supervisors agreed to have all home visitors at their agency participate. A few home visitors reported that the experience of having home visits recorded was so anxiety-provoking that, even though they recognized their goal planning skills improved, they were reluctant to recommend the coaching experience to others. Second, we have participants establish goals for themselves. For example, in our supervisor coaching program, at the end of the two days of training, supervisors identify the skills they want to work on during the four months of coaching. That plan becomes the basis for the initial coaching session, in which the supervisor and coach talk through the plan and come to agreed-upon goals. Third, coaching sessions focus on the supervisor’s previous supervision session. Coaches begin each coaching session with the supervisor self-evaluating that session. After discussing these reflections, the coach affirms the supervisor’s reflections and identifies positive strategy use the coach heard in the recording of the previous supervision session. Then the coach identifies one or two areas where the supervisor might have tried a different strategy or skill. To date these approaches, seem to have helped create a good working alliance between our coaches and participants.

**3. Basic counseling techniques serve both coaches and coaches well.**

What skills should be coached? There is no clear or single answer to this question, as the research base on home visitor and supervisor competencies that promote greater engagement and/or improved family outcomes is limited (Home Visiting Research Network, 2013; Korfmacher et al., 2008; Schaefer, 2016). This research largely consists of family, home visitor, or supervisor impressions of the qualities of home visitors who engage families well, with few descriptions of specific skills that relate to outcomes quantitatively (e.g., Caron, Bernard, &

Dozier, 2016). Qualities cited most frequently include relationship and communication skills, such as being empathic, supportive, nonjudgmental, respectful, and friendly (Black, Wenger, & O’Fallon, 2015; Landy, Jack, Wahoush, Sheehan, & MacMillan, 2012; Pharis & Levin, 1991; Schaefer, 2016; Wallach & Lister, 1995; Wasik, 1993; Wasik & Roberts, 1994; Zeanah, Larrieu, Boris, & Nagle, 2006).

Regardless of the specific content focus of coaching, we have found that communication skills that facilitate the above qualities serve both coaches and coaches well. These communication skills are highlighted in Carl Rogers’ client-centered therapy and Miller and Rollnick’s (2013) motivational interviewing techniques. For example, Miller and Rollnick describe open-ended questions, affirmations, reflective listening, and summaries (OARS) as basic communication techniques upon which empathy and a respectful working alliance are built (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). In our coaching programs we include training for both coaches and participants in OARS and other communication techniques. These steps seem to have been successful, as in our goal planning coaching program independent observers found that our three coaches used open-ended questions, affirmations, and reflections in nearly all coaching sessions, although use of summarizing was less consistent. Similarly, home visitors who participated in this project found great value in these skills. In focus groups and interviews with home visitors following coaching, they suggested they ended up focusing on these communication skills during coaching as much as, if not slightly more than, goal planning skills.

#### **4. Let adult learning principles guide what you do.**

A considerable knowledge base exists describing how adults most effectively acquire knowledge and skills (i.e. adult learning principles) and what makes it most likely they will use these skills in practice (i.e., training transfer). We have described these principles and discussed their implications for training of home visitors elsewhere (Schultz et al., 2018) and will provide some examples here of how they relate to our coaching program content. Trivette, Dunst, Hamby, and O’Herin (2009) consolidated previous theories of adult learning principles (e.g., Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998) into six practices, and we use their conceptualization.

The first two practices are to introduce and illustrate the concepts and strategies that are the focus of training. This involves providing a conceptual understanding of the strategy and the benefits of the strategy. It also involves providing concrete examples of the strategy in use by a home visitor or supervisor. For both our coaching programs we have contracted with our university’s media studio to develop video exemplars of strategy use during supervision sessions or home visits. We present and discuss these during trainings, and these also reside on the UMBC Home Visiting Training Center website for ongoing use by coaches and participants throughout the programs (e.g., <https://homevisitingtraining.umbc.edu/curriculum/parent-child-interactions>). Next, professionals need to practice the skill. This ideally occurs in the training and/or coaching sessions. In a performance-based feedback coaching program, the actual supervision sessions or home visits are part of this practice, too. In both our programs we use role play in trainings and/or coaching sessions, and ongoing audio-recording of supervision sessions or home visits is central to the coaching process.

