



Research Brief

Supports for Early Care and Education Coaches Working with Preschool Teachers and Family Child Care Providers

Introduction

Coaching is a common approach to professional development and support for quality in early care and education (ECE) settings. Coaching is an especially important part of professional development because it can be tailored to meet teachers' and family child care (FCC) providers' needs and can positively affect instructional practices, the quality of the setting, and children's outcomes (Aikens and Akers 2011; Isner et al. 2011). Its use as a tool for professional development has grown as quality initiatives in early childhood have proliferated, particularly with Continuous Quality Improvement Systems, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs; Build Initiative 2019), and state-level preschool development grants.

With any profession, development and maintenance of workplace skills require ongoing support. This is also true for coaches. Research suggests the following activities might play a role in coaching effectiveness: coach training (before coaching begins and during coaching); tools and assessments to measure coach performance; observations and ongoing supervision of coaches; certification programs; coaching frameworks; and materials such as manuals, books, videos, webinars, and peer support (Lloyd and Modlin 2012; Lloyd et al. 2021a; Lloyd et al. 2021b; University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning 2015; Jayaraman et al. 2014; Jayaraman et al. 2015). How and when these supports are implemented likely plays a key role in their usefulness (Fixsen et al. 2005; Wasik et al. 2013). For instance, understanding how often effective coaches receive supervision and what topics they discuss can provide useful insights for administrators and policymakers who design or use coaching models. In addition, exploring if coach–teacher and coach–provider interactions are observed and with what frequency might enable stakeholders to strengthen the practices of ECE teachers and FCC providers.

This brief describes information about ECE coaches' training and supervision from 2019 surveys of coaches who provided coaching in center-based classrooms and FCC homes. In boxes throughout the brief, we highlight information from surveys of **center directors** about the types of supports they provided to coaches working in their centers. Only center directors were surveyed about coach supports. Since FCC providers used coaching services only from coaches provided through external sources, we did not expect them to offer supports or training to their coaches. Therefore we did not survey those providers about coaching supports, only center directors. We collected the surveys as part of the Study of Coaching Practices in Early Care and Education Settings (SCOPE; see box below).

Overview

Study of Coaching Practices in Early Care and Education Settings

The Study of Coaching Practices in Early Care and Education Settings (SCOPE) was funded by the Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. This project was conducted by Mathematica in partnership with Child Trends, consultant Chrishana Lloyd, and the Children’s Learning Institute at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston.

SCOPE goals. The SCOPE project was designed to learn more about the ways coaching is implemented to improve instructional practice in early care and education (ECE). SCOPE focused on coaching in center-based classrooms and family child care (FCC) homes that served preschool-age children from families with low incomes. SCOPE also explored the programmatic and systems-level factors associated with coaching.

Information about SCOPE, including its recruitment criteria, data collection, and sample, can be found here: [Study of Coaching Practices in Early Care and Education Settings \(SCOPE\), United States, 2019-2021 \(childandfamilydataarchive.org\)](https://childandfamilydataarchive.org/study-of-coaching-practices-in-early-care-and-education-settings-scope-united-states-2019-2021).

ECE coaching. This brief uses data from ECE coaches and center directors about the availability and features of coaching supports. When we refer to coaching or coaches in SCOPE, we mean people who meet regularly with teachers or FCC providers one-on-one or with their teaching team to provide feedback and guidance to help them strengthen their teaching with preschool-age children. Other terms might be used for these types of staff, such as *mentors*, *mentor-coaches*, *Technical Assistance Specialists*, or *consultants*.

Features of ECE coaching. SCOPE focuses on features—or components—that make up coaching. These features were identified based on the research literature for SCOPE 2019. Structural features are the parameters placed on the coaching process, such as how frequently coaching occurs or when coaches can meet with teachers or FCC providers. Process features focus on the coach–teacher or coach–provider interactions during the coaching process, including coach–teacher or

coach–provider relationship building and coaching activities.

This brief. This brief focuses on information from two of the SCOPE 2019 surveys: (1) a survey of coaches who work in centers and FCC homes and (2) a survey of center directors. We describe findings from the two surveys related to the supports coaches have in the form of training and supervision and the other ways center directors may support coaching within centers. FCC providers who participated in SCOPE were not asked about coaching supports, as all their coaches were hired and trained by external entities and it is unlikely they offered training or support to the coaches. Note: The coaches surveyed, however, supported a mixed portfolio of centers and FCCs.

