

Child & Family Workforce Skills Strategy – Working group for on-the-job learning & support

Background

While access to good quality training and education opportunities was viewed as foundational to skills development, workforce consultation participants equally emphasised the critical importance of ongoing mentoring, coaching and supervision of staff to consolidate and build on training and education opportunities. Participants stressed that without ongoing mentoring, coaching and supervision, staff struggled to consolidate learnings and translate newly acquired knowledge and skills into practice.

Overall, workforce consultation participants felt that there was a lack of access to quality mentoring, coaching and supervision for staff within the child and family sector. This was viewed to have adverse impacts on the capacity of organisations to retain their staff and in turn build sustainable relationships with clients.

On-the-job support

The need to invest in the capacity of managers to practice and apply coaching and supervision skills was consistently identified. Participants suggested that allocating funding for mentoring, coaching and supervision would assist with overcoming systemic barriers to implementing consistent and coaching and supervision.

Understanding, developing and investing in evidence-based approaches to mentoring, coaching and supervision of staff was also identified as a prerequisite for ensuring quality and consistency in approaches used across the sector. Participants discussed the need for coaching and supervision approaches that support staff to reflect on their own practice in addition to discussing a case.

Professional development should include a focus on assisting practitioners to reflect on their progress, refine their way of working, and build occupational resilience (e.g., learn effective strategies to manage the psychological demands associated with their occupational roles).¹

Self-care

Training and education in self-care is often recommended as an avenue by which practitioners may protect themselves against the deleterious effects of exposure to trauma. Self-care is broadly defined as “the practice of taking action to preserve or improve one’s own health” including “wellbeing and happiness, in particular during periods of stress”.^{2 3} Practitioners should be assisted to reflect on their progress, refine their way of working, and build occupational resilience (e.g., learn effective strategies to manage the psychological demands associated with their occupational roles).⁴

Key working group action areas:

- Proactively prevent worker burnout through staff support to maintain professional boundaries, limit workload and engage in self-care.
- Recognise the importance of ongoing professional support in building occupational resilience and strategies for managing demanding roles.
- Encourage reflective practice that assist staff to develop self-awareness and critical evaluation of practice.
- Promote the value of supervision, coaching, and mentoring for staff development and competency. This may include recommendations for monitoring the quality and effectiveness of coaching and supervision models.
- Foster self-care, along with greater supervision, mentoring and supports to lessen the impact of work-related trauma.
- Support staff to practice self-care through mentorship and supervision.

Working Group Lead – ACWA

Working Group Members:

- DCJ
- Peaks
- NGOs
- AbSec
- Australian Services Union (ASU)

Strategies to improve retention

Research highlights a lack of adequate investment in mentoring, supervision, and training in the child welfare workforce.⁵ Mentoring and coaching programs integrated throughout a practitioner's career can result in positive personal and career benefits.⁶

Similarly, ongoing training and supervision have been touted as key ways to improve frontline practice and address issues around retention.

Farber and Munson synthesised findings from a review of efforts to strengthen the child welfare workforce in the context of class-action litigation for system reform and noted the *“need to focus intensively on improving the quality of frontline practice through attention to the background and experience of staff hired, the content of training, the supervisory relationship, quality assurance and data feedback mechanisms. The focus cannot exclusively be on how many staff are hired, how many hours of training staff are offered, or how many case plans have a current date on them...”*⁷

What is coaching?

Coaching is an adult learning strategy focused on building the skills and potential of the practitioner. Rather than focusing on the organisation's agenda or priorities, coaching is **practitioner-led**, and is purposeful by addressing practitioners' needs using individualised goals which are relevant to their **current** experiences (present-focused) and everyday practice.

