



Supporting Statewide Implementation of the Practice Standards: A Guide for DHHS Staff



The North Carolina Practice Standards build skills and behaviors that support effective Communication, Engagement, Assessment, Planning, and Implementation in child welfare practice. They were designed to improve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children and families, and they serve as the foundation for a statewide Child Welfare Practice Model for better quality, consistent practice across all 100 counties.

As DHHS staff, it is your responsibility to support DSS leaders, supervisors, and workers as they incorporate the Practice Standards into their work. You can do this by modeling the Practice Standards in your everyday interactions with state and local DSS staff, private agencies, judges, tribal representatives, individuals with lived experience, stakeholders, and other partners.

There are many opportunities for you to prioritize and model the Practice Standards in your work:

- Developing and implementing new policies or programmatic changes
- Drafting federal reports, such as the Annual Progress and Services Report (APSR) and Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP)
- Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) activities
- Providing technical assistance and consultations
- Facilitating and attending trainings, meetings, and other presentations
- Facilitating and participating in workgroups and committees
- Meeting and coordinating with external partners and stakeholders
- Conducting case reviews and providing feedback
- Drafting Dear County Directors Letters (DCDL)



COMMUNICATING

Communicating defined: Timely and consistent sharing of spoken and written information so that meaning and intent are understood in the same way by all parties involved. Open and honest communication underpins the successful performance of all essential functions in child welfare.

How can I integrate effective Communicating in my own practice?

- Clearly describe and explain the ‘why’ behind new requirements or directives when developing and implementing a new program, policy, or initiative. Ensure your communication is timely and check for understanding by asking for and answering questions. Provide additional clarification where needed or when there are misunderstandings
- Solicit and use input from agency staff and stakeholders when drafting a new policy, initiative, or other document.
- During meetings and presentations, refer to the meeting purpose, goals, and intended outcomes throughout your presentation. Incorporate data and ask questions to check for understanding.
- Facilitate small and large meetings with ease and make attendees feel included and motivated. Solicit and use input from meeting attendees prior to creating the meeting agenda and end meetings by recapping and discussing next steps. Be sure to express gratitude for meeting participation, time, and effort to all meeting attendees.
- Use clear and concise communication in your written or verbal responses to ensure understanding. Tailor your communication to the audience and be sure to avoid the use of acronyms.
- Consistently demonstrate transparency, authenticity, and genuineness during difficult conversations with agency staff and stakeholders in a way that promotes dialogue.



ENGAGING

Engaging defined: Empowering and motivating families to actively participate with child welfare by communicating openly and honestly with the family, demonstrating respect, and valuing the family’s input and preferences. Engagement begins upon first meeting a family and continues throughout child welfare services. As a leader, you will empower and motivate county and agency staff, stakeholders, elected officials, and communities to actively participate with child welfare by communicating openly and honestly, demonstrating respect, and valuing input and preferences.

How can I integrate effective Engaging in my own practice?

- Prepare in advance for meetings with agency staff and stakeholders to demonstrate respect and engagement through your knowledge of the topics being discussed.
- Connect with meeting participants by providing enough time during meetings for clarifying and follow-up questions about data, policy, protocol, and best practices. Ensure participants finish speaking without interruption to fully understand their perspective and thought process.
- Demonstrate partnership with agency staff and stakeholders by creating a collaborative environment using a teaming approach. Encourage feedback, input, and new ideas. Incorporate feedback into your work and identify both positives and challenges as opportunities for growth and change.
- Demonstrate empathy to others’ perspectives in all situations by listening, reflecting, and acknowledging their perspectives, even when you may disagree.
- Use active listening and body language, such as leaning in, smiling, maintaining eye contact, and nodding your head to show you are listening and interested in what others are saying.
- Listen and respond to concerns from agency staff and stakeholders. Work to understand the nature of the concerns and seek resolution early by considering other opinions or approaches to reach agreement among parties. Develop reasonable and realistic solutions collaboratively.





