

# Ten Tips for Coaching Adults

## An Emotionally Healthy Approach

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**Sarah** (*program director, smiling as she comes into a preschool classroom during nap time*): Hi, Robin, how are things going with your new group? I know it takes time for teachers and children to get used to working with each other. I peeked into your classroom earlier today, and the children really seemed to be enjoying themselves.

**Robin** (*teacher, heaving a sigh of relief*): I'm glad you had a chance to visit us today. I'm used to working with the older preschool group, and I'm having trouble helping these 3-year-olds get into a cleanup routine. I'd really appreciate some advice.

**Sarah**: I'm happy to help. You sound a little frustrated. Talk to me about what was going on today and where you are as a result.

**Robin**: The children have a hard time with cleanup after center time. Charlotte and I gave five-minute and two-minute alerts. We sang the cleanup song with the children, and we asked them to stop playing and put things away. But it wasn't working. So we had everyone stop what they were doing and come sit in the circle. Then Charlotte and I brought the containers and play materials into the middle of the circle. Once the children were together on the rug, they put the toys in the right containers and put the puzzles away. After that, we continued with the regular circle time activities. I'm concerned because cleanup took a long time, and with the circle time activities that followed, we were on the rug for almost 45 minutes. I know that's too long, but I'm not sure what to do. The children have to learn to clean up.

**Sarah**: I can see why you're frustrated. Let's think about the children for a minute. About half of them have never been in group care before. Many of them haven't had experience cleaning up in a classroom situation. I think your strategy of having the children come to the rug was great. That helped them stop playing and switch their focus to putting things away.

**Robin**: You're right. I didn't think about the fact that many of the children don't know how to clean up. Coming to the circle did help them stop playing; I can keep doing that. But I don't know how to shorten circle time. Doing cleanup that way takes way too long.

**Sarah:** Let's back up a bit and talk about what happens when you bring the children and the materials to be put away to the rug. What do the children do, what do the teachers do, and what would you like to have happen?

**Robin:** We teachers talk about how the materials should match the picture labels on the containers and about which things are the same or different. We name the materials, like cars, trucks, planes, and have the children put the transportation items in the right container. This helps them learn to put things back where they belong.

**Sarah:** Those are good strategies, Robin, and they go well beyond cleaning up the classroom. You've extended cleanup time to be a sorting, matching, classifying activity that helps the children develop math skills. Now, let's think about how to shorten the group's time on the rug.

**Robin:** I hadn't thought about cleanup as a learning activity. Maybe cleanup, sorting, and matching could be a circle time activity for a while.

**Sarah:** That sounds like a wonderful plan. You can make this part of the daily routine in your classroom for the next two weeks. I'll stop by again in a couple of days to chat and see how things are progressing.

**In the opening scenario**, Robin faces challenges in her work. Sarah helps Robin understand the children's experience during clean-up time. She also supports Robin in connecting the strategies Robin uses to encourage the children to clean up with the results of those strategies. This boosts Robin's confidence and her emotional intelligence skills. Effective coaching uses difficult situations as learning opportunities by focusing on teachers' strengths, as Sarah did, and it supports teachers in building their emotional intelligence. Teachers' job performance continues to improve as they focus on strategies that bring positive supports.

Leaders in preschool and primary settings—administrators, directors, lead teachers, and others—often find themselves consumed by the numerous tasks that must be accomplished daily. Unlike Sarah, they may not be mindful of the emotional needs of the people carrying out those tasks.

Gardenswartz, Cherbosque, and Rowe state that “teams as well as individuals need to develop emotional intelligence skills that help enhance teamwork, improve group dynamics, and ultimately, increase performance” (2009, 44). Emotional intelligence is the ability to become aware of one's own emotions and those of others. Kremenitzer and Miller (2008) believe high emotional intelligence is crucial for the early childhood teacher. Effective early childhood

teachers have the ability to observe situations in the classroom, reflect on what occurred during the day, and make needed adjustments.

