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CENTER FOR STATES

# Supporting Quality Contacts Through Supervisor-Worker Coaching

*This tip sheet offers one-on-one coaching techniques aimed at enhancing the quality of caseworker contacts with children, youth, and families.*

Quality contacts between caseworkers and children, youth, and parents are the foundation of positive family engagement and a cornerstone of effective child welfare practice. They provide critical opportunities for caseworkers to build working relationships with family members, jointly develop and monitor case plans, assess child safety and permanency, and promote child and family well-being (Atif & National Resource Center for Child Protective Services, 2010). Coaching is one key strategy that supervisors or other staff can use to help workers build their competence and confidence in conducting quality contacts. Coaching can support workers in improving their skills, thinking critically, and transferring learning from training to everyday practice (Akin, 2016; Antle, Sullivan, Barbee, & Christensen, 2010; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Hafer, & Brooks, 2013). Through coaching, supervisors also can model strength-based practices that workers can apply in their work with families (North Carolina Division of Social Services, 2011).

## A few definitions...

**Quality contacts** are “purposeful interactions that reflect engagement and contribute to assessment and case planning processes. These face-to-face interactions often are referred to as ‘home visits’ or ‘caseworker visits’” (Capacity Building Center for States, 2017, p. 1).

**Coaching** is defined as “a process by which the coach creates structured, focused interaction with learners and uses appropriate strategies, tools, and techniques to promote desirable and sustainable change for the benefit of the learner, making a positive impact on the organization” (Hafer & Brooks, 2013, p. 72, adapted from Mink, Owen, & Mink 1993; Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2010).

## Key Characteristics of Coaching

Similar to the ways a coach works with an athlete to help him or her excel at sports, a coach in the workplace can maximize a worker’s potential and performance (Whitmore, 2009). Coaches use deliberate and thought-provoking strategies to guide learners in achieving their goals (Beasley, 2012).

Coaching may take different forms but typically reflects the following qualities or characteristics (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2013):

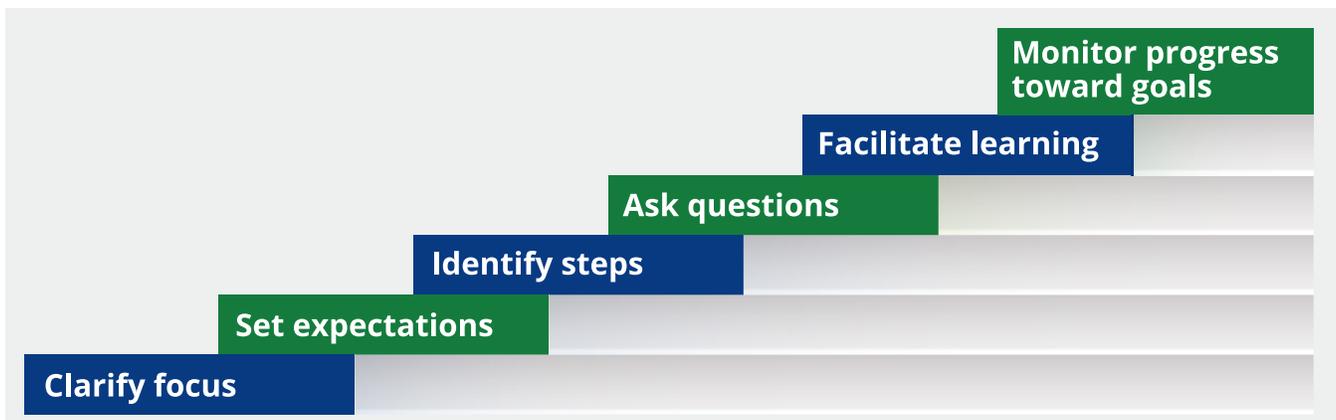
- **Relationship based:** Coaching is grounded in an open and trusting relationship between a coach and a learner. To build a successful coaching relationship, research suggests that supervisors should build trust, demonstrate empathy, pay attention to individual needs, and create a positive feedback environment (Gregory & Levy, 2011).
- **Goal oriented:** The coaching process typically begins by co-creating specific goals that benefit both the individual and the agency.