PLANNING

Planning defined: Respectfully and meaningfully collaborating with families, communities, tribes, and other identified team members to set goals and develop strategies based on the continuous assessment of safety, risk, family strengths, and needs through a child and family team process. Plans should be revisited regularly by the team to determine progress towards meeting goals and changes made when needed. As a leader, you will work with county and agency staff, stakeholders, partners, and others to develop a joint vision for your organization and to develop short and long-term strategic plans.

How can I integrate effective Planning in my own practice?

- Use Structured Decision-Making tools with agency staff to further identify needs and concerns in their assessment process and how to address those needs.
- Discuss bias and how bias impacts outcomes with agency staff.
- Create “buy-in” through collaboration with agency staff and stakeholders to set programmatic goals. Meet with those same individuals to address any concerns about the goals and objectives.
- Organize your work and set priorities, so agency staff and stakeholders are clear on timelines and deadlines, especially as it relates to new mandates.
- Involve agency staff and stakeholders in the organizational change process through meetings and by providing frequent updates.
- Conduct regular organizational and programmatic assessments to identify needs and strengths. Seek input from agency staff and stakeholders on needs and strengths needing improvement.

ASSESSING

Assessing defined: Gathering and synthesizing information from children, families, support systems, agency records, and persons with knowledge to determine the need for child protective services and to inform planning for safety, permanency, and well-being. Assessing occurs throughout child welfare services and includes learning from families about their strengths and preferences. As a leader, you will gather and synthesize information and use data to make decisions and determine next steps for organizational strategic plans, goals, and objectives.

How can I integrate effective Assessing in my own practice?

- Establish strategic performance measures to continually assess and adjust programmatic direction for the programs you oversee.
- Focus on using data and evidence to measure outcomes, guide decision making, and inform best practice.
- Incorporate data into strategic plans, reports, policy and program guidance, and other presentations.
- Identify gaps in data and brainstorm solutions to collect missing data.
- Encourage agency staff and stakeholders to discuss data, discover root causes of system problems, and work collaboratively to find solutions.
- Connect programmatic performance measures with the importance of serving families and improved outcomes and communicate this information clearly to agency staff and stakeholders.
- Rely on other DHHS staff and agency staff and stakeholders as experts and as reliable and valid sources for creative problem solving.
- Form workgroups, subcommittees, and other teams by selecting agency staff and stakeholders with the right skill sets, knowledge, and subject matter expertise. Empower these groups to explore root causes and develop solutions. Encourage diverse voices at the table when considering solutions.



