Evidence-Based Practices and Reflective Coaching

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In the world of early intervention (EI), children are identified with developmental delays, prior to age three. A number of reasons may be behind such delays. Autism, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, is one reason for young children’s delays, especially in the areas of communication and social skills. The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) (2016) reports that Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) occurs across all socioeconomic backgrounds and affects every ethnic and racial group. Typically, more boys than girls are diagnosed with ASD, and it is believed that possibly one in 68 children has ASD (NINDS, 2016).

As an aspiring EI teacher, I would like to understand and present evidence-based strategies and techniques to parents of children with ASD, as it pertains to their children’s learning and development. One such way to present these practices is through reflective coaching. According to Rush and Shelden (2011), reflective coaching allows for the coach and parent to work collaboratively to develop strategies and techniques to use, based on the prior knowledge and learning of the parent, in order to problem solve situations that are challenging to the parent.

Through my practitioner inquiry-based research, I would like to answer the following question: As an EI teacher, how can I increase my understanding of reflective coaching, in order to present effective evidence-based practices to parents of toddlers and preschool-aged students on the autism spectrum?

Context for the Project

In the EI program for which I work, service coordinators and providers need to collaborate with parents to determine what the best course of action is for their children, who range in age from birth to age four and have developmental delays and/or disabilities. In this
partnership with parents, communication should go both ways, where we listen to each other and come to a mutual agreement on how to best service the children. Reflective coaching is a practice that many EI programs want the service coordinators and providers to engage in with parents, as it is considered an effective evidence-based practice (Rush & Shelden, 2011). Not all parents or providers are open to reflective coaching, but the practice is still strongly encouraged, as research supports its use.

Reflective coaching has 10 key elements, which are: consistent with the principles of adult learning, capacity building, nondirective, goal-oriented, solution-focused, performance-based, reflective, collaborative, context-driven, and as hands-on as it needs to be (Rush & Shelden, 2011). To me, the collaborative aspect is most important because, if all parties are not working together, then the other key elements cannot be achieved. Regarding collaboration, according to Rush and Shelden (2011):

The coach must learn what the [parent] knows, understands, is doing, including his or her preconceived knowledge about coaching and ideas for change, and how potential changes might be applied and might affect the [parent’s] current situation. The [parent] may learn the coach’s processes for reflecting upon and generating ideas, developing resources, solving problems, and planning actions, in addition to gaining any specialized knowledge that the coach provides in the form of feedback. Coaching cannot be based on the coach’s power over the [parent]; in other words, it cannot be a hierarchical relationship in which the [parent] implements actions due to directives, intimidation, or a need to satisfy or please the coach. (p. 11)

Research shows that reflective coaching is an effective evidence-based practice for all adults involved, in the education of young children, and has positive outcomes across a variety of
settings, such as in the home, the community, and the classroom (Rush & Shelden, 2011). As a service coordinator or provider, we must continually work with parents and assist them in understanding that, through reflective coaching, we can help the children make progress with their developmental delays. I believe that reflective coaching is a valuable tool for working with the parents of children in our EI program and support its use, whether I am working as a service coordinator or as an EI teacher.

**Demographic Data**

The children in our EI program qualify in one of three ways: through a 25% delay in one or more areas of their communication, cognitive, social-emotional, adaptive, or motor skills; through atypical development; or as an automatic pre-qualifier, such as an infant who was born weighing less than two pounds 10 ounces, has a diagnosis of Down syndrome or Chronic Lung Disease, or was weaned off of morphine as a newborn. Children with ASD generally do not come into our EI program already diagnosed, and some with ASD may not be officially diagnosed, due to the parents not being ready to accept that diagnosis. It is our job, however, to work with the parents where they are in dealing with their children’s delays or disabilities.

During the 2015 year, 2385 new children were referred to our EI program, with an average of 46 referrals received each week. A little more than half of those weekly referrals qualified for services. In addition, 2561 children and their families received services though an Individualized Family Service Plan. While we do not have the breakdown for 2015, for the 2014 year, 1197 children qualified based on a 25% delay, 322 children qualified based on atypical development, and 502 children qualified based on a high probability condition, which may lead to future delays, for a total of 2021 children. Unfortunately, it is not known how many children have specific diagnoses, such as ASD, because EI programs do not code disabilities the way they
do in special education, beginning at age three. However, it is not necessary to know the exact number of children with ASD to know that we must utilize effective evidence-based practices to service their specific needs.

