



Photo by DANIEL RARELA/Child360

Child360 Program Coach Claudia Velasco (left) models how the classroom teacher might ask open-ended questions with a young student.

BRIGHT AND EARLY

COACHING INCREASES THE QUALITY
OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

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For nearly 15 years, Child360 (formerly Los Angeles Universal Preschool) has offered coaching services to early childhood education providers who serve children up to age 5 in public centers and family-based childcare homes. These coaching services give educators the support they need to ensure their programs are places where children are happy and healthy, and where a love for learning is born. Coaching at the preschool

level substantially improves teacher instruction (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018), which in turn produces higher-quality environments and practices that lead to better outcomes for children (see Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009). With this in mind, Child360's coaching model integrates research-based practices that promote teacher competency, confidence, and professional growth.

Coaching and professional learning are crucial for developing early educators' skills, but are less commonly experienced by teachers in the early childhood education environment than by K-12 teachers.

To evaluate its practices, Child360 examined the effectiveness of its coaching model during the 2017-18 program year. Overall, teachers who received coaching improved their practices, and their programs saw increases in quality ratings from Quality Start LA, a tiered quality rating system that parents can use to make decisions about where to enroll their children.

WHAT IS CHILD360'S COACHING MODEL AND WHAT SETS IT APART?

The central tenet of Child360's coaching model is that the cultivation of positive and effective relationships between coaches and teachers strengthens early childhood education programs.

This focus on relationships drives the four ongoing components of the coaching model: building coach-teacher

relationships, setting goals, maintaining continuous support (through modeling teaching strategies, providing feedback on observed practices, sharing resources, checking in via phone and email, etc.), and engaging in thoughtful reflection.

Each of these components is associated with its own set of activities designed to support coaches in helping teachers reach their goals.

Child360's relationship-based approach is based on four theories and frameworks:

- **Appreciative inquiry**, which asks questions and focuses on strengths (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005);
- **Process consultation**, which focuses on building relationships through questioning and asking, "What changes would be helpful in a given situation?" (Schein, 1999);
- **Servant leadership**, which encourages leaders to serve others first to help them achieve individual goals while supporting organizational goals (Autry, 2001); and
- **The Quality Counts California Rating Matrix**, which provides seven elements of quality that can be used to shape classroom-level goals (California Department of Education, 2017).

To guide the coaching process, teachers work with their coach at the beginning of the school year to co-

COMMENTS FROM COACHES

Coaches reported observing that teachers improved instructional and behavioral strategies during the year. The following are examples of coaches' comments during focus groups:

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

- **"By increasing their 'why' questions, the teachers engaged the children further by having them analyze and reason their comments and ideas more deeply."**
- **"The teacher was able to ask children open-ended questions during small group. She was also able to prep the questions ahead of time and write them on sticky notes for the assistants to ask as well."**
- **"Increased use of visuals to support children to know what to do, success with connecting concepts to children's experiences, and teaching concepts in the context of children's play and hands-on experiences."**

BEHAVIORAL STRATEGIES

- **"I was able to work with [teacher name] on supporting students with aggressive behaviors by coming up with strategies to use in her classroom. These strategies also included helping the teacher practice mindfulness to remain calm."**

construct a quality improvement plan, with at least two specific goals they aim to achieve by the end of the year.

Based on this plan, coaches support teachers to use research-based instructional strategies, including asking children open-ended questions, modeling the use of rich language and vocabulary, and teaching concepts in multiple ways to make them accessible to more children.

As one coach described it, she focused on encouraging the teaching team to ask “why” questions of children: “By increasing their ‘why’ questions, the teachers engaged the children further by having them analyze and reason their comments and ideas more deeply.”

Coaches conduct site visits every two to four weeks, based on the individual needs and scheduling availability of each site. Informal check-ins over phone or email may also occur between site visits.

HOW DO CHILD360 SUPERVISORS WORK WITH COACHES?

For our coaching model to be effective, Child360 requires coaches to have six core competencies that are aligned with our foundational theories and core values: resourcefulness, professionalism, building relationships, facilitation of learning, clear communication, and reflective practice.

Coach supervisors employed by Child360 to manage and direct coaching teams support all coaches. Research suggests that when coaches receive the support and mentoring they need, the quality of coaching they deliver is significantly higher. These supervisors are often former coaches themselves, with a personal understanding of common experiences and challenges.

Isner et al. (2011) described effective supervision as a balance of traditional supervision activities (such as structured observation and documentation) and support activities, including feedback and opportunities for reflection.

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Child360 supervisors leverage both supervision and support to guide their coaches.

They provide guidance via three primary activities: shadow assessments during two classroom visits per year; reviews of site case notes; and periodic check-ins, which can be formal or informal.

