

## Coaching for Quality Improvement: Lessons Learned from Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)



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Research Brief

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# Coaching<sup>1</sup> for Quality Improvement: Lessons Learned from Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

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Coaching and other on-site, individualized professional development strategies (consultation, mentoring, and technical assistance) are promising approaches to support the application of new teaching practices and overall quality improvement among practitioners in early care and education settings. This Research Brief summarizes a recent report synthesizing findings from a literature review and a multi-case study of coaching in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to understand more about the practice of coaching and whether features of coaching can be identified that are linked to positive outcomes for practitioners and children. The Research Brief concludes with an overview of implications for QRIS policy and practice.

For the full report on which this Research Brief is based, see **Coaching In Early Care and Education Programs and QRIS** produced by Child Trends for the Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County.

Recent research documents the emergence of coaching and other on-site, individualized models of professional development as strategies to support the application of teaching practices and overall quality improvement in early care and education settings (Klein & Gomby, 2008; Tout, Halle, Zaslow & Starr, 2009; Zaslow, Tout, Halle, Vick & Lavelle, 2010). Coaching and other strategies to support quality improvement are increasingly prevalent in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) which aim to provide information about quality to parents and incentives and resources to programs to improve and sustain their quality. In a recently released Compendium that summarizes approaches used in QRIS, all 26 QRIS reported that some type of coaching or individualized, on-site assistance is available to programs to help them improve, though the strategies vary considerably across QRIS (Tout, Starr, Moodie, Soli, Kirby & Boller, 2010).

Though a sizeable literature exists on the predictors, correlates, and outcomes of quality in early care and education settings, the body of evidence on approaches that are effective in *improving quality*, particularly in the context of QRIS, is small. To date, there is little research documenting the types of coaching strategies used or the effectiveness of various coaching approaches in

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<sup>1</sup> The term “coaching” is used in this Research Brief to refer to the variety of individualized on-site strategies currently in use in interventions and ongoing services for early childhood practitioners to support the application of skills to practice. In addition to “coaching,” terms such as consultation, mentoring and technical assistance are also used widely. These terms are not interchangeable. Efforts in the field by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies are underway to specify definitional features of these varying strategies. For simplicity when looking across studies and to avoid conflicting with the terms that are agreed upon in the new work, we use the term coaching but recognize the limitations of using it to cover diverse strategies. The term “on-site” indicates that practitioners do not have to leave their place of work in order to receive the coaching. This could include online or telephone supports in addition to visits from coaches

QRIS (Tout, Zaslow, Halle & Forry, 2009; see Smith, Schneider & Kreader, 2010, for a recent exception).

The purpose of the report described in this Brief was to assess what is known about effective coaching by asking the following questions:

- What are the key dimensions of coaching and how do they vary across early care and education interventions studied in the research literature?
- Is there evidence that outcomes for practitioners or children vary according to the key dimensions of coaching?
- What are the characteristics of coaching in a sample of Quality Rating and Improvement Systems?
- What lessons about coaching can be learned by synthesizing the research literature and contrasting the literature with the experiences of pilot- and county-level Quality Rating and Improvement Systems that employ coaching?

Two complementary research strategies were used to address the central questions for the report:

1. A review of the literature on coaching, consultation, and mentoring in early care and education settings was conducted to identify the features and outcomes of coaching. The researchers reviewed 48 articles and recorded information about the constructs of interest in matrices to facilitate analysis.
2. A multi-case study of four local or pilot QRIS was conducted to learn about how coaching is being implemented in QRIS. Across the sites, QRIS directors, coaching supervisors, and coaches were interviewed in groups (a total of 19 interviews with 5 directors, 13 supervisors and 18 coaches). Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for key themes.

In the remainder of this Brief, we provide the highlights of the full research report that are most important for QRIS administrators, staff and stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> We focus first on an overview of findings from the literature. Next, we outline findings from the multi-site case studies. Finally, we describe implications for policy and practice, using implementation science as a framework for making recommendations.

### **Key findings from a review of the research on coaching in early care and education**

The existing research on coaching has been conducted across the full range of formal early childhood programs with practitioners and children from diverse backgrounds. The following statements summarize the descriptive features of coaching noted in the literature:

- Coaching may be focused on improving overall quality or it may be more targeted at improving specific practices that support children's development. Language and literacy development and the practices that can support children's language and literacy were a particular focus in the literature.