As a result of my review of the literature regarding reflective coaching and effective evidence-based practices for children who are on the autism spectrum, three main themes have emerged: reflective coaching should be clearly defined, in order for providers to understand the practice and perceive it as beneficial; parent-led EI in the natural environment is one of the preferred methods for presenting strategies and techniques to parents of children with ASD; and joint attention is one of the main deficits addressed by providers of children with ASD, through evidence-based practices.

**Review of the Literature**

**Defining Reflective Coaching**

According to Kemp and Turnbull (2014), “coaching with parents became an accepted and oftentimes expected practice in EI for infants and toddlers with disabilities and their families between the years of 2000 and 2010, which was the first decade with widespread use of the term in the literature” (p. 305). They summarized that, when synthesizing EI studies that used reflective coaching, “there is no common definition/description for the term ‘coaching with parents in early intervention,’” and they suggested a need for clarifying the term and its parameters (Kemp & Turnbull, 2014, p. 305). Kemp and Turnbull (2014) felt that what is known as coaching does no harm, and infants and toddlers do appear to make progress, through its use.

Salisbury, Woods, and Copeland (2010) indicated that studies support that, when parents participate in their children’s EI, child engagement improves, and parent participation also promotes the achievement of their children’s outcomes. In their study, Salisbury, Woods, and
Copeland (2010) shared that providers and parents participated in the following components of coaching:

1. A clearly defined process for home visiting that is responsive to changing family needs;
2. A collaborative consultation approach to support, assessment, and intervention;
3. A range of collaborative consultation strategies to promote parent learning;
4. Use of family preferred activities and routines as contexts for embedding intervention for functional outcomes;
5. Continuous progress monitoring; and

According to Salisbury, Woods, and Copeland (2010), five of the six providers in their four-year study reported that, after engaging in reflective coaching, their perspectives on providing EI, based on routines and centered on the family, were positive. However, in order for providers and parents to engage in reflective coaching, the practice itself needs to be defined.

As indicated by Friedman, Woods, and Salisbury (2012), traditionally, the parents’ role in EI has been for the providers to seek the parents’ participation, through making decisions, regarding their children’s services and by developing outcomes for their children. Friedman, Woods, and Salisbury (2012) further shared that, currently, the emphasis on the parents’ role is parent-led EI in the natural environment, meaning the parents are at the forefront of providing EI, with the assistance of the providers. Therefore, providers are now focused on strengthening the parent-child relationship so that parents can implement strategies and techniques with their children to meet their outcomes (Friedman, Woods, & Salisbury, 2012). Through their research, Friedman, Woods, and Salisbury (2012) wanted to develop definitions of coaching strategies so
that providers would understand how to share strategies and techniques with parents. When setting the stage for the interaction between the coach and the parent, the coach, who is the provider, can use the following coaching strategies: conversation and information sharing, observation, direct teaching, and demonstrating (Freidman, Woods, & Salisbury, 2012). When the parent applies EI strategies and techniques with his or her child, the provider can provide for guided practice with feedback, parent practice with feedback, and joint interaction (Freidman, Woods, & Salisbury, 2012). During the mastery stage between the coach and the parent, the provider engages in problem solving and reflection with the parent (Freidman, Woods, & Salisbury, 2012).

As Salisbury, Cambray-Engstrom, and Woods (2012) conducted their research, they wanted to know how often coaching strategies were being used in the home and determine the providers actual use of coaching strategies versus their reported use. Using the same strategies as defined by Freidman, Woods, and Salisbury (2012), Salisbury, Cambray-Engstrom, and Woods (2012) concluded that providers consistently underreported their use of coaching strategies. They found that coaching strategies, which came more from the provider, such as demonstration and direct teaching, were reported with greater accuracy than the coaching strategies, which gave control of the session to the parent, such as guided practice with feedback and problem solving (Salisbury, Cambray-Engstrom, & Woods, 2012).

**Parent-Led EI in the Natural Environment**

Wetherby, Guthrie, Woods, Schatschneider, Holland, Morgan, and Lord (2014) found that parents involved in an individual coaching model had their children do better on their outcomes than those parents who met as a group in a clinic setting. This is an important factor because EI programs, as directed by the federal government, follow a parent coaching model, rather than a
medical model of intervention. In most cases, parent coaching is provided in the home, and some EI programs have chosen to follow a reflective coaching approach, as well. However, in my experience, some providers have not embraced reflective coaching. Providers include: speech and language pathologists, special educators, physical therapists, and occupational therapists.

