



# Core Competencies for Coaches

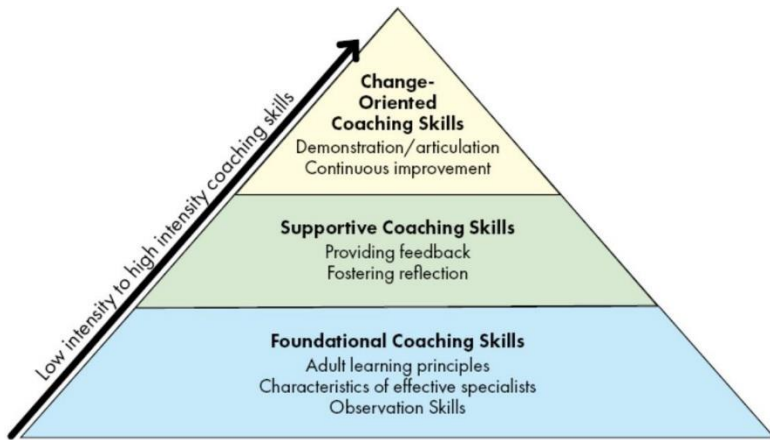
## Overview

Competencies are defined as an individual's demonstrable abilities that can be observed or otherwise assessed. The competencies in this document represent core strategies that coaches can use to scaffold educators' ability to provide children with high quality and impactful experiences, interactions, and instruction.

Individualized coaching is a promising strategy for improving the quality of children's learning experiences. Coaching models have been linked to gains in educators' self-efficacy and can increase practitioners' use of effective instructional strategies, which, in turn, may help practitioners to feel more effective and reflective in their teaching practices. Despite this promise of coaching, there continues to be mixed research support for its effectiveness as a professional development model, likely due to poorly defined coaching processes across the field of education. Unclear coaching processes can undermine the effectiveness of coaching and result in missed opportunities to improve instruction and, ultimately, student outcomes. A goal of this document is to increase the transparency of quality coaching strategies to support alignment and implementation of effective practice across all coaching contexts. Using this competency-based framework naturally supports quality improvement efforts because it articulates specific behaviors that can be set as goals, practiced, and observed for improvement.

Over the past 20 years, the Children's Learning Institute (CLI) has established a significant body of research and implementation expertise in the development and investigation of coaching-based professional development models for early childhood educators. Repeated implementation and refinement of our model has helped us to isolate the coaching behaviors that we hypothesize are contributors to practitioner change independent of intervention content or grade level. Thus, the competencies included in this document are generalizable across varied coaching contexts and can be applied to most age levels and programs.

There are six categories of competency: characteristics of effective specialists, observation, providing feedback, fostering reflective thinking, demonstration and verbal cues, and supporting continuous improvement. Each competency may be demonstrated during one-on-one conversations with practitioners (e.g., feedback conversations), during instruction or interactions with children (e.g., during co-teaching), or in both contexts. Coach-practitioner interactions can be focused on classroom management, children's behavior, or children's skill development.



Each of the six coaching competencies are clustered across three tiers: foundational, supportive, and change-oriented competencies (McLeod, Hardy, & Grifenhagen, 2019). The three tiers are progressive, with foundational coaching skills representing a core set of knowledge and competencies that are necessary to demonstrate

the other two tiers of competencies. This framework works concurrently with structural supports (e.g., coaching duration) and content focus areas (e.g., knowledge of evidence-based practices and early learning outcomes).

Coming soon: Coaches will be able to earn micro-credentials across the six areas by demonstrating individual competencies via video submissions or other artifacts. Please contact Dr. Varghese for more information (Cheryl.A.Varghese@uth.tmc.edu). Information will also be posted on cliengage.org when the micro-credential system launches. The micro-credentials will be linked to the Texas Early Childhood Professional Development System (TECPDS), automatically updating the education and credentials for early childhood professionals with personal TECPDS accounts.

