

Educating Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder

A Model for High-Quality Coaching

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Introduction

Public schools have experienced a significant increase in the number of students qualifying for special education and related services under the disability category of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). As a result, many states are developing additional certification or authorization in this area, which in turn is increasingly becoming a requirement for employment in teaching students with ASD in school districts. However, with or without additional certification, many educational professionals still lack sufficient training and/or experience in providing effective instruction and meaningful support to these students. Consequently, many educational professionals may feel overwhelmed when faced with the prospect of providing instruction to a population of students with unique challenges for whom they feel unprepared to teach. Fortunately, when considering this as a field, we have learned a number of things about how to provide educational supports to students with ASD within the context of real-world school and classroom settings. One of the things we have discovered is that simply delivering academic instruction is insufficient for this population. Rather, these students need to be provided with targeted and intentional interventions in the areas of interacting with others in the school's social context and in communicating effectively with others. Only when students with ASD are exposed to effective strategies

supporting the development and active use of social-communicative skills with their peers and family members will we really begin to positively affect the overall quality of their lives.

Second, we have come to know through practical experience that supporting students with ASD in this way cannot be the responsibility of any single professional. These supports cannot be provided piecemeal by various disciplines working in isolation from one another. Instead, it truly takes a collaborative effort between those more experienced professionals willing to support and coach their fellow colleagues and those newer to this area, who must be willing to recruit input, ask for help, and tirelessly try out new ideas. Many school districts are currently providing beginning teachers with a more experienced colleague to serve as a coach by supporting the new teacher as he or she "learns the ropes." We feel that this type of a coaching arrangement can be a powerful opportunity for collaboration and skill building, ultimately benefitting students most of all.

The purpose of this book is to provide practitioners, including speech and language professionals, general and special education teachers, and other service providers with a resource to support their collaborative efforts to teach meaningful skills to students with ASD. The first section of the book presents a multi-tiered model for providing coaching

at varying levels of support intensity, along with the numerous important considerations involved in implementing effective coaching supports. The second section of the book presents an outline of effective practices in utilizing coaching strategies to support teachers in planning for the instruction of meaningful skills to students with ASD utilizing a team-based, collaborative coaching model. The third section of the book

provides numerous practical, evidence-based strategies to be used by coaches and teachers in teaching meaningful skills to students with ASD. We end the book with a chapter addressing critical issues involved in building the capacity of districts to evaluate, oversee, and support the effective coaching of teachers in providing evidence-based practices to students with ASD.



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CHAPTER 5

High-Quality Coaching: A Framework

The ability to help the people around me self-actualize their goals underlines the single aspect of my abilities and the label that I value most—teacher.

—Bill Walsh

Chapter Objectives

- Overview a multitiered framework for coaching on the basis of a three-tiered model of support
- Assist teachers and districts in identifying the type of coaching supports needed for successful implementation of instructional and behavioral interventions for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
- Prioritize coaching goals and coaching strategies for three levels of coaching intensity
- Offer coaching strategies for establishing collaborative working relationships

Introduction

Coaching is not something you get. It is something you do with others to earn their trust and respect with the potential to change lives for the better. Traditional models of coaching emphasize an expert imparting knowledge to a novice learner, demonstrating a skill or way of doing that maximizes the potential of the learner, group, or team. The expert provides an invaluable service, if and only if he or she can communicate with the new learner(s), monitor growth, and evaluate progress. High-quality coaching (HQC) embraces and accentuates equality in the coach-coachee relationship as well as empowerment for the coachee (see Cramer, 1998; Kampwirth & Powers, 2011). Face-to-face coaching stresses the principle of live coaching, where a coach with knowledge of evidence-based practices shares a strategy that a teacher or educational team may find useful with a particular student, or demonstrates how to target a particular challenging behavior of a student. The teacher, likewise, can demonstrate that instructional method to an instructional assistant for use with an individual student. Oftentimes, instructional assistants, many of whom have been with a classroom for years, have acquired strategies that the teacher or coach may find incredibly practical. High-quality coaching provides opportunities for all stakeholders in the classroom to share ideas that build camaraderie, trust, and newfound skills. The following coaching approaches can be used independently,

or in some combination depending on the particular teaching circumstance.

