

GUIDE

CONVERSATIONS THAT COUNT:

COACHING & MENTORING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

**Supportive practices for growing
confident, capable educators!**

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CULTIVATING CONFIDENCE & CONNECTION



In early childhood education, **relationships are everything**. The ones we build with children, with families, and with each other shape our daily work and the way we grow in it. Children thrive when they are nurtured, guided, and seen—and so do the educators who care for them.

As a director, your greatest influence often lies not in policies or paperwork, but in the way you support your educators to grow into confident, capable professionals. Two nurturing, powerful, people-centered ways to do this are **coaching** and **mentoring**.

This resource is for anyone leading or working alongside early educators—whether you're a center director, program lead, or a solo in-home provider. We'll explore what coaching and mentoring are, how they're different, and how you can bring them to life in your setting—through simple **weekly rhythms**, **meaningful conversations**, and **intentional reflection**.

COACHING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

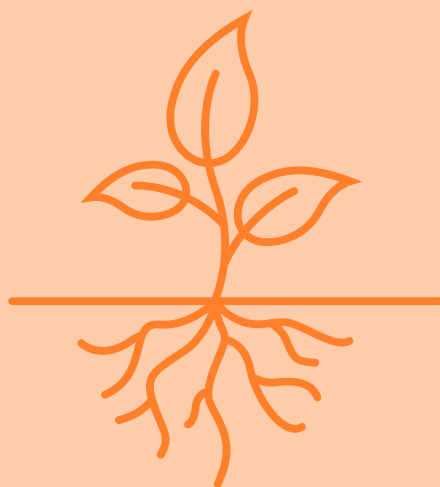
A **strengths-based, collaborative approach**, coaching supports professional growth through reflection, goal-setting, and practice. It's **built on trust, curiosity**, and the belief that the answers often lie within the educator. The coach walks alongside—asking guiding questions, offering feedback, and helping the educator explore strategies and solutions.

Coaching is:

- Rooted in a trusting relationship
- Led by an expert with adult learning knowledge
- Based on specific goals and measurable outcomes
- Short-term and structured
- Focused on building or refining skills and improving performance

Coaching looks like:

- A reflective conversation after an observation
- Setting a shared goal for improving transitions or routines
- Weekly check-ins to discuss what's working and where to grow



Rooted Guidance

Think of coaching as planting seeds, not giving directions. The most meaningful growth often comes from helping educators uncover their own insights—**your role is to walk beside them**, not ahead.

MENTORING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

A development-focused, peer-based relationship, mentoring pairs a more experienced educator with a colleague to offer guidance, encouragement, and perspective. It's less about achieving a single goal and more about nurturing professional identity and confidence over time, rooted in connection, trust, and shared experience.

Mentoring is:

- Relationship-centered and ongoing
- Less formal and more flexible
- Focused on long-term development
- A safe space for conversation, connection, and growth

A mentor:

- Shares stories, insights, and lived experience
- Offers encouragement, advice, and a listening ear
- Supports reflective practice and critical thinking
- Models professional behaviors and dispositions



Walking Together

Mentoring is like walking an old path with a new companion—it's not about having all the answers, but about offering perspective, presence, and a reminder that they're not walking alone.

KEY DIFFERENCES AT A GLANCE



Coaching and mentoring are both powerful, but they serve different purposes. This side-by-side view makes it easy to see how each approach supports educator growth in unique ways.

	FOCUS	STRUCTURE	ROLE	APPROACH	DURATION
COACHING	Performance, practice, short-term goals	Formal, scheduled, structured	Expert guide or external coach	Reflective questioning, feedback loops	Time-bound with clear goalposts
MENTORING	Identity, confidence, long-term growth	Informal, flexible, as-needed	Peer with experience	Shared experiences, stories, advice	Open-ended, evolving

Both coaching and mentoring help educators thrive. One is structured and skill-focused, the other is relational and growth-oriented—and together, they create a balanced support system.

WHY IT MATTERS



Implementing coaching and mentoring practices is about more than professional development. It's about...

● **Fostering Confidence and Value**

Coaching and mentoring help educators recognize their strengths, build new skills, and feel proud of the work they do every day. It's about reminding them that what they bring to the classroom truly matters.

● **Creating Trusting, Collaborative Teams**

When people feel safe to ask questions, share ideas, and learn from one another, something powerful happens—teams become more connected, capable, and aligned. Coaching and mentoring encourage open communication and create the kind of trust that helps teams thrive.