Settings and participants. The centers and FCC homes in the SCOPE sample served children from families with low incomes primarily through a Head Start grant and/or with Child Care and Development Fund subsidies (though many settings had other sources of revenue as well). When responses differ by setting, or when it is helpful for interpretation of findings, we present data for *Head Start centers* (that is, centers with any Head Start funding), *centers not funded by Head Start*, and *FCC homes*. Coaches may work across these types of settings, but they were asked to focus on one type of setting in the survey, and their data is therefore grouped with that setting. (See [Study of Coaching Practices in Early Care and Education Settings \(SCOPE\), United States, 2019-2021 \(childandfamilydataarchive.org\)](https://childandfamilydataarchive.org/study-of-coaching-practices-in-early-care-and-education-settings-scope-united-states-2019-2021) for more details).

Exhibit I shows the number of coaches and center directors who responded to the SCOPE 2019 surveys. Across all 100 coach responses in SCOPE 2019, 70 focus on coaches’ work with centers, and 30 focus on coaches’ work with FCC providers.

Exhibit I. SCOPE 2019 study sample



	Head Start-funded centers	Centers not funded by Head Start	FCCs
SCOPE 2019 study sample sizes			
Coaches	42	28	30
Directors	40	26	N.A.

Source: SCOPE Spring 2019 Teacher and FCC Provider Survey; SCOPE Spring 2019 Coach Survey.

Note: FCC = family child care. N.A. = not applicable.

ECE coach preparation and training

Coach preparation and training in previous research

The effectiveness of coaching relies, in part, on coach training and ongoing support and supervision (Lloyd and Modlin 2012; Zaslow et al. 2012). Coaches who participate in training before initiating their work with teachers and FCC providers can be more successful in coaching. This holds true even for coaches with strong coaching skills, prior ECE experience, and knowledge of the skills or content they try to impart (Lloyd and Modlin 2012). Few studies, however, have identified the content of initial training and ongoing supports coaches receive (Artman-Meeker et al. 2015; Isner et al. 2011). In this section, we highlight the training and education of SCOPE coaches, the training they received related to the coaching process, and challenges related to coaching and professional development.

Findings from SCOPE surveys of coaches working with centers and/or FCC homes and center directors

Coaches in SCOPE had varying levels of experience:

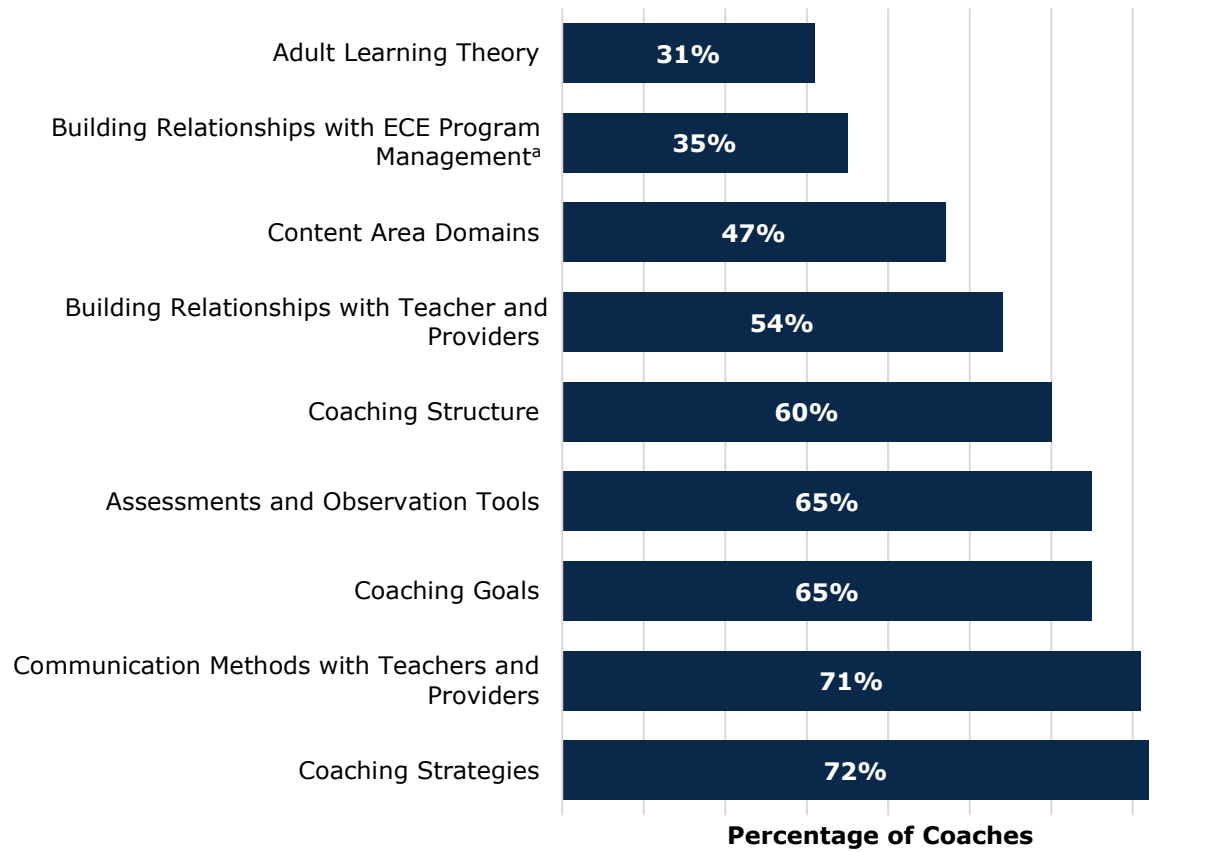
- An average of 8 years teaching and training adults (range 1 to 30 years)
- An average of 5 years providing ECE coaching (range 1 to 25 years)
- 36 percent had a coach certification