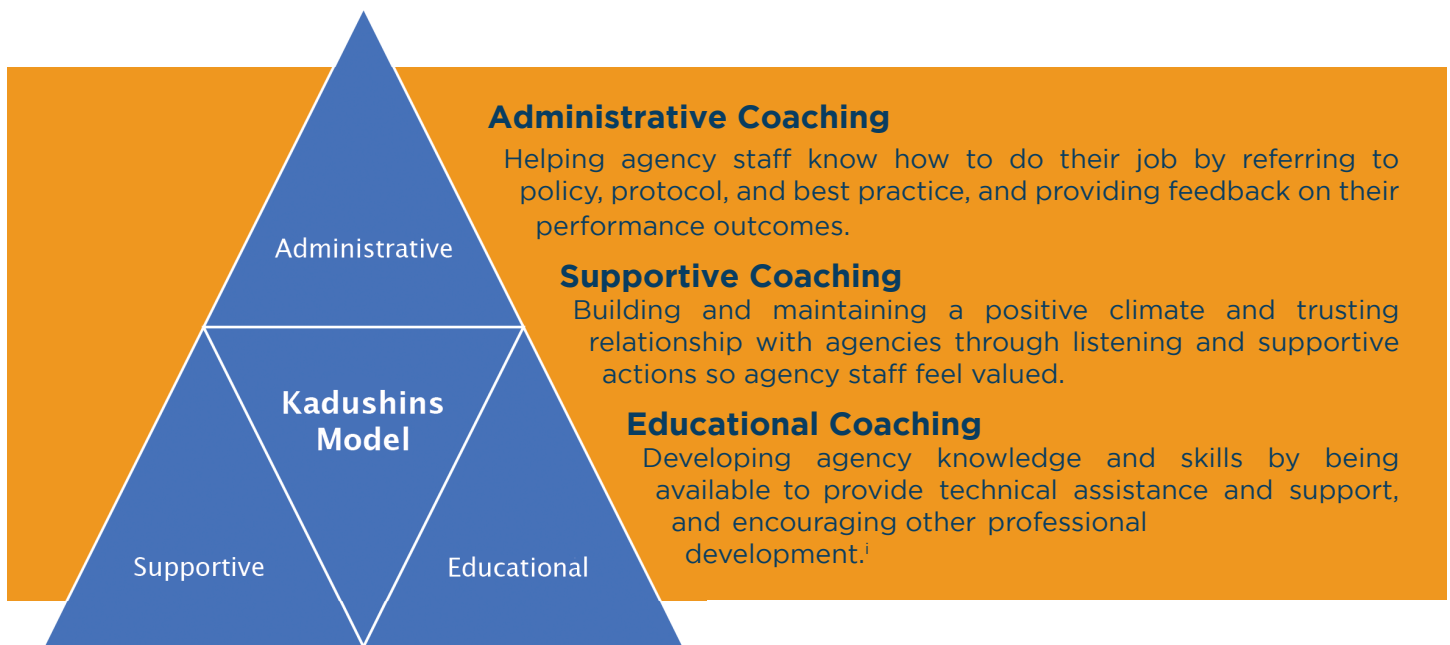
IMPLEMENTING

Implementing defined: Carrying out plans that have been developed. Implementing includes linking families to services and community supports, supporting families to take actions agreed upon in plans, monitoring to assure plans are being implemented by both families and providers, monitoring progress on behavioral goals, and identifying when plans need to be adapted. As a leader, you will guide change efforts through a purposeful process resulting in improved outcomes.

How can I integrate effective Implementing in my own practice?

- Lead change efforts using a specific model and maintain fidelity to that model. Connect change efforts to the agency’s mission, vision, values, and strategic plans. Use data to inform decision making in change efforts and to assess achievement of outcomes.
- Engage and communicate with agency staff and stakeholders in change efforts to seek feedback and input and to create buy-in to changes.
- Utilize project management plans and facilitate processes to monitor and assess implementation progress on change efforts. Model a CQI approach to using data to assess progress, identify barriers, and develop solutions to achieve outcomes. Brainstorm collaboratively with agency staff and stakeholders to identify potential barriers and solutions to successful implementation.
- Identify and assist agency staff and stakeholders in understanding evidence-based practices and how those can assist families.
- Provide guidance to agency staff about how to be family-centered to improve safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children and families.

Implementing the North Carolina Practice Standards Through Coaching



The Practice Standards are described in observable, behaviorally specific terms to illustrate how leaders, supervisors, and workers will conduct the essential functions of child welfare and how DHHS staff will support their work at the local level. It is important that you model the Practice Standards in your own work while also coaching others to do the same. Coaching is a hands-on approach to supporting agency staff as they incorporate the Practice Standards. Modeling and coaching are parallel processes, both mirroring the behaviors of the Practice Standards. This allows DSS staff the opportunity to both observe and receive feedback on how they should integrate the Practice Standards into their work.



