

Five Core Areas of Knowledge in Mentoring

Adult Learning; Teacher/Provider Development

In studying early childhood education, we learn a great deal about child development and about developmentally appropriate practices in working with young children. Becoming a mentor can expand on that knowledge to include a greater understanding of how *adults* learn and grow.

Researchers have also proposed various theoretical models of the phases and stages of *teacher/provider* development – the different needs, concerns and abilities that educators will have, related to the tasks they face, at varying times in their own teaching and learning process. Caregivers who are entering into mentor/protégé relationships can benefit from a basic understanding of the stages of teacher/provider development, in order to assess their own current levels of practice and to identify their own priority areas for challenge and growth.

Reflective Practice and Mentoring Skills

The ability to reflect, and to take action based on that reflection, is a significant aspect of being human. Acting upon our reflections signifies taking risks—inviting ourselves to stretch past the “comfort zone” within which most adults prefer to operate. It is when we stretch *from within* that we truly change and grow.

The effort to incorporate reflection into one’s daily life is called *reflective practice*. Reflective practice is an essential element of the mentor curriculum, since mentors will be “coaching” protégés to become more reflective about their interactions with children and adults, their caregiving, and their abilities to grow personally and professionally. The Curriculum covers a series of fundamental skills which we suggest mentors practice during their training in order to become effective coaches to their protégés: clear communication; modeling; giving and receiving feedback; observation and conferencing; self-assessment; and conflict resolution.

Building Positive Mentor/Protégé Relationships, and Understanding the Process of Change

A supportive, encouraging and trusting relationship is the key to making the mentoring experience successful for both the mentor and the protégé. Occasionally, such relationships develop spontaneously. More often, they are the result of careful attention to each other’s needs, and clear expectations about each other’s roles and responsibilities. A mentoring relationship hinges on es-

tablishing a sense of trust and clear communication early on, and nurturing it throughout the process of working together.

Mentors and protégés are “agents of change.” Change is growth—but it is a highly personal process that takes time, and one that can be exciting, difficult, or both at once. The mentor/protégé relationship is structured to offer true support to the protégé in making changes which, in turn, generate growth in the mentor.

Respect for Diversity in Early Childhood Settings

Excellent caregivers encourage children to be comfortable with who they are, and they develop programs that reflect children’s home cultures. Mentors and protégés demonstrate respect for diversity when they foster a positive sense of self-identity in young children, regardless of differences in race, gender, ethnicity, creed, language or class background. Embracing diversity and implementing culturally relevant, anti-bias education are central to a basic knowledge of best practices with young children and families—and with co-workers. It is essential that mentors and protégés work together to understand and appreciate *each other’s* differences and similarities in a mutually supportive context—and develop critical thinking skills to resist bias.

Leadership and Advocacy Roles for Mentors

Since mentors are called upon to act as leaders and role models for other teachers and providers, cultivating leadership is an inherent part of mentoring programs. As mentors build their understanding of adult development, and their abilities to communicate with and support protégés, they also build their capacity for leadership. Because mentors have managed to advance their skills and to achieve a new level of professional status, they signal a sense of possibility and hope to their co-workers about child care as a worthy career option. The voices of mentors carry a great deal of influence with others in the field.

Mentors constitute a core group of skilled and dedicated practitioners, and they are also emerging as effective advocates for the early childhood profession. In a number of communities, mentors have stepped to the forefront of efforts to promote better resources and services for children, and to improve working conditions, training and compensation for their fellow teachers and providers. ■