Coaches in SCOPE reported receiving multiple trainings, focused on a variety of topics. In the last 12 months before the survey:

- 68 percent (more than two-thirds) received training more than three times
- 28 percent received training once or twice
- 4 percent never received training

Common training topics, reported by at least half of coaches, addressed the structure of coaching and the interactions between coaches and teachers or FCC providers. For example, topics included setting coaching goals and strategies, using coaching assessments and observation tools, and building relationships (Exhibit II). Box 1 provides information from center directors about the training they offered coaches.

Exhibit II. Coaches in SCOPE received training on a variety of topics



Source: SCOPE Spring 2019 Coach Survey.

Note: Coaches (n=96) were asked, “What was the focus of the training or trainings [from your program/your organization to support your coaching]?” Respondents could select all response options that apply.

^a n=57; this question was asked only of coaches who reported on their work with center teachers and not of coaches who reported on their work with FCC providers.

ECE = early care and education.

Coaches in SCOPE cited some training and professional development challenges. Although most center directors report providing some training (Box 1), almost half (49 percent) of center-based coaches reported that a lack of training or professional development for coaching was sometimes/often/always challenging. In addition, 67 percent reported the level of coaching support received from center or program directors was sometimes/often/always challenging.

Box 1

Center director reports of informal and coach training offered by their ECE centers¹

Informal training. An initial meeting or informal training was provided in 70 percent of Head Start-funded centers and 80 percent of centers not funded by Head Start.

Formal training. Thirty-eight percent of center directors in Head Start-funded centers and 16 percent in centers not funded by Head Start had someone from the center provide formal training to coaches.

Training topics. Whether training was formal or informal, at least two-thirds of center directors in each setting reported that training focused more broadly on the program context, such as center structure and organization, staff roles and training needs, and curriculum and assessment tools. At least two-thirds of center directors in each setting reported training topics focused specifically on coaching processes, such as overall goals for coaching, coaching strategies, and specific teacher professional development needs.

Ongoing peer collaboration and supervision provided for ECE coaches

Coach supervision and peer collaboration in previous research

Ongoing peer collaboration and supervision might be important drivers of coaching efficacy (Lloyd and Modlin 2012; Zaslow et al. 2012). Studies do not emphasize peer supports that coaches might access, such as peer networks or learning communities (Aikens et al. 2017). However, because prior research suggests these sorts of supports are useful for other adult learners such as teachers (National Research Council 2015), they might be similarly valuable for the quality of coaches' work (Aikens et al. 2017). Many professional development studies also do not provide information about how coaches are supervised or how coaching progress is monitored (Isner et al. 2011). The few studies that do provide information highlight the dosage and content of coach-supervisor meetings (Isner et al. 2011). This section describes coaches' collaboration with peers and satisfaction with those activities and their interactions with supervisors.

¹ Center directors reported about training resources provided to coaches regarding the center's organization and approach for serving children. Center directors could report that coaches received an informal training, formal training, written information, or no overview from the center. We did not define informal versus formal training; center directors interpreted these terms for themselves.