*Strengths-Based Coaching*<sup>®</sup> (Humbarger 2006), created at the Francis Institute for Child and Youth Development, is an approach to working with adults that changes the way leaders support and motivate teachers. Coaching enhances the development of emotional intelligence by encouraging teachers to become more self-reflective. To do this, the coach provides positive feedback on the observed strengths and skills of teachers and supports them in connecting their actions to outcomes. Crane (2010) believes people can empower others to thrive in their jobs. He considers coaching to be *leading*, not managing, people. Leaders in early childhood settings reach this goal when they take the time to nurture relationships with teachers through feedback and conversations. This builds on teachers' strengths and helps them develop the confidence to carry out their job responsibilities.

A leader who coaches intentionally focuses on the assets of the organization—the people. To create an environment that increases the emotional intelligence of teachers, leaders establish relationships with teachers that generate “feedback, good dialogue, conversations without retribution... so people can communicate without hurting each other” (Gardenswartz, Cherbosque, & Rowe 2010, 81).

This article offers 10 tips from the *Strengths-Based Coaching*<sup>®</sup> curriculum (Humbarger 2006) for early childhood directors, teachers, and others who support adults. The tips help leaders keep relationships positive and communication open as they continue their professional journey in creating an emotionally intelligent work environment.

## **Ten tips for effective coaching**

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**1. Start with a safe, supportive environment.** Learning new skills can feel cumbersome and uncomfortable. Teachers may worry that the changes they make are not having the anticipated results, or that they themselves are not carrying out the changes consistently.

Provide a safe, supportive environment by checking on progress often. Comment positively on staff members' efforts. Show interest in what they are thinking and experiencing during a change in routine: “*Hi, Robin. It looks like the children are enjoying sorting and matching during cleanup time. Your strategy of having the children come to the rug seems to be working well.*” Reassure teachers when they are frustrated. Show that you trust them to be capable of making the change: “*I know it takes time for teachers and children to get used to working with each other.*” Your patience, encouragement, and support provide the fertile ground needed for staff members to grow and change.



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**2. Build relationships.** Positive relationships are key when supporting teachers through the process of change. To foster strong relationships, be authentic and professional in every interaction. Encourage teachers to talk about themselves—their dreams, strengths, opinions, and experiences: *“Talk to me about what was going on today and where you are as a result.”* Practice listening carefully; develop trust by keeping all confidences to yourself. Look for and focus on topics of common interest, shared purposes, and mutual goals: *“Having the cleanup sorting and matching activity be a circle time activity for a while sounds like a good plan. You are extending the cleanup time routine to help children develop math skills.”*

**3. Consider staff capable.** It is easy for directors to get into the habit of micromanaging everything that goes on in the program—assigning coverage for staff breaks, reviewing which materials teachers provide for the children, deciding whether a child is sick enough to go home, and myriad other things. When administrators believe staff members are capable, they send this message in all their interactions. This conveys the assumption that teachers can determine what to do and what changes to make to enhance the classroom or the setting.

Encourage teachers to explore opportunities and ideas for change rather than telling them what to do. Ask questions to help them develop critical thinking and self-reflection skills: “What do you think should happen?” “What changes do you think would make the program/classroom better?” “How would you handle this situation?” Use staff ideas and suggestions. This builds teachers’ confidence and self-reliance in making day-to-day decisions and working through change.

**4. Observe with an open mind.** There are many opportunities throughout the day to observe teachers in action, even if only for a few seconds, as you walk through the program or school setting. When you observe with an open mind, the third tip, Consider Staff Capable, becomes easy. Be curious about what you hear and see. What is the teacher experiencing? What does she want to accomplish? Are you seeing the big picture? Be aware of your own “hot buttons”—those things that matter most deeply to you, such as health and safety issues. Consciously put such focuses aside so they do not limit your observations.