Woods, Kashinath, and Goldstein (2004) felt that inserting EI within daily routines of families in their natural environments was a big change for providers, who may be used to a more direct approach to EI, such as working one-on-one with the children. Woods, Kashinath, and Goldstein (2004) further explained that natural environments are not just where children spend their time, such as at home or daycare, but also includes the natural activities and routines that occur with the children in those places. In their study, increases in their communication skills were noted for all four child participants, who received EI within the daily routines of their natural environments. While the children may not have been diagnosed with ASD, two of the four children had expressive language delays, and the other two children had developmental delays. These types of delays are typical of children with ASD, so the findings may be generalized.

The key to children, who have ASD, making progress is to offer EI. Wetherby and Woods (2006) wanted to determine if they would find differences in communication skills for children with ASD between pre- and post-intervention, who received EI at age two and received EI for one year. When comparing those children with a contrast group of children, who received EI at three years of age, Wetherby and Woods (2006) found that there were substantial gains in all areas of communication skills, except for gaze shifts and shared positive affect. The components of their EI program included: individualized curriculum, routines-based intervention in the natural environments, and parent-implemented intervention. In other words, parent-led EI in the natural environment occurred.
Address Joint Attention in Young Children with ASD

Parent-led EI in the natural environment can address many areas of concern for children with ASD, such as their communication and social skills. It is common knowledge among EI providers that children, who have ASD, lack skills in the area of joint attention. Schertz and Robb (2006) give the definition of joint attention as “visually coordinating attention with another person in relation to an object or event, sharing social interest, and showing an understanding that the partner is sharing the same interest” (p. 22). Therefore, many studies have been done to address this deficit. Schertz and Odom (2007) wanted to determine how using the parent-child relationship to encourage learning could determine the effectiveness of intervention with toddlers, through “promot[ing] joint attention by building on its developmental precursors” (p. 1563). Using a mixed methods research approach, three toddlers and their mothers were observed in the home (Schertz & Odom, 2007). Activities included: focusing on the face to increase the child’s tolerance; taking turns, which is a component of joint attention; responding to joint attention, which the parent initiated; and initiating joint attention, which was encouraged for the child to engage the parent (Schertz & Odom, 2007). While the study is limited in its participants, it is interesting to note that an hour of parent-child interaction that is face-to-face, in both routine and planned activities, resulted in two of the three toddlers demonstrating joint attention (Schertz & Odom, 2007). The third toddler made improvements in the areas of focusing on the face and taking turns, which Schertz and Odom (2007) believe are precursors to joint attention. The findings of this study support using an EI approach to address joint attention. Given this study was based on parent-led EI in the natural environment, it further supports using reflective coaching with the parents, as one way to assist them in developing strategies and techniques to address joint attention.
Additional research was done by Schertz, Odom, Baggett, and Sideris (2013), regarding joint attention. Some key differences exist between this study and Schertz and Odom’s (2007) study. To begin, there was a control group, in addition to the intervention group. There were also more participants, with 12 participants in the control group and 11 participants in the intervention group. In addition, this study used a specific approach called Joint Attention Mediated Learning (JAML), which appears to build upon the activities suggested in Schertz and Odom’s (2007) earlier study. Schertz, Odom, Baggett, and Sideris (2013) defined three phases in JAML, the Focusing on Faces phase, the Turn-Taking phase, and the Joint Attention phase. Through each of the three phases, five principles exist in JAML, which parents use to help their children do the following:

1. Focus their attention;
2. Organize and plan communication;
3. Encourage self-confidence;
4. Give meaning to social interactions; and
5. Expand interaction more frequently in a variety of settings and with different people.

By using the JAML intervention, the children’s communication improved (although not targeted by the intervention), the children focused more on their parents’ faces, and the children responded to their parents’ attempts at joint attention. Given this study was completed in the home by observing parent-child interactions, it is an authentic way to document children’s progress. As with Schertz and Odom’s (2007) study, Schertz, Odom, Baggett, and Sideris’ (2013) study also involved parent-led EI in the natural environment, which further supports using reflective coaching with the parents, as a way to help them with addressing joint attention.
Analysis

Review of the literature indicates that research promotes parent-led EI in the natural environment. One way to achieve this is through reflective coaching. Reflective coaching relies on reflection of current practices on the part of the parent and problem-solving challenging situations with the guidance of the provider. Reflective coaching is essentially a partnership between the parent and the provider, where the provider facilitates the parent towards coming up with possible solutions on his or her own. Providers may underreport their use of reflective coaching because they do not fully understand the practice. By giving providers a set of coaching strategy definitions, one could conclude that it would be easier to implement reflective coaching because there would be a general consensus of what it is. It is important for providers to strengthen the relationship between parents and their children so that effective EI can take place.