● **Building a Culture of Reflection**

Reflection is where growth begins. Through thoughtful conversations and guided support, coaching and mentoring invite educators to pause, consider, and grow in their practice.

● **Keeping Learning Alive**

Learning doesn't stop once we leave school—it's a lifelong journey. Coaching and mentoring keep curiosity and growth at the heart of the work. When educators are given space to learn and stretch, they stay inspired—and that inspiration spreads to the children they teach.

PRACTICES THAT STRENGTHEN COACHING AND MENTORING

Across both practices, the following values create a safe, growth-rich environment:

Being Present

- Listen with your whole self. Sit beside, not across. Put distractions away.

Asking Reflective Questions

- Instead of giving answers, ask:
 - "What do you think is going on here?"
 - "What might be another way to try this?"

Authentic Communication

- Model how to give kind, helpful, honest feedback. Invite educators to observe each other and reflect gently together.
- Affirm what's working before challenging what can grow.

Follow-through

- Circle back. Revisit past conversations.
- Show that you're paying attention and you care.

Celebrate Growth

- Notice and name even the small wins. A "you did it!" post-it can go a long way.



Remember: You don't need to create a brand-new program. Instead, think of coaching and mentoring as lenses you can wear—ways of being with educators that prioritize reflection, curiosity, and growth.

WEEKLY COACHING PRACTICES



→ WINDOW WALKS

Walk through classrooms weekly with a coaching lens. Observe quietly, take a few notes, and invite the educator into a short reflective conversation later in the day or week.

Try saying something like:

- "I noticed how you supported the children during transitions today. What felt successful? What might you try differently next time?"

→ COACHING CHECK-INS

Set aside time to meet one-on-one with team members. Use these moments to revisit goals, offer feedback, and co-create next steps.

Ask guiding questions like:

- "What's one small change you'd like to try this week?"
- "What's something that felt good this week?"

→ CREATE A "GROWTH WALL"

Set up a staff room visual where educators post personal practice goals. Provide sticky notes so peers (and you!) can leave affirming or thought-provoking comments.

- **Choose one practice to spotlight** center-wide each month (e.g., transitions, routines) and invite everyone to share strategies and progress.

→ SWAP A STRATEGY

Offer one small, actionable practice to try—something quick to implement, such as focusing center-wide on a single practice for the month (e.g., transitions, routines).

WEEKLY MENTORING PRACTICES



➔ "PAIR AND SHARE" MENTORSHIP BUDDIES

Match newer staff with more experienced educators. Encourage short weekly meetups where they can talk through questions, ideas, and challenges.

Starter prompts:

- "What's something that surprised you this week?"
- "Is there something you're unsure about that we can talk through together?"

➔ "STORY SESSIONS"

In staff meetings or PD days, invite mentors to share a quick story about a meaningful classroom experience, challenge, or learning moment. Kick things off with one from your own early days—something honest and imperfect. Storytelling like this builds connection, shares wisdom, and reminds everyone that growth takes time.

➔ "REFLECTION JOURNALS"

Invite educators to keep short weekly journals and share entries (if they choose) with a mentor or during team reflection times.

Prompt them to answer:

- "One thing I noticed about myself as a teacher this week..."

➔ AFFIRM THE JOURNEY

Send a quick note or message with something like:

"I've been noticing your confidence growing. You're really stepping into your role, and it shows."

IDEAS FOR IN-HOME PROVIDERS

Coaching and mentoring can be just as impactful for in-home providers—it just takes a little creativity. Here are a few ways to stay connected and supported:

Virtual Coaching

- Reach out to your state's Quality Rating & Improvement System (QRIS) or local CCR&R (Child Care Resource & Referral) agency. Many offer free or low-cost coaching virtually.
- Look into national coaching networks like [Child Care Aware](#) or [Zero to Three](#).

Find Your Circle

- Join a local or online provider group (Facebook, Meetup, etc.).
- Set up a regular call with another provider to check in, share stories, and swap ideas.

Keep a Learning Journal

- Each week, jot down:
 - One thing that worked well
 - One thing you're wondering about
 - One new idea to try
- Reflect on it with a mentor or coach every few months

Ask for a Mentor

- Many experienced providers are happy to offer guidance. Ask your licensing rep or local early childhood network if they can connect you with someone.