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<sup>2</sup> Detailed findings can be found in Isner, T., Tout, K., Zaslow, M., Soli, M., Quinn, K., Rothenberg, L. & Burkhauser, M. (2011). Coaching in early care and education programs and Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS): Identifying promising features. Report produced for the Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County. Washington, DC: Child Trends.

- Coaches in the studies reviewed tended to have higher levels of education and more experience than the teachers and caregivers in the early childhood workforce who are the recipients of coaching. Experience as a teacher, content knowledge, and experience working with adult learners were valued characteristics of coaches in the studies reviewed.
- The practitioners who received coaching varied in their education and experience. Coaching in some studies was aimed at teachers who were new to the field. Other coaching was implemented in particular types of settings (Head Start and pre-kindergarten programs) but not targeted at practitioners with specific characteristics.
- The coaching reviewed in the literature took place primarily in settings serving children with low-incomes and who are culturally and linguistically diverse.
- The activities used in coaching models are tailored to support the goals of the coaching (which may be overall quality improvement, curriculum implementation or specific practices to support children's development). A variety of activities are conducted that maximize the individual relationship between the coach and the practitioner and the opportunity for direct observation, reflection and modeling of practices.
- The majority of coaching is conducted as part of broader initiatives that include professional development activities such as classroom training or workshops. Few details are provided about how the activities are coordinated. In a small number of initiatives, the workshop trainers also served as the coaches which increased the potential for more integration of the training with the coaching.
- Many studies in the literature do not provide information about the dosage of coaching. Among the studies with information available, coaching visits most commonly happen on a weekly or bi-monthly schedule, and the duration is under one year.
- Written contact logs and regular meetings are used to provide supervision and to track the progress of coaching.

The descriptive features were reviewed and analyzed to determine patterns of associations with outcomes. The following statements summarize the findings of this analysis:

- The majority of studies that examined how coaching affects the overall quality of the environment reported improvements on global quality and/or on specific aspects of quality designed to support children's language and literacy development or other developmental domain. Thus, coaching is associated with quality improvements in early care and education.
- However, patterns of association between outcomes and coaching features such as the characteristics of coaches, type of coaching activity, duration and frequency of coaching, and how coaching was combined with other activities could not be identified because of lack of detail in reporting of features.
- Coaching focused on specific practices to support language and literacy was associated with improved language and literacy practices. Variations in the features or delivery of this coaching could not be linked to variations in outcomes, again because of inconsistency in reporting of features.

## Key findings from the multi-case study of coaching in QRIS

Coaching in a QRIS is distinct from the coaching described in the early childhood literature and has some advantages:

- QRIS coaches may have access to measures of a program's quality to use as a baseline for determining improvement goals and measuring progress. Even when no formal baseline assessment is conducted, the rating system itself serves as a structure for self-assessment and guides the improvement process by defining quality and how it is measured.
- Quality improvement in QRIS may be viewed as a long-term process in which changes can be made incrementally over a period of years (again, using the rating scale as a guide for reasonable increments to achieve). This extended view of quality improvement may be more realistic for programs than shorter-term interventions that occur over a year or less.
- The QRIS likely has tangible incentives for quality improvement including higher ratings and, in some QRIS, higher reimbursement rates and quality awards tied to the ratings.

However, coaching in QRIS has more structural challenges than coaching in intervention studies:

- Because of the rapid pace in which some QRIS are launched, coaching may be added to the QRIS by incorporating ongoing coaching programs or quality improvement initiatives already underway. Thus, coaches across the QRIS may begin with different approaches (at the level of the individual or the agency) which makes consistency across coaches difficult to achieve.
- QRIS coaches may not have been hired with coaching as their primary job responsibility. In addition, a greater number of coaches are required in QRIS, so the experience and qualifications of coaches are likely to be more varied than in a smaller-scale intervention study.
- The coaching supports are provided over a longer time frame, making turnover more likely and training for the coaches more difficult to coordinate.
- Coaches work with whole programs in QRIS, not just selected classrooms. Coaches thus need to have a different set of skills to work with both teachers and directors.
- Many QRIS are still new and undergoing revisions. Changes to the model may occur and adjustments may be made to the frequency and duration of visits due to growing caseloads.