- **Customized:** Coaching is not delivered in a “one-size-fits-all” package; rather, the supervisor tailors the coaching approach to the worker’s strengths, needs, goals, and learning style.
- **Growth oriented:** Coaching integrates feedback and reflection to encourage the worker’s development. To promote success, coaches must create a safe learning environment that supports experimentation, reflection, and learning from mistakes (Hafer & Brooks, 2013).
- **Ongoing:** Coaching typically occurs in multiple sessions over time.

## Common Coaching Steps

Coaching can be part of a formal program, using a specific model and strategies, or can be used informally in supervisor-worker interactions, such as individual supervision or emergency consultations. Regardless of the coaching model used, coaching often includes the steps shown in exhibit 1 (Bernotavicz, 2013). These steps are outlined below, along with tips and sample questions for supervisors to ask workers.

### Exhibit 1. Core Steps in Coaching\*



\*Adapted from steps identified by Bernotavicz (2013, p. 109)

### Clarify Focus and Roles

Coaching begins with the supervisor and worker working together to clarify the desired focus. To support quality contacts, the focus may vary according to each worker’s strengths and areas for development (e.g., planning purposeful visits, engaging family members, conducting assessments, or setting boundaries).

During this initial stage, it also is important to clarify roles as coach and coachee. The supervisor and worker should have a shared understanding of what coaching is (a working alliance that supports learning) and is not (counseling or performance evaluation).

**Tip:** Written coaching agreements can set the groundwork for the coaching process. They can stand alone or be built into supervision notes. Find examples at <http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/coaching.htm>.

#### Coaching for Quality Contacts: Questions to Clarify Focus and Roles

- In what aspects of conducting caseworker visits are you most comfortable? Least comfortable?
- Can you identify an upcoming visit in which we can focus on planning and conducting purposeful visits (or another identified challenge)?
- What would you like to be able to do differently? Why?
- What will success look like?
- How can coaching help?
- What is your understanding of the coaching process and our roles?

## Set Expectations

As part of expectation setting, the supervisor and worker codetermine reasonable coaching goals. It may help to think in terms of specific behaviors the worker is trying to change. Setting and documenting coaching goals can help promote clarity about the purpose of the coaching process and support later assessment of whether the worker has made progress in desired areas. During each new coaching session, the supervisor and worker revisit the goals and review what the worker has accomplished since the last session.

**Tip:** Make goals SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time limited.

## Identify Next Steps

The supervisor and worker collaboratively identify necessary steps to achieve desired goals. Conversations about next steps might include a discussion of what the worker has tried in the past and exploration of current options. Steps will include the application of new strategies, skills, and competencies for achieving quality contacts.

**Tip:** Use the “[Quality Contact Casework Activities Worksheet](#)” to help identify areas for further attention. For example, ask the worker to complete the worksheet after upcoming visits and then discuss.

## Ask Questions

One of the most powerful coaching techniques is asking questions that will help workers think for themselves and find their own answers. To do this effectively, the supervisor/coach must accept that a question usually has more than one “right” answer and demonstrate openness in hearing approaches that may differ from his or her own (Atlantic Coast Child Welfare Implementation Center, 2013). Some supervisors find it difficult not to jump in and suggest a solution when workers present a problem. Recognize, however, that people are more likely to take action and become empowered if they had a part in coming up with the solution (Rush & Shelden, 2012).

As coach, the supervisor not only asks questions but also actively listens to responses. This requires attentiveness to what the worker is saying as well as his or her body language and then clarifying, reflecting back, and summarizing what was heard.

**Tip:** Ask open-ended questions (i.e., those that workers cannot answer with a “yes” or “no” response). These often begin with “what” or “how.” Give workers some time to think before they respond to questions.

## Employ Other Techniques to Facilitate Learning

In addition to asking questions, coaches use one, or a mix, of other techniques that facilitate learning. Shown in exhibit 2, these can include demonstrating and observing, providing feedback, creating awareness of opportunities, reframing, connecting past successes to current challenges, and other strategies that promote reflection and encourage growth. These learning techniques can deepen the worker’s understanding and inspire self-directed action (Northern California Training Academy, Center for Human Services, & Casey Family Programs, 2012). To support learning, supervisors also may tap other agency resources (e.g., arranging for a worker to “shadow” a more experienced worker).

### Coaching for Quality Contacts: Asking Questions

- How are you doing with planning for visits (or other identified focus area)?
- What approaches have helped to keep your visits focused and purposeful?
- What can you learn from your most recent visit? From training or shadowing activities?
- What worked well that you would continue to do in the future?
- What could you do differently in the future to keep visits focused on your agenda? How will that help?
- How can I support you in preparing for future visits?