### Using This Document:

- **Coaches, Mentors, Specialists:** Professionals who provide direct coaching services to educators can use this document to self-assess current skill levels, set goals for improvement, and track improvements. Used over time, the tool supports self-reflection and differentiation of skill levels (i.e., identification of competencies demonstrated but needing further improvement). By looking at gaps across the six areas, coaches are able to identify where additional training and learning is needed, allowing for targeted professional development decisions that build specific skill sets.
- **Program Administrators:** Professionals who are responsible for managing, implementing, and evaluating programs can use this document to identify areas of need, create targeted professional development plans, and evaluate the appropriateness of existing trainings. The framework can also be used to develop detailed job descriptions and reward coaches who engage in improvement efforts and demonstrate increasing levels of competence.
- **Policymakers and Program Leaders:** Individuals responsible for high-stakes decisions, policies, and programs can use the competencies to create and implement policies and initiatives that support quality improvement and professionalism of coaching services.

Note about terms: in reviewing the competencies, the term “practitioner” is used for any early childhood professional receiving coaching services, including teachers, directors, administrators, educators, specialists, etc.



# Core Competency Area 1: Characteristics of Effective Specialists

Coaches are able to create an environment that supports adult learners' efficacy and capacity for implementing evidence-based practices when they establish positive and supportive relationships with educators. Adult learning is shaped by prior knowledge and experience, and for some adults, this can serve as a barrier to learning and practicing new strategies. Establishing relationships that promote open communication, experimentation, and two-way feedback can increase receptivity to new approaches and mitigate resistance from educators. Coaches also build relationships with school leaders to increase understanding and alignment around improvement goals, support needed, and progress. Effective coaches continually reflect and improve on their interactions with educators to ensure that they are responsive to their professional and learning needs. Positive and supportive interactions between coaches and educators are **foundational** for the success of coaches' feedback and guidance to educators. The competencies in this section address the core knowledge and skills needed to promote strong collaboration and good working relationships between coaches and practitioners.

## Characteristics of Effective Specialists Competencies

### Flexibility, Respect, and Accountability

- Reflects on one's own biases and perspectives on adult learning to help maintain objectivity, respect, and flexibility with learner(s) throughout interactions with educators
- Understands that individual and/or cultural differences (e.g., national origin, age, professional status) can impact learning preferences, and shows consideration for differences when developing strategies to meet the practitioner's needs
- Shows respect to all learners and avoids using any verbal or nonverbal characterizations of diverse individuals or groups
- Shows flexibility by making accommodations for practitioner preferences that do not alter the content and effectiveness of the training or coaching
- Respects the practitioner's authority in the classroom (e.g., refrains from unnecessary interruptions during instruction or interactions)
- Shows respect by moving on once learner demonstrates understanding (i.e., avoids repeated explanations or demonstrations of concepts the practitioner has grasped)

- Recognizes and responds sensitively if practitioner shows discomfort or resistance
- Shares leadership during activities intended to increase practitioner problem solving and decision-making skills
- Ensures that personal content knowledge is deep enough to support practitioners, and connects those who need additional information with the right resources
- Refrains from promising answers that will not be delivered, and informs practitioner(s) when an exact answer is not known
- Solicits and accepts critical feedback about one's training or coaching style, demeanor, and content, then integrates feedback to improve the quality of practitioners' experiences

## **Communication**

- Maintains a positive, approachable, and attentive demeanor during classroom/site visits or coaching sessions
- Creates and sustains a safe learning environment that encourages experimentation with new ideas, reflection on practices, and questioning
- Uses verbal and nonverbal language that is positive in content and tone
- Values the practitioner by responding sensitively to practitioner's comments and questions
- Encourages the practitioner to talk about their own interests and challenges
- Provides positive encouragement to motivate the practitioner to try new strategies and/or practices or persist when implementation challenges arise
- Reinforces existing positive practices by providing specific feedback (e.g., highlighting the connections between teaching behaviors and child response and understanding, connections between staff development plans and increased staff qualifications)
- Allows practitioner time and space to talk by avoiding heavy reliance on summary or declarative statements



## Core Competency Area 2: Observation Skills

These competencies describe the core knowledge and skills needed to understand the purpose, benefits, and uses of coach observation and evaluation. Observation and evaluation serves multiple purposes in the context of coaching, including a) assessing and understanding practitioners' individual needs, b) gathering evidence of practitioner and/or student behaviors for feedback to practitioners, and c) gathering data and feedback to evaluate and improve practitioners' classroom practices. Coaches' observational skills are also often **foundational** for many of the other coaching competencies (e.g., coaches must have good observation skills to provide accurate feedback). Coaches must consider the methods and tools (e.g., formal, informal, norm-referenced observation tools) most appropriate for the purpose of the observation and/or evaluation.