In the four QRIS examined in the report, the coaching approaches had distinct features but also shared a number of common features:

- Three of the coaching models used in the four sites were based on work by Pat Wesley and the model of consultation developed with Virginia Buyse in their 2005 book *Consultation in Early Childhood Settings*.
- Three of the four sites reported that they did not have a formal manual or set of materials to guide coaches in their daily practices.
- Across the four sites, coaching is adapted based on the needs of providers and programs and the skills and experience of coaches. The sites described the coaching models as a

guiding framework or starting point for coaching, but supervisors and coaches agreed that there is a great deal of room for interpretation and adaptation based on individual coaches' styles and strengths and the kinds of support individual programs/providers need.

- Three sites reported that lower scoring, higher need programs in the QRIS receive more coaching than programs at higher rating levels.
- Most sites show a cyclical pattern in their coaching process, with coaching intensity increased at certain times (while developing quality improvement plans and when formal rating is imminent) and decreased at other times (waiting for rating results and when programs have progressed in the system). Additionally, some sites had not yet developed a process for ending the coaching supports, but expressed a need to cycle out providers that no longer need coaching.
- Coaching can be intended to address three very different purposes: preparing providers for the rating, facilitating the rating process, or improving the rating. In three of the four sites, coaches are meeting with providers for an extended period of time and can therefore blend all three purposes in their practice. Coaches repeatedly reported that the emphasis of their work depends greatly on the individual needs of providers.
- All sites reported that coaches and practitioners collaboratively develop a quality improvement plan/action plan (often based on a baseline rating/observation) and then use that as a guide for approaching and completing goals. This plan is either recorded on a paper form or housed in a database and is always shared with the director/provider. Coaches state that goals must ultimately be chosen by the provider or director, but also describe helping the director or provider to choose relevant and reasonable goals based on the baseline rating or observation.
- All interviewed sites reported that their coaching is intended to improve both understanding of the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) and scores on these scales.<sup>3</sup>

All sites described strategies for supporting coaches in the field, but there was consensus that more formal tools and processes could be beneficial for supervisors and coaches.

- Coaches received support in their role from their supervisors and through interactions with other coaches. Both formal and informal meetings are held to share and reflect on experiences. Coaches report that they benefitted from sharing their successes and challenges with other coaches.
- All sites reported some format for documenting coaching sessions: two sites have a more formal database tracking system for documenting coaching activities and two document activities less formally using the program's quality improvement plan or using some form of timesheet. Supervisors review this documentation submitted by coaches.
- Supervisors working with coaches have other responsibilities beyond working with coaches. Thus, it is difficult for them to have adequate time for observing coaches and practitioners in the field. Nonetheless, supervisors report that they would like to have more time for observing coaches in the field.

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<sup>3</sup> The ERS are observational tools developed by Thelma Harms, Richard Clifford, Debby Cryer and colleagues at FPG Child Development Institute including the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised, the Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale – Revised, the Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale – Revised, and the School Age Care Environment Rating Scale. See <http://ers.fpg.unc.edu/> for details.

- Tools for monitoring and evaluating coaching practices are in development in several sites which indicates that bolstering the supervision of coaches in the field is a need in the sites.

Data collection is occurring to some extent in all of the sites. Evaluation efforts in the sites will not, however, yield findings to indicate which elements of the coaching are most important to program improvement.

- In two of the sites, the QRIS evaluation includes an examination of the coaching process. However, none of the four case-study sites have conducted an evaluation of the impact of coaching on program-level outcomes or child outcomes. While some of the sites reported systems for observing coaches and tracking the dosage of assistance each program has received, none of the sites are intentionally varying which sites receive coaching or at what intensity, or how intensity of coaching received relates to changes in quality or child outcomes.