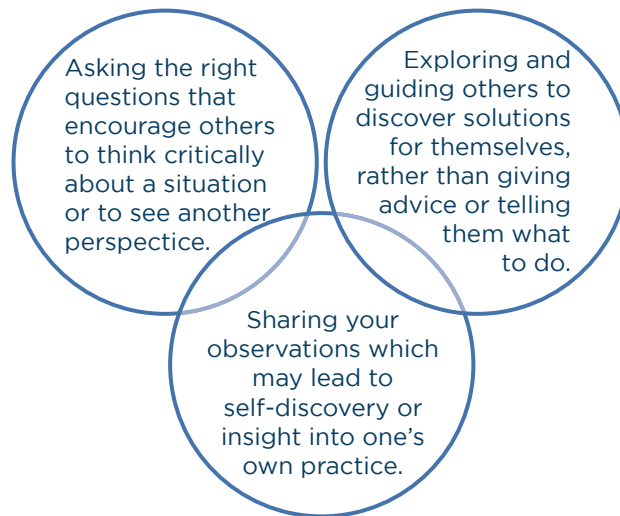
What is coaching?

Coaching is a collaborative and structured process in which the coach uses specific strategies to help the learner improve their skills and behaviors. Improving the skills and behaviors of the child welfare workforce contributes to improved agency and statewide practice, as well as improved safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes for children and families.

Using coaching as DHHS staff creates opportunities for support, guidance, and practice improvement within the local departments of social services (DSS) and other stakeholders you work with. Coaching is a method of guiding and teaching that is not only applicable to frontline staff but can be used at all levels of child welfare. Coaching is not telling or directing, but rather, supporting DSS leaders, supervisors, and workers so they can grow and develop their own solutions as they incorporate the Practice Standards into their work. Coaching also provides support to your peers and those reporting directly to you at the state level. Coaching also creates a safe environment that fosters trust between state, county, and other local agencies. Through coaching, agency staff and stakeholders will be more likely to ask questions and seek guidance as they need it.

Coaching can occur in many different situations and environments, such as in meetings with stakeholders, during agency consultations, and when collaborating with agency staff and stakeholders. Incorporating the Practice Standards into your own work and providing coaching to local agencies will ensure the Standards are implemented consistently statewide and will create improved outcomes for the children and families of North Carolina.

It is important that you use coaching for growth and development rather than for situation- or problem-specific challenges. When you use coaching during interactions with child welfare agencies, their staff will in turn be more likely to use it in their own agencies and with the families with whom they work. Effective coaching focuses on three main strategies.ⁱⁱ



Benefits of Coachingⁱⁱⁱ

Skill Building	Engagement	Motivation	Culture & Morale
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases skills, competence, and confidence Leads to more effective use of agency resources Improves outcomes for children and families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases agency engagement and effectiveness with families Supports agencies in problem solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improves agency motivation and commitment to child welfare work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improves agency culture Creates a culture of trust, safety, and learning Decreases child welfare staff turnover



Principles of Coachingⁱⁱⁱ

- 1) Relationships come first: Coaching is successful only in the context of a positive, empowering relationship.
 - Coaching requires a culture of trust in a strengths-based environment that encourages growth and professional development.
 - Coaching is founded on trust, and defined by partnership and equality, not hierarchy.
- 2) People can create their own solutions: Coaching means supporting and empowering the leaders, supervisors, workers, other agency staff, and stakeholders you work with to identify and develop their own solutions.
 - Resist the urge to solve problems or identify solutions.
 - Recognize that agency staff and stakeholders have knowledge and skills that they bring to their job and coaches must support them to use their expertise to discover their own solutions.
- 3) Facilitate the process, not the outcome: To take ownership of their work, agency staff and others must determine the next steps they will take.
 - Ensure goals and action steps are concrete and agencies have the knowledge to implement identified steps.
 - Collaborate and create room for agencies to make their own decisions.
- 4) Manage yourself first: Be aware of your own bias and the impact personal bias may have on your work.
 - Understand and accept your culture and how past experiences affect how you evaluate others.
 - Stay neutral even when the individual you are coaching has a different approach or perspective that is driving the solution.
- 5) Table your expertise for curiosity: Operate from a sense of genuine curiosity.
 - Listen to understand others' perspectives and ask thoughtful questions.
 - Step back so agency staff can step into the role of expert on their cases.
 - Resist the urge to simply give the answers or solutions.
- 6) Ask powerful questions: Ask insightful and open-ended questions that will prompt reflection and critical thinking through the situation.
 - Encourage agencies and other stakeholders to ask questions and seek guidance as they need it by yourself asking thoughtful questions.
 - Create 'a-ha' moments by asking powerful questions that facilitate learning and growth in agency practice.