## Exhibit 2. Coaching Techniques to Facilitate Learning

Coaching Technique	Approach	Sample Application for Quality Contacts
Demonstrating, practicing, and observing	Model a behavior or task and then observe the worker replicating it with families (in practice, or by reviewing documentation and discussing).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shadowing and observing a home visit</li> <li>Role playing difficult conversations</li> </ul>
Providing feedback	Provide specific and constructive feedback that identifies strengths and areas for improvement and encourages efforts to move forward.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reassessing case closure criteria</li> <li>Reviewing and offering feedback on visit documentation</li> </ul>
Creating awareness of opportunities	Encourage worker reflection and exploration of alternatives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reflecting on strategies for engaging children, youth, and parents</li> <li>Identifying training opportunities to deepen skills</li> </ul>
Reframing	Help the worker think about a situation from a different perspective (e.g., shifting from a negative to a positive viewpoint).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supporting workers in getting “unstuck” in their interactions</li> <li>Allowing workers to see new opportunities for a family</li> </ul>
Connecting past successes to new challenges	Praise strengths and accomplishments of the family and the worker and help him or her see connections to current and future situations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helping workers find family strengths</li> <li>Helping workers to recognize their own strengths</li> </ul>

Supervisors also may use these techniques during other steps in the coaching process, including clarifying goals or monitoring progress. Across coaching techniques, supervisors should be mindful of any cultural considerations that may affect the worker’s behaviors, interactions, and receptiveness to coaching supports.

**Tip:** Focus coaching conversations on building solutions for the future rather than problems in the past.

### Monitor Progress Toward Goals

As coaching progresses, the supervisor and worker regularly review progress together and adjust action plans as needed. The supervisor should routinely explore with the worker how to best support him or her in meeting identified goals. By documenting the coaching sessions and observed progress, the supervisor creates a concrete record that can support reflection and future planning.

**Tip:** Use coaching for professional development apart from performance evaluation. For a successful coaching partnership, staff need freedom to experiment and fail (Bernotavicz, 2013).

#### Coaching for Quality Contacts: Questions to Reflect on Progress

- How would you assess your progress toward your goals for planning purposeful visits (or other identified area)?
- What has helped you to reach your goals? What has served as barriers?
- What insights have you gained that you might apply to future visits?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “not at all confident” and 10 being “very confident,” how would you rate your confidence in planning purposeful visits (or other specific aspect of a quality contact)? What would it take to move that rating up a number?
- What new goals are you ready to work toward?

## Conclusion

Coaching can be a valuable tool in a supervisor’s “toolbox” for building caseworker competence for having quality contacts with families. By asking purposeful questions and using other strategies that promote self-reflection and learning, supervisors can help caseworkers overcome challenges, identify solutions, strengthen thinking skills and confidence, and make progress toward goals. Coaching also can offer opportunities for a “parallel process” in which the supervisor models behaviors that caseworkers can use in conducting quality contacts with families (e.g., setting expectations, engaging in reflective questioning, and providing constructive feedback). During coaching sessions, supervisors also can demonstrate attributes that contribute to engagement and relationship building (e.g., genuineness, empathy, and respect). As such, coaching can have an impact on multiple levels that ultimately contribute to effective practices and positive outcomes for children and families.

## Additional Resources

### Quality Matters: Improving Caseworker Contacts With Children, Youth, and Families

This suite of products addresses various aspects of quality contacts in child welfare and includes a foundational issue brief, a video series with learning tools, and several specialized tip sheets. Access suite resources at <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/foster-care-permanency/quality-matters/>.

### Coaching in Child Welfare

This Center for States issue brief discusses coaching benefits, functions, models, and strategies. Access at <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/workforce/>.

### Coaching Resource Search

The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute offers links to training guides, webinars, reports, and other resources related to coaching and mentoring in child welfare available at <http://ncwwi.org/index.php/component/jak2filter/?Itemid=396&isc=1&searchword=coach>.

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**Quality Matters**  
Improving Caseworker Contacts  
With Children, Youth, and Families

To learn more about quality contacts and related Center for States publications and learning tools, visit the **Quality Matters: Improving Caseworker Contacts With Children, Youth, and Families** webpage at <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/foster-care-permanency/quality-matters>

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