Additionally, coaches should account for the ways that the information from the observations and/or evaluation will be analyzed, reported, and used. Clear communication with practitioners about what to expect before, during, and after observations can alleviate anxieties about observations, maintain professionalism, and establish coaching routines.

### Observation Skills Competencies

- Remains objective, noting only what is seen or heard (i.e., does not make inferences about a practitioner's meaning or intentions)
- Manages cultural and individual biases (e.g., does not allow speech/dialect/casual register to affect observations in irrelevant areas; avoids sympathizing with target)
- Uses neutral verbal and nonverbal communication during formal observations to avoid inadvertently influencing classroom interactions (e.g., assessor avoids sitting down with a child who is painting and saying, "Wow, what are you painting today?" which could prompt the educator to sit with another child and start a conversation about his or her work)
- Sets clear expectations for what to expect before, during, and after observation period (e.g., how long the observation will be, the extent of your interactions during observation, when they will receive feedback)
- Practices good note-taking that provides sufficient details and specific evidence to support feedback conversations or completion of assessment instruments
- Prioritizes constructive observational feedback to share with the practitioner in a way that is not overwhelming (e.g., even though there may be many areas for feedback, the coach

selects a few to work on with the practitioner)

- Recognizes when to terminate an observation and/or report an incident (e.g., child mistreatment)



## Core Competency Area 3: Providing Feedback

The competencies in this section address the core knowledge and skills needed to provide practitioners with strong feedback that is constructive, succinct, and focused. This set of coaching competencies are considered to be **supportive** because the coach is helping to facilitate awareness and understanding of best practices. Feedback should always occur in the context of positive and supportive interactions between the practitioner and coach. Coaches are responsible for providing feedback that is accurate and evidence-informed and for refraining from providing feedback that is outside their area of expertise. During feedback sessions, coaches give opportunities for practitioners to seek clarification, discuss strategies or solutions, and engage in back-and-forth conversations. Finally, coaches' feedback is a starting point for helping practitioners to identify areas for improvement in their instructional and professional practices.

### Providing Feedback Competencies

#### Content-Focused Feedback

- Uses content-focused language that references key learning objectives during feedback conversations (coach has to use domain specific language)
- Refers to relevant national, state, or program learning guidelines during feedback conversations (e.g., Infant, Toddler, and Three-Year-Old Early Learning Guidelines; Texas Rising Star Standards for Family Involvement)
- Refers to behaviors or standards within observational/program assessment tools used to track practitioner's performance in order to reinforce the connection between practitioner's performance data and implementation
- Provides content-focused feedback that references and builds upon what the practitioner already knows about skill development, pedagogy, and evidence-based practice

#### Feedback Communication Characteristics

- Succinctly summarizes events or interactions to allow ample time for discussion and back-and-forth conversation
- Stays focused on feedback that fits the current instructional and interaction feedback context (avoids drifting into topics not tightly matched to the situation)
- Quickly corrects misunderstandings in content or instructional practices in the moment rather than waiting until the coaching session is over



- Delivers constructive feedback that includes possible solutions or opportunities for growth; shows respect rather than condescension

## **Actionable Feedback**

- Provides adaptations, modifications, or extensions to improve future delivery of instruction or support
- Provides opportunities for immediate practice by recommending adaptations, modifications, or extensions to improve instructional delivery or interactions in the moment and when the coach is present to provide support
- Builds on what the practitioner is already doing by providing actionable feedback that pushes for more skilled practice and supports more complex, sophisticated implementation of evidence-based practice