Through the review of the literature, it is clear that EI must come from the parents, with the assistance of the providers. Providers are the ones who train the parents in the strategies and techniques necessary for providing EI in the natural environment. While maturation alone may result in the lessoning of some developmental delays, children with ASD should receive EI as soon as possible, as indicated by the research. Using a four-step collaborative coaching approach, Wetherby, Guthrie, Woods, Schatschneider, Holland, Morgan, and Lord (2014) share that:

1. What works for children is identified, with direct teaching if needed;
2. Guided practice is provided, with parents in an active role, and providers give feedback;
3. Providers allow for caregiver-led practice and reflection with provider feedback; and then,
4. The provider backs out to allow for caregiver independence.

This coaching approach, along with coaching definitions provided by Freidman, Woods, and Salisbury (2012), should allow for providers and parents to successfully participate in a coaching session, to address the needs of the children.

In addition, Wetherby and Woods (2006) suggest the following three components for addressing areas of concern for children with ASD and can be incorporated into the coaching session:

1. Families identify the activities and routines that are important to them, which will be the context for intervention;
2. A curriculum is developed to target joint attention, social interaction, communication, play, imitation, and emotional regulation; and then,
3. The providers teach the parents to generate learning opportunities and utilize certain EI strategies to allow the children to reach their goals.

Once these concerns are identified, Schertz and Odom (2007) recommend using joint attention activities that involve toddlers focusing on the face, taking turns, responding to joint attention, and initiating joint attention.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, parent-led EI in the natural environment has much to offer families of children with ASD. Joint attention is one of the areas in which providers need to assist parents in developing appropriate strategies and techniques, as it is generally one of the skills children with ASD lack. This current trend of parent-led EI in the natural environment can be addressed
though the practice of reflective coaching. Reflective coaching is a promising practice, as it allows for providers to assist parents with developing the strategies and techniques they need to address their children’s delays, as a result of their ASD, and puts the parents in charge of EI with their children.

**Plan for Action**

In order to facilitate answering my practitioner-inquiry based research question about reflective coaching, I propose a number of actions in order to gather data, through two inquiry cycles. Given I work at an EI program and have internet access, I suggest the following actions.

During the first inquiry cycle, the first action I will choose is to have a discussion with my supervisor and coworker, who practice reflective coaching, regarding several questions I have about reflective coaching and how it pertains to me implementing the practice. I will audiotape and code the discussion. The second action I will choose is to watch videos on YouTube of EI reflective coaching sessions, after which I will document and code the sessions.

During the second inquiry cycle, the first action I will choose is to explore and research several websites, which contain sections of information on reflective coaching. As a result, I will print and code several artifacts, which are informative on reflective coaching. The second action I will choose is to conduct two separate reflective coaching role-plays with a coworker and my supervisor, in which they play the role of the parent. I will audiotape and code the role-plays and feedback I receive.

Through this plan for action, my goal is to find trends in the coding of the data, in order to discover major themes. Given this further research, I hope to tie these major themes to my current work as a service coordinator and possible future work as an EI teacher, as it pertains to reflective coaching.
Inquiry Cycles

During my two inquiry cycles, I was able to implement my entire plan for action. After my discussion with my coworker and supervisor, I wrote up the discussion and coded our answers, my comments, and any follow-up questions I had. The key initial codes I identified were: reflective coaching is parent-driven; what are my feelings about reflective coaching; and what should I do to be more comfortable with reflective coaching. I also highlighted the different codes, so I could see how prevalent each was. After I viewed the videos, the codes I identified were the types of feedback and the types of reflective coaching questions that were evident in the sessions. As I researched the two websites that featured artifacts on reflective coaching, a new code emerged: practice is key, in addition to the code of reflective coaching is parent-driven. Finally, after I participated in the role-plays, I conducted similar coding to that of my discussion on reflective coaching, and the same codes were identified. Moreover, “practice is key” ties into my original code of “what should I do to be more comfortable with reflective coaching,” so there was a connection between the two codes. I reviewed the data, after I added something new to my field notes, and I decided what constituted a big theme in the data, by determining what kept coming up over and over in my codes.