### **Recommendations for implementing coaching in QRIS**

Coaching or other forms of on-site assistance are used universally in existing QRIS. The QRIS context is unique compared to the context of the early care and education coaching programs described in the literature. Therefore, it is useful to consider strategies for implementing coaching programs that build on promising practices identified in the literature and use guidance from implementation science to support the installation of new practices. Implementation science demonstrates that a model or program approach that has been demonstrated to be effective in a research study may fail to produce effects if it is taken to a new site and implemented incompletely or poorly. According to implementation science, there are specific factors that need to be thought through and put in place to assure faithful implementation of a program or model. These factors become especially important when a program or model is implemented widely, throughout a system or geographical area. These factors are referred to as implementation “drivers.”

The National Implementation Research Center has synthesized a large body of research and identified an integrated set of implementation “drivers” that should be attended to when new practices are incorporated into a system.<sup>4</sup> These drivers are: *staff recruitment and selection, pre-service training, ongoing coaching and supervision of coaches, staff performance assessment, program evaluation, data systems, facilitative administration, and systems level partnerships and interventions*. Below we note recommendations for each of these implementation drivers for coaching within the QRIS context.

- *Staff recruitment and selection* – The multi-case study findings indicated that QRIS often need to quickly create and implement a coaching program and may pull existing staff from other roles into the QRIS coaching. Yet, intentional staff recruitment and selection is an essential component of effective implementation of practices. It is important to

<sup>4</sup> The core components of implementation are described in Fixsen, D. L., Blase, K., Naoom, S. F., & Wallace, F. (2009). Core implementation components. *Research on Social Work Practice, 19* (5); updated definitions and examples are provided at the National Implementation Research Network, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, FPG Child Development Institute. [http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~nirn/implementation/07/07\\_coreimplcomp.cfm](http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~nirn/implementation/07/07_coreimplcomp.cfm)

recruit and hire QRIS coaching staff with the qualifications necessary to complete the job responsibilities. Qualifications for the coaching staff should be aligned with the coaching methods and goals used in the QRIS.

- *Pre-service training* – All staff involved in QRIS coaching should receive specialized training to orient them to the elements of the coaching model and documentation requirements. This training is particularly critical when staff are being drawn from multiple agencies who may already be using existing coaching models. A manual should be developed for the initial training and to provide periodic refresher training for supervisors and coaches in the field.
- *Ongoing coaching and supervision of the coaches themselves* – Once coaches are in the field, it is important that they have ongoing coaching of their own and supervision to support them in their role. This support may be delivered through individual or group meetings with opportunities to reflect on experiences in the field.
- *Staff performance assessment* – Coaches will benefit from assessment of their performance that is driven by data on the fidelity of their coaching (that is, the degree to which they adhere to key components of the model) and the outcomes for the practitioners with whom they work.
- *Program evaluation and data systems* – Strong data collection and data management are needed to provide descriptive information about practitioners’ needs, provision of services and outcomes for practitioners.
- *Facilitative administration* – Facilitative administration refers to the need for strong administrative and organizational structures that can support QRIS coaching as well as the other QRIS components. Administrative processes that reduce barriers for coaches, provide adequate resources of time and funding, promote adherence to the provision of high quality services, and use the results of staff assessments and program evaluation to make procedural improvements are essential supports for successful QRIS quality improvement coaching.
- *Systems-level partnerships and interventions* – QRIS coaching occurs in a broader structure of external partner organizations and local, state and federal policies and systems that will affect the work. This implementation component refers to the importance of leadership that can intervene at multiple levels of the system to protect the fidelity of the QRIS quality improvement component and provide optimal support for the program within the broader system.

## Next Steps

As more state and local QRIS emerge across the nation, questions about the most effective strategies for encouraging and supporting quality improvement will become more pressing. Working in a context of limited resources and high stakeholder expectations for success, QRIS are seeking approaches to maximize their efforts with practitioners to promote quality improvements, particularly in programs serving the most vulnerable children.

The analysis and findings summarized in this Brief document the importance of coaching and other on-site assistance strategies in improving the quality of programs. However, the early care and education field is still at an early stage of understanding the most effective content and structure of QRIS coaching to promote quality improvement. Attending to the core components

of implementation when developing and implementing coaching in QRIS will help support more systematic coaching strategies in the field and strengthen coaches' ability to deliver services with consistency and competence. In addition, data collection and evaluation efforts can play a critical role in helping researchers, policymakers and practitioners determine the optimal approaches to coaching that results in sustained quality improvements and beneficial outcomes for young children.

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