Tiered Coaching as Professional Development in Early Intervention: The Kansas Early Years Model

Peggy Miksch, M.S., David P. Lindeman, Ph.D., Kathleen Kyzar, Ph.D., and Ann Turnbull, Ed.D.

Kansas Early Years Mentor Coaching

Kansas Early Years uses mentor coaching as its means of supporting early intervention practitioners in translating knowledge they gain from Kansas Early Years online professional development modules to their practice. This approach has the advantage of prioritizing concepts and techniques from research on mentoring and coaching. We define mentor coaching as reciprocal interactions mentor coaches and practitioners use for reflecting on and applying empathetic communication, trusting partnerships, and evidence-based practice in work with families. Reciprocal interaction refers to mutual learning between mentor coaches and practitioners, which builds trust and benefits both partners.

Kansas Early Years Tiered Coaching Model for Mentors and Learners

Kansas Early Years identified the need for coaching to occur at two distinct levels. The first is the interaction between the mentor coach and the Kansas Early Years materials and/or staff. This interaction is designed to provide needed support to the mentors who will guide the learners. Mentors complete self assessments to determine their needed level of support. The second level is the reciprocal relationship between mentor coaches and learners who are completing the online modules. At the second level, mentor coaches and learners jointly determine the necessary amount of support.

We have designed the Kansas Early Years mentor coaching to be based on strengths of mentor coaches, local service programs, and learners within programs. We realize that early intervention programs include mentor coaches and learners whose experience and expertise are on a continuum. Some mentor coaches have years of experience in coaching in early intervention. Other mentor coaches are strong in some of these respects but need more information in other areas. Some learners may request minimal guidance from an experienced mentor, such as being a sounding board or brainstorming when challenges arise. These learners already have strong foundations in implementing evidence-based practices in early intervention. Other learners may need someone to join them on home visits or to observe mentor coach modeling practices in home visitation opportunities. This may be their first experience in early intervention.

Recognition of this continuum of need is the basis for Kansas Early Years’ tiered model of mentor coaching. The need for multiple strategies to support adult learners to master content and to transfer content to job-embedded application finds support in the literature on coaching and adult learning (Cornett & Knight, 2008; Dunst & Trivette, 2012; Ridgley, Snyder, McWilliam, & Davis, 2011; Snyder, Hemmeter & Fox, 2011; Trivette & Dunst, 2009; Trivette, Dunst, Hamby & O’Herin, 2009). Like mentor coaching, the tiered model is
grounded in the Kansas Early Years foundational steps of trusting partnerships, empathetic communication, and evidence-based practices.

**Intensity of Support for Mentor Coaches**

For mentor coaches to be most effective, Kansas Early Years staff strongly believes that they must have access to professional development. To ensure this access, a component of Kansas Early Years is a professional development model for tiered support of mentor coaches.

Figure 1 illustrates the professional development model for Kansas Early Years mentor coaches.
Within each tier, mentor coaches offer support in the context of empathetic communication, trusting partnerships, and evidence-based practice.

**Tier One**
Tier One strategies should be useful for *all* mentor coaches. Kansas Early Years provides the basic materials for this low intensity support. Mentor coaches at this level of support are those individuals with experience in guiding the learning of others. Mentor coaches receive support though their use of (a) Kansas Early Years modules, (b) written support materials, (c) module activities, and (d) the Mentor Coaching Guidebook.

**Tier Two**
Tier Two strategies should be useful for *some* mentor coaches. Mentor coaches will have checklists to determine whether they need or want more support at increased intensity levels. In other cases, mentor coaches and supervisors might review checklists together, and supervisors might direct mentor coaches to these levels of support. Examples of Tier Two support include attendance in Kansas Early Years webinars or participation in web-based communities of practice.

**Tier Three**
Tier Three strategies should be useful for *a few* mentor coaches. Mentor coaches will use the checklists referenced in Tier Two, completing self-assessments to determine whether they need or want support at high levels of intensity. In other cases, mentor coaches and supervisors might review checklists together, then decide the mentor coaches need higher levels of intensity of support. Examples of Tier Three support include one-on-one support, either in person or virtually, through use of computer based or video conferencing.