In Chapter 1, we emphasized the trend toward mentoring professional staff that teach students with special needs and, in particular, those with ASD. Coaching efforts require attention to the elements that make it exceptional and worthwhile. In this chapter, we clarify a framework for coaching delineating how this process can be undertaken at different levels of intensity. Borrowing from multitiered systems of support and decision-making logic utilized by an increasing number of fields of educational methods (e.g., response to intervention, positive behavior interventions and supports, etc.), we conceptualize three levels of coaching intensity that can be used to make system-wide decisions about the allocation of coaching resources and activities by a given educational agency (e.g., county office of education, local education agency or school district, public school consortium, etc.). Each level of coaching intensity is selected on the basis of need and context within a given school program or classroom (Figure 5–1).

Intensity of Coaching

All teachers can benefit from a basic level of coaching support by accessing peers and/or educational professionals knowledgeable about special needs students to serve as a support system, and thus, our first level of coaching is referred to as “peer-to-peer coaching.”

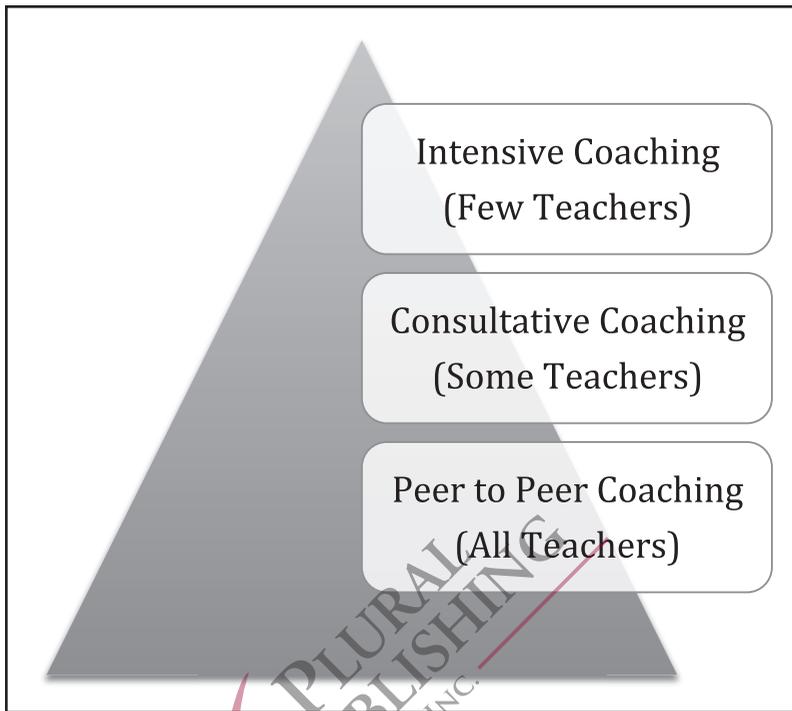


Figure 5–1. Tiered model of coaching support intensity.

Peer-to-peer (PtP) coaching is typically provided on a check-in and as-needed basis. Many teachers with experience implementing evidence-based interventions would be likely to find this level of coaching sufficient in supporting their everyday efforts to effectively teach students with ASDs. Alternatively, some would benefit from a more intensive level of support. Hence, we further elaborate a model called “consultative coaching” at a second tier on the pyramid (see Figure 5–1). Although not intended for all teachers, consultative coaching (CC) would be provided to a select group who may be (a) altogether new to teaching students with ASD;(b) implementing a new program, curricu-

lum, or intervention; or (c) encountering challenges and barriers to successfully implementing specific interventions for a student. Consultative coaching differs in intensity from PtP coaching involving a greater degree of monitoring and support from an outside expert. In-class consultations are provided, and debriefing and follow-up activities are scheduled. Consultative coaching generally consists of a more uniform observation and follow-up schedule than PtP coaching (see expert coaching models described in Chapter 3).