**5. Ask and actively listen.** Begin by being curious about the teacher’s perspective. Ask nonthreatening, open-ended questions. The goal is to understand her point of view. Encourage the teacher to think more deeply. Invite her to express how she feels, what she wants, what she thinks. *“What do the children do, what do the teachers do, and what would you like to have happen?”* Listen carefully. Let the teacher know you are listening by occasionally summarizing what you hear. View a difference of opinion, or even conflict, as a source of new information.

Open expression of ideas and feelings is emotionally healthy and can lead to new and creative ways to solve problems.

**6. Highlight strengths first.** After you have heard the other person's perspective, it is your turn to provide input in the conversation. Always start with strengths. Find the gem in every person and every situation. Too often administrators comment only on what is going wrong while saying nothing about what is going right. An easy way to remember to share with people what they are doing well is to follow the measures in this recipe when giving feedback: 80 percent what they are doing well, 20 percent areas for growth.

When leaders focus 80 percent of their interactions on communicating what a person is doing well, that person is much more willing to learn and change: *"The children really seemed to be enjoying themselves at cleanup time. I think your strategy of having the children come to the rug is a success."* The more we communicate to people what they are doing well, the more they repeat those behaviors. So, it is important to let others know often what is going well.

**7. Help staff connect behavior with results.** After conveying to a teacher your observations of her strengths, use objective facts to help her see the results of those behaviors: *"You're extending cleanup time to be a sorting, matching, classifying activity that helps the children develop math skills."* You may think that because a teacher knows everything you know, she makes the same connections you make; but often this is not the case. Teachers are deeply involved in their work and may not have the distance and perspective to see the results of their strategies.

Intentionally and objectively describe to a teacher what she is doing and how it affects the program or classroom. A teacher who has been working with a child on behavior management may feel frustration when the child still uses the undesirable behavior at one particular time of day. The teacher may need the help of an outside observer to see that the strategy is working at other times during the day.



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**8. Investigate alternatives.** When you and a teacher understand each other's point of view and have all the information about a situation, it is time to investigate alternatives. Invite the staff member to share his ideas and brainstorm solutions together with you. *"Let's think about the children for a minute. For about half of them, this is the first time they have been in group care. How could we help them learn about this routine? What connections could we make with the skills you are focusing on?"* Remember to consider him capable. Staff members may have unique ideas for solutions. Consider all the ideas and, with the staff member, decide on a plan for moving forward. Use the plan to reach a goal.

**9. Nurture work on the goal.** As teachers guide children in learning new skills, check their progress regularly. What feelings are the teachers experiencing? Provide encouragement using objective observations. Comment on teachers' strengths. Help them connect their practices with the results they are achieving. Listen to their frustrations, and together brainstorm ideas to help them. Feedback and encouragement given on a regular basis reinforce continued motivation to work toward a goal.

**10. Grow your skills—build your strengths.** When you work with teachers, it is important to reflect on your own behavior after interactions. What went well? What could you have done to be more effective? What do you want to do next time in this situation? Intentionally reflecting on your practice helps you internalize these 10 tips. It also provides a model of the self-reflection teachers need for continuous professional growth.

## Conclusion

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Guiding adults is not easy and requires leaders to adopt a positive strengths-based approach in the way they interact with others. Biech (2007) states that a good leader can take staff on their own personal journey by establishing relationships with them, having a vision for the changes that need to be made, trusting others, and being trusted as a leader. When people feel they are making a difference in the classroom, they become more involved in their work and their job performance improves. They reconnect with the excitement of being an integral part of a dynamic team.



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The 10 tips presented in this article are practical guidelines for coaching teachers, using a positive, strengths-based approach. The tips center on five concepts: building relationships, positive focus, communication, partnership, and support. Working to improve these elements helps create an emotionally intelligent work environment where all employees feel they are valued and their opinions are respected. When leaders identify strengths-based strategies to build relationships, approach interactions with a positive perspective, develop positive communication strategies to support teachers, and identify additional ways to support them, they empower the teachers they work with to thrive, not just survive, in the early childhood setting.

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