Building Your Coaching Toolboxⁱⁱⁱ

Because coaching is about asking rather than telling, having a toolbox full of different questions is key. Questions must be insightful, open-ended, and powerful to create those “a-ha” moments.

Exploring questions: Encourages others to share more about a situation to create clarity. These questions look deeper into a situation and promote critical thinking.

Relationship questions: Encourages others to look at situations from different perspectives. Promotes self-awareness by asking questions to consider another person's perception and acknowledge their own biases.

Exception questions: Encourages others to think about the absence of a problem or a time it was less of a problem. These questions identify strengths to build on, such as what has worked in the past.

Scaling questions: Encourages others to be solution-focused. Questions can be used to assess safety, needs, and strengths; set goals; measure progress; and determine the next steps.

Coping questions: Acknowledges difficult situations while recognizing strengths, persistence, resiliency, and resources to cope. Encourages the use of coping strategies during difficult situations.

Visioning questions: Encourages others to think about how they would like a situation to be or imagine what it would be like if the situation was better. This can motivate them to work towards their goals. These questions focus on asking what they want for themselves or what they envision for their agency or a family on their caseload.

Action questions: Encourages others to take the lead in identifying and moving towards committing to action steps. These questions ask what needs to happen first, who needs to be involved, what is needed to make it happen, and the potential barriers.



Coaching Toolbox



Exploring Questions

- What is the concern?
- What have you already tried?
- How would you describe what has happened so far?
- What do you think is different about this situation?
- What will happen if nothing changes?



Relationship Questions

- How do others feel about what is happening?
- What else might have been going on during that situation?
- What might be influencing your impressions of the situation?



Exception Questions

- Tell me about a time when you felt successful with a similar situation.
- What was different then?
- What has worked well in the past that you might want to try again?



Scaling Questions

- Define the 1 and the 10 on the scale.
- Where is the situation you are currently facing on the scale? Why?
- What steps might it take to move up the scale?



Coping Questions

- What has been helpful in managing the situation?
- Where has there been success despite the challenges?
- What has contributed to success so far?



Visioning Questions

- Six months from now, how do you want the situation to look?
- What does success look like?
- What outcome would be ideal?