## Core Competency Area 4: Fostering Reflective Thinking

Coaches engage in reflective conversations with educators so that they become independent problem solvers who are able to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their practice. Practitioners who reflect on their classroom instruction are better positioned to adapt and modify their instruction to make it more effective. Strategies such as open-ended questions/prompts with adequate wait time encourage practitioners to adopt contemplative and reflective dispositions. Video playback also can be a powerful tool for helping adults reflect by allowing the adult to slow down and view events from a different vantage point or perspective. This set of coaching competencies is considered to be **supportive** because the coach is primarily helping the practitioner to engage in a new way of thinking. These competencies describe the core knowledge and skills that are needed to successfully foster reflectiveness within practitioners.

### Fostering Reflective Thinking Competencies

#### Supporting Awareness and Objectivity

- Uses a variety of prompts as needed until the practitioner provides objective description of events; this would occur prior to making judgments or moving on to solutions or next steps (i.e., describing what happened without the “why” it happened)
- Prompts the practitioner to provide evidence that children were engaged or unengaged during interactions and instruction that are the subject of reflective conversation
- Uses cues to orient the practitioner to child signals during instruction to increase the practitioner’s ability to recognize children’s current level of engagement and understanding

#### Supporting Perspective Taking

- Uses a variety of prompts as needed until the practitioner articulates their own explanations or judgments about the connections between their instruction/interaction(s) and child behaviors/responses or offers explanations if the practitioner is unable to make connections on their own
- Uses a variety of prompts as needed until the practitioner generates alternative explanations that consider others’ perspective (e.g., administrator, student, teacher, etc.)
- Offers alternative or contrasting perspectives in response to a practitioner’s own explanations or judgments of an interaction or situation

#### Connecting Data/Learning Standards/Actions to Practice

- Prompts the practitioner to think about and question the extent to which their instruction and interaction matches the targeted developmental or learning objectives

- ❑ Incorporates conversations about learning standards into reflective discussions to help the practitioner think about how their lessons and interactions align with key child outcomes
- ❑ Connects reflection opportunities to child data and progress monitoring results to strengthen the practitioner's ability to recognize opportunities to adapt instruction and interactions to individualize support
- ❑ Supports the practitioner with articulating specific action steps (e.g., lesson adaptation) that are in alignment with their reflections on or conclusions about events and interactions



## Core Competency Area 5: Using Demonstration and Verbal Cues

The competencies in this section address the core knowledge and skills needed to show how coaches can effectively use demonstration and/or verbal cues to support practitioners' instructional practices. Verbal cues are defined as the clear and explicit verbalization of the steps, procedures, or process for implementing a lesson or strategy. Modeling and demonstrating activities communicate the subtleties (i.e., tacit knowledge) of implementing new practices that cannot always be easily articulated verbally. These competencies are part of the **gradual release of responsibility** process, in which coaches demonstrate/articulate specific practices and then scaffold educators by gradually allowing them to assume more responsibility over implementation. Demonstration and articulation also can allow the practitioner to assess a coach's credibility in the classroom, which supports relationship building. This set of coaching competencies are considered to be **change-oriented** because they directly contribute to changes in practitioner practices.

### Demonstration and Verbal Cues Competencies

- Models or demonstrates a lesson or strategy in the practitioner's own setting to help the practitioner see how new practices look when implemented in the context of their own resources, classroom/facility environment, and students/teachers needs
- Shares and discusses targeted video exemplars as an alternative to in-class demonstration to show rather than simply tell the practitioner about new practices
- Connects demonstrations and/or verbal explanations to previous professional development to support transfer of learning
- Provides the practitioner with an immediate opportunity to practice with coach feedback after demonstrating a new strategy or practice
- Prompts the practitioner before demonstrations to observe for specific instructional elements or student responses/engagement to focus their attention
- Clearly articulates the steps/procedures during modeling and demonstration to draw attention to the key aspects or transitions in lessons
- Clearly articulates the steps/procedures (i.e., without demonstration) to guide the practitioner to implement practices and strategies on his/her own
- Engages in co-teaching in which the coach (1) joins the practitioner in planning the lesson, (2) begins the lesson by modeling and guiding the first turn, and (3) transitions to supporting the practitioner in implementing the remainder of the lesson