Findings from SCOPE surveys of coaches working with centers and/or FCC homes and center directors

Almost all coaches in SCOPE had a supervisor with whom they met regularly. Ninety-four percent of coaches had a supervisor assigned to provide oversight to their work as a coach. Eighty-five percent of these coaches met regularly with their supervisor. Of those who had regular meetings, 65 percent did so at least twice a month. Box 2 summarizes center director reports about supervision of coaches in ECE centers.

Box 2

Center director reports about ECE coach supervisors and their supervisory activities²

Almost all (98 percent) of directors of centers with Head Start funding and most (77 percent) of directors of centers without Head Start funding reported that the coach working in their center had one or more people who supervised the coaches' work with teachers. **Most frequently, center directors, child development coordinators/managers, and others outside the center supervised the coaches' work with teachers (Exhibit III).** In Head Start-funded centers, 13 percent of center directors reported that some outside

supervision was provided, while this was more frequent in centers not funded by Head Start (50 percent). This may be related to the fact that 86 percent of Head Start-funded centers had coaches internal to the center and almost all (95 percent) of the centers not funded by Head Start were supported by external coaches. None of the directors reported that teaching staff or directors from other centers that were part of the same larger organization were involved in supervision.

² Center directors reported on the types of staff who supervised coaches' work with teachers in their center. Center directors could select more than one type of staff, as applicable, because of the possibility that more than one person was involved in supervising this work.

Exhibit III. Center directors, child development coordinators/managers, and others outside the center most frequently served as supervisors of coaches’ work with teachers in SCOPE

Who supervised center-based coaches	Center directors in Head Start-funded centers (n=37–38)	Center directors in centers not funded by Head Start (n=8–20) ^a
Center director	50%	60%
Education or child development coordinator or manager	57%	25%
Specialists or other types of managers/coordinators	16%	20%
Someone outside the organization	13%	50%
Program director or administrator of a larger organization the center is part of	-- ^b	14%

Source: SCOPE Spring 2019 Center Director Survey.

^aSample size variation is a result of what options center directors were offered. Response options about program directors and directors of other centers were only offered to center directors working at large organizations, franchises, or a chain. Response options about an education or child development coordinator or manager or specialists or other types of managers/coordinators on staff were only offered to those who had reported in a prior question their center or larger organization included these types of staff.

^bToo few directors of Head Start-funded centers responded to this question to report on the data.

Note: Center directors were asked, “Who supervises the coaches who work with teachers of preschool age children in your center?” Respondents could select all the answers that applied.

Center directors reported that supervision addressed multiple topics with coaches in SCOPE. The most common supervisory activities, reported by at least three-quarters of center directors in each setting, included discussing or reviewing the following:

- Coaching progress generally (not specific to one teacher)
- Strategies or processes for coaching
- Progress of specific teachers
- Strategies for specific teachers
- Coaching paperwork, documentation, or assessment data

Observation of coaches in SCOPE was also common, for those working in centers. At least half of center directors (51 percent in Head Start-funded centers and 63 percent in centers not funded by Head Start) reported that they or a coach supervisor conducted in-person observations of coaches’ interactions with teachers in their centers. A very small percentage (3 percent in Head Start-funded centers and 7 percent in centers not funded by Head Start) conducted video observations of coach–teacher interactions. When a center director did observe coach–teacher interactions (by video or in person), the observations tended to occur at least monthly (47 percent of the time in Head Start-funded centers and 79 percent of the time in centers not funded by Head Start).

Almost all coaches in SCOPE collaborated with other coaches, and most found this collaboration helpful. Eighty-seven percent of coaches in SCOPE collaborated and shared resources with other coaches. Among those who collaborated, 77 percent found this collaboration to be “very helpful.”

Box 3

Center director reports about coaching benefits for their ECE center

Center directors in SCOPE generally agreed that coaching improved practices in their center, and they also saw room for improvement. More than three-quarters of center directors agreed or slightly agreed that the coaching provided in their center was improving teacher practice (reported by 77 percent in Head Start-funded centers and 93 percent in centers not funded by Head Start). However, a substantial portion agreed or slightly agreed that coaching in their center could be more effective at supporting teachers’ professional development (reported by 56 percent in Head Start-funded centers and 41 percent in centers not funded by Head Start).

Center directors also reported that coaching was helping their center meet its goals (reported by

79 percent in Head Start-funded centers and 92 percent in centers not funded by Head Start). Though directors did not report their specific center-level goals, they did report whether coaches were asked to focus on specific topics, and what those topics were. In the SCOPE sample, 62 percent of directors in Head Start-funded centers and 67 percent of directors in centers not funded by Head Start reported they or a coach supervisor directed the coach about what topics to focus on. The most common topics reported by 70 percent or more of directors from both settings included relationships, interactions, or behavior management/guidance; teacher–child interactions (individual or small group); learning environments; dual-language development and learning; and child development and learning.