One major theme that emerged during my first inquiry cycle was that reflective coaching sessions are parent-driven, in that they are coming up with the topic, while the conversation is facilitated by the coach, using reflective coaching questions. During multiple times during the conversation with my supervisor and coworker, it was clear that reflective coaching is not about me but about the parent. The parents drive the reflective coaching session with the topic they choose. This came through during the videos, as well, as one parent was focused on language facilitation during playtime, while the other parent’s session centered on feeding. As I watched the videos on
reflective coaching sessions, it was evident that the practitioner asked her next question based on the response of the parent. When I researched the websites that featured reflective coaching, a number of artifacts contained references on how to respond to parents. One example was the artifact in which Rush and Shelden (2008) gave tips and techniques on what to do when the parent one is coaching says, “Just tell me what I need to do” and if they respond to a reflective question with “I don’t know” (p. 2). During one of my role-plays, my supervisor, who played the role of the parent, stated, “Follow where I lead.” When I first started my data collection, I was looking for how reflective coaching affected me, but my coworkers and supervisor assured me that it was not about me; it was about the parents and their needs. As a result, I feel the theme of reflective coaching is parent-driven was one of the top themes to emerge first.

Another major theme that emerged was that, while every reflective coaching session is unique, they seem to follow the same general pattern of starting out with joint planning between the coach and the parent about what the topic will be. Next, the parent observes the provider with the child, using strategies and techniques. Then, the parent practices, using those same strategies and techniques, while the coach watches. Finally, the session ends with reflection on what occurred. A variety of questions, including awareness, alternatives, action, and analysis, are asked throughout the session. In the one video I viewed, the session seemed to pick up at the observation part and ended with the reflection. The only thing missing was the joint planning part of the session. According to my supervisor and coworker, sometimes you do not get to all parts of the planned session. For example, you may only get to the joint planning part, which was the case in the other video I watched about feeding. I also found a number of artifacts, which laid out this same pattern of a reflective coaching session.
The final major theme, practice is key, also came through in my discussion, the videos I viewed, the websites I researched, and the role-plays in which I participated. Practice seems so obvious, yet it came to me as a theme, only after looking at the artifact mentioned in one of the previous paragraphs. Even in one of my discussion posts, where I talked about the theme of practice coming through in my artifact, two of my classmates agreed with the importance of practice, not just with reflective coaching but in life in general. In addition, in my discussion on reflective coaching, my supervisor stated, “A good way to practice is during initial phone calls.” My coworker on two separate occasions during the discussion said, “It’s going to take so much time to get to that point [of comfort],” and “You can practice.” During my role-plays, both my coworker and supervisor indicated that reflective coaching takes lots of practice. My coworker suggested starting with an easier topic, though, to build up my confidence. As I reflected on what I could do to improve my comfort level with reflective coaching, throughout these two inquiry cycles, the theme of practice is key came up over and over again.

In conclusion, after coding the data from my field notes, three major themes emerged regarding my practitioner inquiry-based research question. In order to increase my understanding of reflective coaching, I must remember that it is parent-driven. The whole idea behind reflective coaching is to determine what the parents’ needs are and how to address them in a way that the parents ultimately help themselves. In addition, I must feel comfortable with the process of reflective coaching, as it does follow a general pattern. Although all parts of the reflective coaching session may not be reached during the initial session, that is acceptable and can be expected. The final thing I must remember is I need to practice reflective coaching (on a smaller scale, if necessary), if I want to increase my comfort level, as well as my understanding of reflective coaching.
Final Reflection

After completing my work during these two inquiry cycles, my understanding of myself as a future EI teacher has been altered. I came into this process believing I would find all of the answers to my practitioner inquiry-based research question in the literature or through my further research. What I did discover was reflective coaching is not about me or my want and need to be an effective coach; it is about the parents’ want and need to be better parents to their children. As my supervisor stated in so many words, “Follow the parents’ lead.” I am just a facilitator in the practice of reflective coaching, and my effectiveness can and will come in time. I believe, with continued practice, I will be proficient in the art of reflective coaching, and the relationships I have with the parents will be even stronger.

Prior to this process, I was not sure if I had what it takes to be an EI teacher, as practicing reflective coaching is a big part of that. Being an effective EI teacher is not about having the appropriate strategies and techniques in my bag of tricks, so to speak; it is about helping the parents find within themselves what they need to work effectively with their children. I may provide some guidance, but ultimately, the ownership is on the parents.

Throughout this entire process, I found myself going through much self-doubt about my abilities as a potential EI teacher. I agonized over if I had what it takes to be truly effective. My problem stems from wanting to have all of the answers, before I even know what the situation is. I have learned that teaching is a process of self-discovery, and I do not need all of the answers, before I begin this journey. I do not need to be the perfect EI teacher, at the start.

Moving forward, what I need is to trust in myself and allow myself the time to learn and grow into a new position, should I find myself on that path. I must not embrace my insecurities and let them take hold. Instead, I must view myself as competent and capable, as so many other
EI teachers, who have come before me. I know I have within me what it takes to be successful at any endeavor I choose. I just need to give myself the time and practice to find my own place and success in the world of EI.
References