LET THE LEARNING IN

Here are some simple ways to get the most out of your coaching or mentoring journey:



- **Stay Curious:** You don't need all the answers. Ask questions, wonder out loud, and say "I'm not sure yet." That's where learning lives.
- **Notice What's Working:** Pay attention to moments that feel smooth, joyful, or connected. Your coach or mentor can help you build on those—but you have to notice them first.
- **Try Something New:** Growth often feels uncomfortable—that's normal. Test out a strategy, shift a response, and remember: trying is a win. Mistakes are part of the process.
- **Take What You Need:** Not everything will fit, and that's okay. Choose what supports you, your classroom, and your values. Trust your instincts—leave the rest.
- **Speak Up with Kindness:** Strong coaching relationships are built on trust. If something's not working, ask for what you need—kindly and with care.
- **Celebrate Wins, Big and Small:** Growth matters. Celebrate what you've tried, learned, and how far you've come—even the small steps.

HERE'S TO THE JOURNEY

In the essential work of caring for young children, educators hold a thousand moments each day—moments of guiding tiny hands, noticing unspoken feelings, answering questions with love, and planting seeds of wonder. But who holds the educators?

Coaching and **mentoring** offer that holding. They're not just strategies—they're **human connections** that say:

- You matter here.
- You don't have to know it all.
- Let's grow together.

When directors embed coaching and mentoring into their programs, they are building cultures of **learning**, **collaboration**, and **reflection**—where teachers feel safe to try, stumble, wonder, and rise again.

So here's to the journey.

To sitting side-by-side, asking thoughtful questions.

To seeing each other clearly.

To leading with heart.



**When educators feel seen,
heard, and supported, they
stay. They grow. And the
children grow with them.**

Activity Printables



I LOVED VISITING YOUR ROOM TODAY!

Here are some amazing things I observed during my window walk:



 One idea to try:

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Here are some amazing things I observed during my window walk:



 One idea to try:

Coaching Check-In Snapshot

Name _____

→ What's one practice you tried this week?

→ What worked well about it?

→ What's one adjustment you want to make next time?

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Mentoring Reflection Snapshot

Name _____

→ What's a story or moment that stayed with you this week?

→ What's one piece of advice or insight you gained?

→ How will this support your growth moving forward?

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Growth Wall





MY GOAL:



MY GOAL:



MY GOAL:



MY GOAL:



**I SEE YOU
GROWING IN...**



**HAVE YOU
TRIED...**



**YOUR GOAL
INSPIRED ME TO...**



**I APPRECIATE
HOW YOU...**



**I APPRECIATE
HOW YOU...**



**I APPRECIATE
HOW YOU...**



**I APPRECIATE
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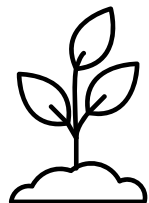
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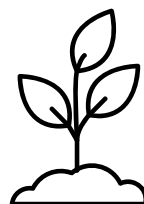
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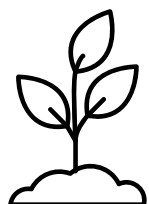
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**I SEE YOU
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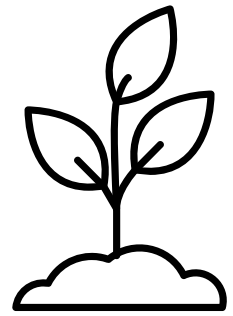
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MENTOR REFLECTION JOURNAL

A space to slow down, reflect, and grow together. Use these prompts to look back on your week—jot quick notes or write more deeply. This journal is yours, but you're welcome to share with a mentor or during team reflection.



This Week I Noticed...

(What stood out to you this week in your practice, your team, or the children?)



A Moment That Mattered...

(Describe a small moment that felt meaningful. What did it teach you?)



Something I'm Wondering About...

(Is there a question or curiosity that's come up in your teaching?)



A Challenge I Faced...

(What was hard this week? How did you respond, & what might help next time?)



Something I'm Proud Of...

(Big or small—what's something you did this week that you're proud of?)



My Focus for Next Week...

(What intention or practice do you want to carry into the week ahead?)

COLLABORATION

BUILT BY EDUCATORS, FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

This resource was created in collaboration with dedicated educators and school leaders who brought their experience, ideas, and insight to every step of the process. We're grateful for their partnership in building tools that truly make a difference in schools.



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