At the top of the coaching pyramid, “intensive” coaching is reserved for a few teachers who would benefit from high-intensity support. In many cases,

intensive coaching (IC) will need to be individualized to address the unique needs of the teacher and/or program. There may be many reasons justifying the need for IC. For example, IC would be required when a teacher has insufficient knowledge or background about ASD as a disability, is struggling to be successful in his or her current assignment, and/or, in some cases, is in jeopardy of removal. Intensive coaching may be provided when other problems arise as well, including but not limited to high rates of challenging student behavior, poor collaboration among related service providers, family members, and parent advocates, or other stakeholders who disagree with a teaching methodology, or Individualized Education Program (IEP) goal priorities for a student. Intensive coaching may be implemented proactively to enhance the likelihood of success in at-risk situations. Examples might include, but are not limited to, a teacher's first month on the job, the adoption of a new evidence-based program, and/or the introduction of a high-needs student with ASD into an existing program.

Intensive coaching entails direct levels of support where the coach operates as "expert trainer." This level of coaching is the most labor-intensive process, most embedded in terms of the involvement of the coach, and accordingly, the most costly. The coach may be on site in the classroom for a duration of several consecutive school days, conducting observations of instruction and student management, reviewing curriculum resources and materials, and utilizing direct observational tools to record a teacher's differentiated instructional

techniques in the classroom as well as recording students' responses. In many cases, when informed parent consent is obtained, there may be opportunity to video-record the classroom or a particular student for later review and analysis with the teacher and staff. Educational staff serving students with ASD with significant learning, social-communication, and/or behavioral issues may require this level of assistance from a knowledgeable expert to implement instructional change and/or behavioral support.

In many school agencies, related special education support personnel (e.g., speech-language pathologists [SLPs], occupational therapists [OTs], and inclusion specialists) assume the role of consultative coach for higher-functioning students on the autism spectrum included in general education programs. As more SLPs, OTs, and behavior intervention managers enter the special educational work force, there may be an expectation for them to take on broader roles of co-teaching and expert coaching in programs, as well as training team members and other professionals in best practices for the ASD population. The expansion of roles and responsibilities, and the trend away from segregated service delivery models toward inclusive classroom models by well-trained service providers is an evolving practice that requires role release and discipline sharing (see McGinty & Justice, 2007). For example, in addition to imparting a particular expertise in a given specialty of focus, such as augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), school-based SLPs actively model and teach

AAC strategies to the educational team that engages with a student throughout the school day. In a similar vein, instructional assistants (paraprofessionals) can serve as peer coaches for novice instructional aides in classrooms. Coaching is not a role we perceive as belonging to the elite few in the field of special education. Rather, we envision that it will emerge as a transdisciplinary practice in public school systems invested in “cross-pollinating” best practices and implementing interventions that are effective for students on the autism spectrum.

Determining the most appropriate coaching approach requires an understanding of student and teacher needs, and how best to address those needs while allocating district resources. With a three-tiered coaching model, professionals can better direct and provide targeted assistance where and when it is most needed. Unfortunately, sometimes coaching can be inconsistent, and the coachee feels underappreciated, unsupported, and overwhelmed by the additional requirements that a coach places on him or her. This issue was previously previewed in Chapter 1 as “obstacles to coaching.” Once a coach clarifies his or her role by undertaking a level of coaching intensity consistent with the needs of the teacher or classroom situation (context), the coachee then has a clearer picture of what to expect, and can enter into a reciprocal problem-solving relationship with the coach. Clarifying the what, why, and where of coaching by utilizing one of these approaches reduces anxiety and increases trust between both parties, which is a key feature of high-quality coaching.

The Autism Services Coach

The increasing need for effective instruction with students with ASD has spawned a new professional title known in many states as an “autism services coach.” These individuals receive advanced training from professional organizations or agencies in evidence-based practices and share this information with educational teams. Around the country, networks of professional autism services coaches and trainers (e.g., the California Autism and Professional Training Information Network [CAPTAIN]) offer extended training and on-site consultation to their local educational agencies). The autism services coach provides assistance at any of the levels of support depicted in Figure 5–1. Much of what this professional shares revolves around new practices in the field to ensure that teachers and staff are up-to-date on the latest pedagogies and evidence-based practices for students. The autism services coach appointed by the school district or intermediate-level educational agency (e.g., county office, regional consortium, or collaborative) holds the requisite skill set to assume this expert role. An autism services coach’s skill repertoire encompasses knowledge about the neurology and core deficits unique to ASD as well as evaluation and assessment, explicit instructional approaches, data collection, social communication and social skill training, writing and developing IEPs, just to name a few. The job of this expert is to observe, guide, model, and offer ongoing feedback and support,