Key takeaways about ECE coaching supports and possible next steps

- **Overall, coaches in SCOPE participated in trainings on a number of topics.** Most coaches in SCOPE received training about coaching strategies and communication with teachers and providers, and many also received training about coaching goals, assessment and observation tools, and coaching structure. Future studies could examine the links between the topics and the quality of coaching.
- **Center directors reported that training provided by their center tended to be an initial meeting or informal (rather than formal) training.** In addition, despite that center-based coaches reported frequent training, many coaches also reported challenges with training and professional development supports. The SCOPE findings add to the small body of literature that has examined the training coaches receive during their careers (Artman-Meeker et al. 2015; Isner et al. 2011). Unfortunately, the nature of the challenges related to training are not specified through the SCOPE surveys. Examining the details regarding perceived challenges with information about the training and supports offered would be important for identifying coach professional development needs.
- **Coach supervision from centers was prevalent for center-based coaches in SCOPE.** Center-based coaches in SCOPE typically had supervisors internal to the ECE program and met with them

regularly. Notably, the frequency of coach supervision meetings varied considerably, but the content did not. Out of the eight topics identified as key areas of discussion between coaches and supervisors, most were consistent across funding type, with slight variations in the following areas: discussions of coaching strategy and progress, coaching observations and feedback, and training of coaches. Future work should particularly examine the trainings and supervision provided to FCC coaches; since coaches for most FCC providers are from external organizations, we did not learn about their supervisors and training providers in this study.

- **Center directors in SCOPE were generally satisfied with coaching in their centers, reporting that coaching helped strengthen teacher and provider practices and meet center goals.** Although they held positive attitudes about coaching, a substantial number also believed there was room for improvement and that coaching could be more effective at supporting teachers' professional development. However, this study did not explore director views on how coaching could be more effective. Future studies should gather information about the topical areas and skills identified for coach improvement, as the design of targeted training and guidance could directly improve coaches' work with teachers and providers.

Additional areas for further exploration about supports for coaches

- **Improve future research about coaching effectiveness with expanded attention to the content and types of training and other supports coaches receive and the links to coaching effectiveness.** The number of trainings and the frequency of coach supervision varied across SCOPE. Further exploring the features of training support that coaches receive from center directors and other sources (for example, training goals or intensity and dosage) and exploring the links to coaching practice would be valuable for improving the ECE professional development system.
- **Consider coach supports in the context of adverse events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.** Qualitative studies could more closely examine the content and process of training or supervision, particularly in the context of new and greater demands on staff. For example, in a recent study of coaching during the pandemic, coaches shifted to providing supports related to the COVID-19 pandemic, with less focus on typical ECE coaching topics (Lloyd et al. 2021a, 2021b). Apart from the pandemic, attention to coach mental health or other nonprofessional development supports might also be important. Insights from this type of research could be advantageous for better attending to the type of supports coaches need throughout unanticipated or adverse events.
- **Collect more information on the process and content of coaches' collaboration with peers.** Most coaches in SCOPE reported that collaborating with other coaches was helpful. For example, a survey of coaches in Washington state (Keller 2017) found that communities of practice (in which coaches connected with one another to support their work) reduced coach isolation, provided them with knowledge about new resources, supported them with reflecting on their practice, and provided an opportunity to receive feedback on their work. Exploring coaches' collaboration (e.g., frequency, level of experience of partners, formality in collaborative activities, interaction with coaches' skills) might help to better understand important pathways to improving coach practices.

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Reminders about interpreting SCOPE findings

SCOPE 2019 participants were purposively selected, and the information learned from these surveys cannot be generalized to a specific ECE coaching approach or group of centers and FCC providers.

Information was gathered in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic likely impacted coaching processes, possibly in ways that will continue even after the pandemic ends. In 2021, SCOPE conducted surveys and interviews with some of the same coaches, center directors, and FCC providers to learn more about coaching in the context of COVID-19 (see [ACF 2022 About the Study](#)). Taken together, these two data collection efforts help to inform the field about what has changed in coaching and professional development and what might be important to understand for the future of coaching.

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For more information about SCOPE

Visit the project page:

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/study-coaching-practices-early-care-and-education-settings-2016-2021>

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SCOPE data

The SCOPE surveys and interview protocols as well as the study data are archived with the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), located here:

<https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/web/pages/>

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