Critical to practice is discussing the professionals’ practice, and the final three adult learning steps of evaluation, reflection, and mastery all relate to aspects of this discussion. Evaluation can take the form of self-evaluation or feedback from another. As stated previously, we include both in our supervisor coaching protocol, first allowing supervisors to self-evaluate based either on their recollection of the last supervision session or their listening to the audio-recording of the session. The coach then affirms these self-evaluations as appropriate, affirms other positive strategy use they heard in the audio-recording, and provides one or two examples of times when the supervisor might have approached the conversation differently. Reflection involves the professional reflecting on feedback they’ve received from the coach, goals for use of the strategies, and/or challenges they might face

when attempting to implement the strategies. Mastery involves having the professional self-assess their strategy use against either an established criteria for the strategy or a conceptual understanding of the strategy and its goals. In addition to discussing some of the preceding questions and issues directly, in each coaching session our coaches have participants reflect upon their progress toward their agreed upon goals, and this discussion helps determine goals for the next supervision session or home visit.

### **5. The parallel process works**

“Parallel process” is a term developed to explain processes that occur in the supervision of counselors. The idea is that when the counselor meets with the client, the counselor will somewhat imitate how the supervisor interacted and/or interacts toward the counselor during supervision sessions. For example, if the supervisor takes time to reflect on the counselor’s feelings more, the counselor may more likely imitate this behavior when meeting with the client. Conversely, sometimes how the counselor behaves toward the supervisor will reflect how the client behaved toward the counselor. In our home visiting coaching programs, we have found parallel processes to unfold in interactions between coaches and home visiting professionals, too. For example, supervisors have reported that following their greater focus on reflective practice or parent-child interactions, they see the same changes in their home visitors’ work with families. Additionally, one supervisor reported that they have incorporated the steps the coach takes in each coaching session—having the supervisor self-reflect, then providing positive feedback about strategy use, and then giving some constructive feedback about strategy use—into their supervision sessions such that they have been able to give more effective constructive feedback to home visitors than they previously did.

### **6. The more perspectives the better, including the professionals own**

Performance-based feedback from another is central to the impact of most coaching. We often have blind spots about how others experience us when we interact with them, and a coach can help us see some of those blind spots and/or provide a different perspective on a situation. A coach can also remind us of the strategies we have been taught but are not currently using. Participants in both programs have noted the usefulness of this feedback from another. Additionally, some participants have reported a benefit of simply listening to their recordings themselves even before receiving feedback from a coach; they were able to identify areas for growth on their own. Following the program one supervisor reported that they have been recommending to other supervisors that they occasionally record their supervision sessions and take the time to listen to them. Mary Dozier and colleagues have found evidence in support of this self-evaluation in implementation of her Attachment and Biobehavioral Checkup program (Dozier, Meade, & Bernard). By having their home visitors simply code five minutes of recordings of their own home visits, home visitors increased their use of “in-the-moment” comments, which involve the home visitor labelling effective strategies caregivers use at the time they use them and linking these strategies to goals of the program and principles of child development. In both our programs we additionally include not just individual coaching sessions but also a few group coaching sessions with the other participants in the program. Participants report added value in these group sessions, as they get to hear the strategies that others are working on and hear feedback from colleagues.

Coaching is underutilized as a professional development tool in home visiting. The evidence for the benefits of coaching from other early childhood professionals is strong, however, and we believe increased opportunities for coaching will strengthen the home visiting workforce. If you are interested in discussing whether or not either of the coaching programs described in this paper might be a good fit for your agency, please contact the UMBC Home Visiting Training Center (<https://homevisitingtraining.umbc.edu/curriculum/contact>).

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