Staff support and self-care

Child welfare practitioners are exposed vicariously to the traumatic experiences of children and families who have been the victims of interpersonal violence as well as perpetrators of abuse, neglect, and intimate partner violence. This exposure can lead to a number of negative outcomes including: compassion fatigue; vicarious trauma; and secondary traumatic stress.⁸ Powerful and negative emotions may be elicited by investigations of abuse and neglect, removal of children from their family and emotional visits with parents and foster carers.⁹ Overall, research shows that Australian child welfare practitioners experience high levels of stress, in line with international literature.¹⁰

Lack of supportive leadership, poor agency culture and ineffective interagency collaboration can result in child welfare workers experiencing a perceived 'lack of respect'¹¹ or suppression of their voice in decision-making processes.¹² The Australian child welfare sector has been critiqued in the literature as being overtly risk-averse and rule-bound.¹³ These intersecting issues cumulatively make it more likely that child welfare practitioners will burnout and want to leave their work.¹⁴

Access to support

Although most frontline practitioners entering the child welfare sector receive some form of pre-service training, the importance of ongoing professional support is being recognised. Opportunities for practitioners to reflect on their progress, refine their way of working, and build occupational resilience (e.g., learn effective strategies to manage the psychological demands associated with their occupational roles) may help to prevent burnout.¹⁵

The current system provides limited opportunities for skilled applicants who do not hold formal qualifications. This shortfall could be addressed through a greater focus on building skills, expertise and other key attributes. The child and family sector is a competitive environment, attracting staff can be particularly challenging in regional locations where there are fewer local workforce resources. Mentoring and coaching programs integrated throughout a child welfare practitioner's career can result in positive personal and career benefits to these workers.¹⁶ Similarly, ongoing training and supervision have been touted as keyways to improve frontline practice and address issues around retention.

Overall, workforce consultation participants felt that there was a lack of access to quality mentoring, coaching and supervision for staff within the child and family sector. This was viewed to have adverse impacts on the capacity of organisations to retain their staff and, in turn, build sustainable relationships with clients.

Coaching

There are several definitions of practitioner coaching described in the literature. While each definition is slightly different, the central focus remains on nurturing goal-focused learners by encouraging practitioners to draw on their previous experiences, talent, and knowledge (strengths-based) while also observing and rehearsing new skills and techniques (active learning) to identify practical solutions (solution-focused) for resolving problems arising in their everyday practice with carers, children, and families (practice-driven).¹⁷

Although coaching is practitioner-focused, the process has a flow-on effect, and can be used to improve outcomes for carers, children, and their families (clients and organisation more broadly). Coaching encourages practitioners to be **active learners** by rehearsing or role-playing specific techniques or skills, receiving technical feedback and demonstrating the technique in everyday practice, until the practitioner has achieved competency or mastery. Importantly, coaching is **strengths-based**, and aims to build the capacity of the practitioner by providing a safe and supportive environment that encourages practitioners to review their experiences (reflect), rehearse their skills and discuss their feelings and their frustrations, free from personal judgement or bias.

Benefits

One-off training events alone are not enough to change practice. On-the-job feedback and support is essential for changing practice and mastering new skills.¹⁸

While workshops and seminars introduce individuals to the theory and reasoning for adopting a set of skills, there is growing evidence that practitioners are unlikely to practice these skills in the workplace unless they have opportunities for on-the-job coaching.¹⁹

Benefits of coaching

Benefits for the learner	Benefits for the organisation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases self-awareness Increases openness to learning Greater clarity of roles and responsibilities Improves ability to identify solutions Improves skills, behaviours, and performance Provides a safer environment to learn and make mistakes Support to manage complex situations Improves self-directive problem-solving skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases learning and creativity Improves organisational performance Builds a motivating environment Better use of learner's potential and talents Improves organisational outcomes Supports the adoption of a non-punitive learning philosophy Provides an accountability mechanism for high-fidelity implementation

The coaching approach is **skill-based** and focuses on the implementation of a new or existing evidence-based practice or intervention identified either through training workshops, formal supervision or ongoing professional development activities.

Models of coaching

Setting goals / joint planning is the most commonly cited essential feature of effective coaching, leading to:

- Clarity of coaching sessions' purpose and desired outcomes
- Improved relationship between coach and learner
- The ability to monitor and document progress achieved.

Goals should be SMART: specific, measurable, achievable, results-focused, and time-bound. The coach and the learner also agree on the actions that will be taken, including what will be practiced between sessions. Coaching models provide specific steps or stages for coaches to follow when coaching learners, providing structure around the coaching process.