- Actively participates in a lesson or interaction, working side-by-side with the practitioner to offer brief demonstrations or articulation to correct the practitioner's mistakes, misunderstanding, or missed steps during implementation
- Verbalizes thought processes to help the practitioner see the logic and intent of instructional strategies and practices
- Uses brief verbal or nonverbal cues to help the practitioner recognize opportunities to make adjustments to instructional situations or interactions
- Provides a quick explanation or cue to guide intervention and support in response to children's signals



## Core Competency Area 6: Supporting Continuous Improvement

These competencies address the core knowledge and skills needed to engage educators in continuous improvement cycles. Improvement cycles include the assessment of skills, planning of targeted improvement activities, practicing to achieve goals, and reflection on progress and growth. Continuous improvement competencies are considered to be **change-oriented** because they support small, incremental changes to practice that collectively lead to large, transformational changes. Coaches may utilize a **gradual release of responsibility** approach to ensure that educators feel a sense of ownership throughout this process until practitioners can independently engage in their own improvement cycles. Coaches are also responsible for working with administrators to establish and promote a culture that values improvement and allows practitioners to acknowledge and address areas for growth.

### Supporting Continuous Improvement Competencies

#### Communicate about Continuous Improvement

- Describes how the core principles of continuous improvement (e.g., repeated cycles of assessment, planning, practice, and reflection) are applied in educational settings
- Engages the administrator in conversations about the process for continuous improvement planning, the coach's role in supporting the practitioner toward meeting goals, the coach's expectations of the practitioner, and supports that are needed at the administrative level in order to make progress toward identified goals

#### Analyze Data and Set Goals

- Helps the practitioner learn to interpret classroom data to identify priorities for improvement in the skill development of their students/classroom staff
- Helps the practitioner learn to interpret performance data to identify priorities for improvement in their own practice
- Supports the practitioner in setting realistic goals (i.e., within scope, timeframe, and ability levels) in alignment with classroom/facility data, performance data, reflection on practice, and their own interests

#### Plan and Practice

- ❑ Supports the practitioner in identifying and planning for repeated practice opportunities in connection with goals
- ❑ Documents action plans that specify improvement goals, needed resources and support (e.g., professional development), and specific steps for the practitioner and coaches (e.g., practice opportunities)
- ❑ Connects feedback with planned practice opportunities using language that is consistent with documented goals and improvement strategies
- ❑ Engages the practitioner in reflective conversations about progress in meeting goals, including the identification of barriers and supports for improvement
- ❑ Tracks and reports on the practitioner's progress in a manner that supports evaluation of progress and the revision or conclusion of activity related to the established goals

# Glossary of Key Terms

**1:1 coaching:** 1:1 coaching describes when a coach works individually with a practitioner, typically before or after an in-class coaching session. During 1:1 coaching sessions, coaches and practitioners may work together for a variety of reasons, including time to planning lessons, problem solving, discussing student progress, and debriefing about observed lessons.

**Andragogy:** Andragogy is the method and practice of teaching adult learners.

**Articulation:** Articulation describes when a coach clearly and explicitly verbalizes the steps, procedures, or process for implementing a lesson or strategy.

**Attuned:** Being attuned is being aware of and responsive to children's responses, cues, and signals.

**Classroom management:** Classroom management describes a practitioner's ability to create an organized and predictable environment for child learning combined with the emotional climate and support that fosters children's feelings of acceptance.

**Coach:** Coach describes a professional who provides direct and individualized professional development services to educators. Coaches are also sometimes referred to as specialists or mentors.

**Coaching competencies:** Coaching competencies describe sets of skills that are needed to show mastery across various aspects of coaching. There are six coaching competencies: characteristics of effective specialists, observation skills, providing feedback, fostering reflective thinking, demonstration and articulation, and supporting continuous improvement. Each of the six coaching competencies is made up of a series of related skills that collectively show mastery of the coaching competency.