During the shadow assessment process, a supervisor accompanies the coach on a site visit, observing the coach’s interactions with teachers, checking for appropriate implementation of coaching strategies, and then debriefing and reflecting with coaches about their strengths and areas for improvement.

To guide this process, Child360 developed a rubric that contains specific criteria aligned with the coaching model’s core competencies. Feedback from supervisors on the rubric has been very positive, with supervisors reporting that it led to more formal and specific debriefing conversations.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE CHILD360 COACHING MODEL?

To understand the effects of our coaching model, we surveyed teachers at 200 of the 540 sites we served in the 2017-18 program year. These included both school district sites and family childcare homes, and included a mixture of quality tier ratings at baseline.

Before sample selection, we removed some sites from the potential pool. Many family childcare homes were already involved in an evaluation related to coaching. We removed sites from a large urban school district due to union challenges and concerns. The remaining pool of 340 sites contained

proportional distributions of the most recent overall tier ratings and site types, to account for potential variations in coaching activities between school district sites and family child care homes.

We drew a sample of 200 sites from that pool, using proportional sampling of tier and school type. Once we selected these 200 sites, we randomly selected a single classroom from each site, resulting in a final study sample of 200 classrooms.

We collected both quantitative and qualitative data to learn how coaches implement the coaching model through their activities, how these activities help teachers achieve their goals, and how coaching affected program quality. Here’s what we learned.

Teachers mastered their goals.

When surveyed, 59% of coaches reported that they achieved more than half of the goals they had co-created with their teachers before the end of the program year. Teachers reported on their own goal achievement using a reflection form provided to them at the end of the year. Lead teachers from 74% of the sampled classrooms (N=147) reported partial achievement or mastery of at least one of their quality improvement plan goals during the coaching process.

These goals were most often related to language and questioning with children, behavioral management, classroom management, and instructional strategies. For example, one teacher said, “My transitions have improved, and I know how to implement learning during transition times.”

Another said, “Through the coach’s guidance, I became more aware of the importance of teaching with intention during my interactions with the children and using every activity or play time as a learning opportunity to teach children not only the learning objectives of a week, but also other concepts such as numbers/counting, colors, vocabulary, and social skills.”

Programs receiving coaching increased their ratings.

Ratings of programs are generated by a regional quality rating and improvement system, Quality Start LA, which assesses and rates early childhood programs using California state standards for quality care and education.

Its five-star rating system provides families a snapshot of a program's overall performance and the quality of its environment.

Once assessed, sites receive a tier rating from 1 to 5. In a separate effort from the survey of 200 classrooms described above, we investigated the tier ratings for 292 sites across the Child360 network, looking at changes from the 2014-15 (or 2015-16) program year to the 2017-18 program year.

During this two- to three-year span, 40% of sites (116 sites) increased their ratings. Over half of the sites overall (51%) remained at the same rating since the previous assessment year. Only 9% of sites saw decreased ratings during this time. The increases by tier rating were:

- Tier 2 sites at baseline: 64 of 91 sites increased to a tier 3 or 4 rating.
- Tier 3 sites at baseline: 42 of 88 sites increased to a tier 4 or 5 rating.
- Tier 4 sites at baseline: 10 of 112 sites increased to a tier 5 rating.

The ratings elements that showed the greatest changes were child observation, teacher qualifications, and director qualifications. The child observation element measures teachers' usage of child assessments (e.g., the Desired Results Developmental Profile) to track child progress and inform curriculum development, and 54% of sites increased their ratings on this element.

The lead teacher qualifications element and the director qualifications element both include achievement of degrees, permits, and professional development hours. Almost half of all

sites (48%) increased their rating for lead teacher qualifications; similarly, 47% of sites increased their ratings for director qualifications.

Support led to positive outcomes.

Qualitative data from focus groups indicated that coaches appreciated the support, feedback, and reflection opportunities their supervisors provided.

This support likely enabled them to provide coaching that led to improvements in teaching and program quality.

On a survey, 94% of 46 coaches described their supervisors as approachable and "always available." The majority of coaches (90%) reported they had opportunities to collaborate and reflect in many forms, including team meetings and informal peer support.

WHAT ARE RESEARCH-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COACHING PROGRAMS?

Classrooms in our Child360 network demonstrated successful implementation of coaching activities, positive outcomes for teaching professionals, and increased quality ratings for the children in their care.

Our results demonstrate that when teachers receive guidance from professional coaches, they can achieve their goals and provide a high-quality classroom environment, ensuring that every hour children spend at school is meaningful, enriching, and stimulating.

Based on our experience and research findings, we recommend that other coaching initiatives fulfill their potential by using tools and resources tied to teachers', coaches', and supervisors' goals, and by creating focused opportunities for coaches to reflect, share information, and strategize.

These systems and supports can help create consistency to ensure that all teachers receive the same high-quality coaching and support for their early education practices.

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