Individual or group coaching

Evidence indicates that the ratio of coach to practitioners does not directly impact upon the success of coaching, providing organisations with some flexibility in its format e.g., individual or group-based, involving one and up to six practitioners.^{20 21 22 23}

The Northern California Training Academy Center for Human Services summarises four coaching models identified as suitable for use in child welfare.²⁴

Model	Overview	Use
Child Welfare Skills-Based Coaching Model	A seven-step model based on a series of observations and demonstrations. The coach or an expert demonstrates particular skills.	Purposeful skill development
GROW Model	A four-step process (goal setting, reality-checking, option exploration, wrap-up), in which learning goals are continually adjusted.	Paying attention to goal setting and action planning
CLEAR Model	A five-step model (contacting, listening, exploring, action, review), through which learners reflect on their work, gain insight and create action steps.	Coaching discussions
Flow of Coaching Model	A non-linear model consisting of five stages in which commitment to coaching is central.	Building a learner's commitment to coaching

Coach-the-coach model

Another option is the coach-the-coach model in which external coaches train and coach selected agency employees in coaching skills and techniques. The benefits of this approach include:

- **acceptance of internal coaches:** in many agencies, practitioners will be comfortable receiving coaching from colleagues with whom they are already familiar, rather than outside specialists
- **sustainability:** this approach builds competent internal teams of coaches, expanding agencies' coaching capacity
- **internal knowledge:** internal coaches understand agency culture and local issues
- **scalability:** allows the sector to scale up coaching support to reach a critical mass of workers.

The GROW model of coaching is the recommended model for this approach. The GROW model is the only model for which training is available in Australia.²⁵

Self-care

Current evidence does not indicate that self-care alone will ameliorate work-related trauma and stress;²⁶ however, fostering self-care in concert with organisation-level changes and greater supervision, mentoring and supports can lessen the impact of work-related trauma.²⁷

The need to invest in both building the self-care capabilities of new staff through training and education opportunities and supporting staff to practice self-care on an ongoing basis through mentorship and supervision was consistently identified across workforce consultations. Participants drew attention to the trauma-saturated nature of the child and family sector and how this could impact the wellbeing of practitioners. Developing skills in self-care, including maintaining professional boundaries and being aware of one's own emotional capacity and needs, was viewed as a strategy for preventing vicarious trauma and burnout.

There is a need for both interpersonal and organisation-level supports. At the interpersonal level, peer support and cohesive teams can supply practical support and help protect against the negative effects of work-related stressors. At the organisation level, leadership, supervisory support, role clarity, workforce training and caseload management can alleviate stress experienced on the job. Peer support in the form of both operational and socioemotional supports have been found to increase job satisfaction and contribute to a positive organisational climate.²⁸ Additionally, peer support in concert with frequent supervision, organisational supports and self-efficacy have been identified as predictors of intent to stay among child welfare practitioners.

Organisation-level changes including decreased workload, compensation, ongoing professional development, competent and engaged leadership, and organisational culture have also been highlighted as critical for improving workforce retention.²⁹ Overall, it is important that child welfare agencies recognise the need to foster an organisational culture characterised by a climate of support.³⁰

External coaches

Some organisations use trained external coaches for the following reasons:

- Ensures a **consistent** approach to coaching
- Offers **High-quality** offered by experienced coaches
- Requires **less internal resources** from an agency.

“We hire very young people for a job that actually requires quite a lot of maturity and emotional intelligence, and this is probably where we trip up the most because... it is really noticeable how their ability to be resilient and to deal with some of the difficulties of the job is hampered because of their age and because of their personal development. It might be worth introducing them to training in emotional intelligence and things like that so that they learn how to respond quicker to their own needs as well, you know, so that the self-care aspect becomes a bit more automatic. It's a really challenging bit, the staff turnover is generally higher with the younger staff.”
Child & Family Services Manager, sector focus group.

“It's the supervision, it's the mentoring, it's the reflective practice space. If we're not going to do that bit, then it's kind of pointless doing a whole new qualification.”
Child & Family Services Manager, sector focus group.

For more information

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w <https://www.sydney.edu.au/arts/our-research/centres-institutes-and-groups/research-centre-for-children-and-families.html>



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