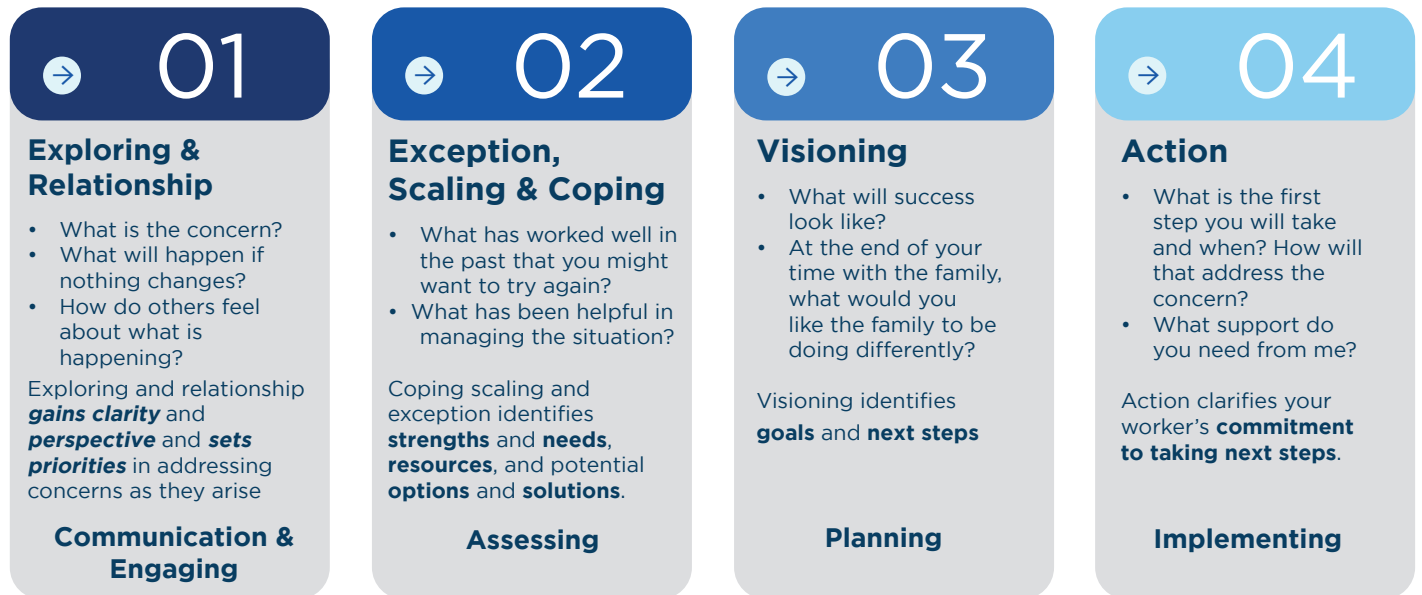
Action Questions

- What are the pros and cons of each possibility?
- What is the first step you will take and when? How will that address the concern?
- What will it take to make that happen? What are the potential barriers?
- What support might you need?



Coaching: Four-Step Process^v

When applying the Practice Standards, particularly around coaching child welfare agency leaders, supervisors, and workers statewide, utilize the four-step process to ensure agencies stay focused on concerns, strengths, and what needs to happen next to improve outcomes for North Carolina’s children and families. This will help you effectively demonstrate your role as a coach and resolve issues as they arise while modeling the Practice Standards.



Keys to Success of Coaching^v

- **Purpose:** Be clear on what problem you are trying to solve and how you plan to solve it via coaching, whether for an individual, groups, or child welfare agency. Clearly define your coaching purpose. Coaching can help resolve individual goals, such as performance on specific goals, and agency goals like responding to organizational needs to improve outcomes.
- **Structure:** Be clear on what you are trying to accomplish through coaching, whether with an individual or with an entire organization. Set specific times to conduct coaching, such as meeting regularly. If doing individual coaching, it is helpful to develop guidelines, boundaries, roles, and responsibilities, and how plans will be tracked.
- **Motivated Learners:** Agencies need to be engaged and invested in the coaching process to get their desired results. Regardless of how coaching is sought whether it is requested or required, leaders using the Practice Standards can help build motivation through management, guidance, training, and general encouragement.

Coaching Strategies to Guide Agency Staff^v



ⁱ Kadushin, A., & Harkness, D. (2014). Supervision in social work (5th ed.). Columbia University Press.

ⁱⁱ Jordan Institute for Families. (2014). Coaching for Change [curriculum]. UNC-CH School of Social Work and NC Division of Social Services

ⁱⁱⁱ Family & Children’s Resource Program. (2022) Staying Power [curriculum]. UNC-CH School of Social Work and NC Division of Social Services

^{iv} Evident Change. (2021). Safe Measures. Retrieved February 27, 2022, from https://www.evidentchange.org/sites/default/files/SafeMeasures%20Pamphlet_O.pdf

^v National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement. (2012). Coaching in Child Welfare. Retrieved March 22, 2022, from https://ncwwi.org/files/Mentoring_and_Coaching/Coaching_in_CW.pdf