**Coaching micro-credentials:** Coaching micro-credentials are a digital form of certification that indicate competency in a specified set of skills (National Education Association, 2018). To earn coaching micro-credentials, coaches select the competency indicator they want to show mastery in. Then, coaches complete the requirements needed to earn the selected coaching competency. Individual badges are awarded upon successful completion of each requirement for the selected coaching competency. Additionally, a micro-credential badge is awarded upon successful completion of all of the requirements for the selected competency.

**Coaching strategies:** Coaching strategies are methods/techniques the coach uses to support practitioners in developing and improving their instructional skills and abilities.

**Continuous improvement:** Continuous improvement describes the practice of guiding practitioners to set measurable aims and test whether the changes they make lead to improvements. Typically, this process encourages practitioners to 1) make a change related to an aspect of classroom instruction; 2) implement the change; 3) examine the data resulting from the implemented change; and 4) reflect on what they have learned by abandoning, revising, or increasing the change



(Langley et al., 2009).

**Co-teaching:** Co-teaching is a process by which the coach (1) joins the practitioner in planning the lesson, (2) begins the lesson by modeling and guiding the first turn, and (3) transitions to supporting the practitioner in implementing the remainder of the lesson. Co-teaching is a process that combines coaching strategies such as instructional planning, modeling, side-by-side coaching, and reflective questioning to provide practitioners with a rich learning opportunity and high levels of support.

**Cues:** A cue is a type of receptive communication that provides a message from one person to another.

**Demonstrating:** See definition of “Modeling.”

**Gradual release:** Gradual release describes how coaches scaffold practitioners' instructional improvement over time. Gradual release is a process by which the coach strategically scaffolds practitioners' learning in order to provide sufficient initial support as practitioners are acquiring new knowledge and learning new skills. It may occur over a few minutes, a day, a week, a month, or a year.

**In-class coaching:** In-class coaching is defined as when the coach works with a practitioner during a period of classroom instruction when students are present. A coach may demonstrate, provide verbal or nonverbal guidance, observe, and provide feedback during in-class coaching sessions.

**“In the moment” coaching:** In the moment coaching describes when a coach provides feedback or intervenes while the practitioner is delivering a lesson or implementing a strategy.

**Instructional planning:** Instructional planning is a very intentional period of sitting down with a practitioner, mapping out a specific activity or lesson, usually with data, curriculum guides, activity guides, etc. This is a process of helping practitioners to organize and optimize their instruction. It is an organized description of the activities and resources the practitioner will use to guide the children to a specific learning objective. It details the lesson the practitioner will teach and how to teach it.

**Modeling:** Modeling is when the coach demonstrates a lesson, approach or strategy they would like to see the practitioner do. Modeling is a high-intensity coaching strategy because the coach is the one doing the “heavy lifting” with interactions that often target specific behaviors and instructional change. The process for demonstration includes feedback and then immediate practice.

**Reflection:** Reflection is described as an ongoing process of learning from experiences in order to gain insights about the individual/practice. Reflection occurs when a practitioner demonstrates self-awareness and critical evaluation of their teaching practices and professional learning/development. The purpose of reflection is to gain new understanding in order to improve future practice.

**Responses:** Responses are a child's reaction to any event, situation, question, experience, or other type of stimulus.

**Scaffolding:** Scaffolding refers to a process in which coaches model or demonstrate how to solve a problem and then step back, offering support to the practitioner as needed.

**Side-by-Side Coaching:** Side-by-side coaching is the process of providing the practitioner instructional support while the practitioner is providing classroom instruction. This strategy is used when the practitioner is very familiar with the instructional practice or activity. During the lesson, if the coach identifies a missed opportunity, the coach should briefly interject with a comment, suggestion, or tip while the practitioner is providing classroom instruction. The practitioner is doing the majority of the work teaching the lesson, while the coach is close by to “jump in” to improve or enhance the lesson as needed.

**Signals:** Signals are gestures, actions, or sounds that children use to convey information.

**Skill development:** Skill development describes practitioners’ instructional efforts that are focused on increasing students’ independence, learning, problem solving skills, and critical thinking skills.