Once determined that a mentor coach needs specific support within one of the tiers, an individualized plan of support is designed within that tier. When supported at the appropriate levels, mentor coaches can, in turn, support learners at varied levels of intensity. The Kansas Early Years tiered coaching model provides options for support in and among three tiers.

**Intensity of Support for Kansas Early Years Learners**
Mentor coaches should create supportive environments for learners to translate new knowledge and skills into their daily practice as learners move through the Kansas Early Years online curriculum. In the Kansas Early Years mentor coaching component, mentor coaches support learners to find potential solutions to challenging practice issues and to apply what they learn.

Table 1 outlines the meeting sequence, materials, and tasks available to mentor coaches and learners for use in weekly mentor coaching meetings:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence</th>
<th>Material(s)</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
<th>Justification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session completion</td>
<td>Mentor Coach Guidebook</td>
<td>Mentor coaches must read the Mentor Coach Guidebook to enhance their understanding of sequence, materials, and tasks used in meetings.</td>
<td>Enables mentor coaches to be familiar with sequence, materials, and tasks associated with mentor coach meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online module</td>
<td>Mentor coaches complete sessions at least one week before learners do.</td>
<td>Enables mentor coaches to prepare well for each meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Mentor Coaching Conversation Guide</td>
<td>Mentor coaches review questions in blank form. Learners complete forms.</td>
<td>Gives mentor coaches a structured way to start conversations with learners. The pairs can adapt conversations to individual needs of learners and programs. This generates mentor awareness of learners’ questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentor Coaching Action Plan</td>
<td>Each meeting starts with reviewing the Mentor Coaching Action Plan and ends with updating the plan.</td>
<td>Establishes action plan with identified steps for the following week. Plan will support learners’ application of information presented in Kansas Early Years session on which learner is working.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2 illustrates the tiered coaching model for Kansas Early Years learners.

**Figure 2**

**Intensity of Support for Kansas Early Years Learners**

- **Greater Intensity/Duration**
  - Focused action plan with identified outcomes for home visit
  - Mentor coach modeling during home visit
  - Videotapes for analysis and feedback

- **Some**
  - Peer to peer support
  - Modeling of practice and/or strategies within mentor coaching meetings (e.g. role plays)
  - Observations during home visit paired with feedback

- **Few**
  - Weekly coaching meetings
  - Mentor coaching activities provided in Early Years materials
  - Action plans for practice of specific skills

- **Less Intensity/Duration**

**Tier One**

Tier One should be useful for *all* learners. Examples of Tier One support include (a) weekly coaching meetings, (b) following the mentor coaching activities provided in Kansas Early Years materials, and (c) development of action plans for practice of specific skills.

**Tier Two**

Tier Two should be useful for *some* learners. This tier provides guided questions and checklists for mentor coaches to use with learners to determine whether they need support.
Guided questions and checklists are specific to practices and strategies of modules in which learners are engaged. Offered near the completion of modules, guided questions and checklists serve as a needs assessment to determine mastery of module content. Examples of support in Tier Two include (a) engaging in peer-to-peer support (e.g. peer observation during a home visit), (b) participating in role playing and modeling of practice and/or strategies within coaching meetings, (c) being observed by mentor coaches during home visits, and (d) analyzing observations during mentor coaching sessions.

**Tier Three**

Tier Three should be useful for a few learners. This tier also provides guided questions and checklists for mentor coaches to use with learners to determine whether they need support. The guided questions and checklists are specific to practices and strategies of modules in which learners are engaged, and, offered near the completion of modules, they serve as a needs assessment to determine mastery of module content. Examples of support in Tier Three include (a) developing a focused action plan with identified outcomes for a home visit, (b) having mentor coach modeling a specific strategy during home visit, and (c) using videotapes for analysis and feedback.

**References**


This project is supported in part by a grant from the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE).