

CHAPTER 1

An Introduction to Powerful Interactions Between Coach and Teacher

Interactions are the exchanges in words and gestures that you have with teachers (and others) every day. Yet too often, as we know from coaches across the country and our own experiences, interactions might occur on autopilot or in the midst of multitasking. As a result, the interactions can deplete people's energy and sense of effectiveness and undermine the goal of enhancing children's well-being and learning. Consider the following example from the perspectives of the coach and the teacher.

Quinn is a coach. He just received an email from his supervisor saying she needs to talk with him as soon as possible. About what he has no idea. The end-of-the-month reports are due tomorrow, and Quinn was planning to spend the morning working on them. He gets a text message from Jasmine, a teacher. The wording of Jasmine's text conveys how upset she is about a challenging situation in her classroom and her efforts to navigate it. Quinn's phone rings not long after, and when he sees it is Jasmine, he lets it go to voicemail. He continues to work on his reports, deciding he will respond to Jasmine's text later in the day.

What if you were Jasmine? She reached out for support and guidance but was ignored. Think about how Quinn's decision might affect Jasmine's mood and interactions with others throughout the day. When Quinn responds to her later, how do you imagine Jasmine will feel? How might this affect their relationship and work going forward? Now imagine an alternate scenario, one in which Quinn pauses just long enough to consider Jasmine's feelings and needs and the impact his actions might have on her and others. By pausing, he decides to quickly respond to Jasmine with a text letting her know he will be back in touch in an hour or two. In other words, he uses the opportunity to pause and think about what to say or do—and how—then moves forward. This is coaching with Powerful Interactions.



Helpful Terms

intentionality: Thinking and making decisions about what to say and do with maximum clarity and effectiveness. When you are intentional, you think about the impact of your words and actions. “You decide to pause just long enough to think before you act and to reflect on the benefits and consequences of your actions, both short- and long-term” (Jablon, Parks, & Ensler 2021, 18).

static: The internal noise in your mind when there are so many things going on that you cannot focus on just one thing. Static interferes with being able to listen, to think, or to question. The first step of a Powerful Interaction, Be Present, helps quiet the static so you can think and make decisions about what to say and do.



Ripples of Change

When you notice a teacher, you are saying “I see you” and “You matter.” A trusting connection between both of you begins when the teacher feels acknowledged, accepted, and valued. Being seen also makes it more likely that a teacher will, in turn, see children, which influences the child-teacher relationship in positive ways.

What Is a Powerful Interaction Between a Coach and a Teacher?

The three steps of a Powerful Interaction—Be Present, Connect, and Extend Learning—serve as your framework. Following each step in turn allows you to intentionally connect with a teacher and extend learning to reach a desired outcome. For example, the focus might be having conversations with children or being able to delegate in the classroom. The outcome is something you have both agreed is necessary and beneficial.

Using Powerful Interactions as your coaching framework supports you in beginning and continuing to develop a strong, trusting relationship between you and the teacher you are coaching. Such relationships are prerequisites for learning and sustained positive change in a teacher’s practice. Having a Powerful Interaction with a teacher can begin the development of a sense of trust between the two of you. Over time, continuing to have Powerful Interactions sustains that trust.

You begin a Powerful Interaction when you pause to think and to decide how best to proceed. To continue a Powerful Interaction with a teacher, you make a conscious decision to connect in a personal way. For example, after observing a teacher working with a child for a while, you might say, “I see you talking with Adrian about the names of insects. I’m interested in hearing about your goals for this conversation with Adrian, and I want to learn more about what you are thinking and doing.”

Your decision to share your curiosity and phrase your comments as an invitation for the teacher to explain more about their practice creates a connection. Over time, connections like this develop into trust and help to reduce the sense of isolation and stress so common among teachers of young children. Your trusting relationship opens the door to a partnership to extend learning about practice and young children.

Shanti, a teaching assistant in an inclusion classroom of 3-year-olds, and Irene, Shanti's coach, have known each other for several years. Shanti's goal is to individualize her interactions with children. During a scheduled classroom visit, Irene observed Shanti interacting with Ethan during center time. As you watch the conversation in Video 3, notice how Irene offers feedback to Shanti and invites her to think about how she can use interactions to document Ethan's thinking and learning, information Shanti needs in order to individualize.

Three steps can turn everyday coaching interactions into Powerful Interactions. We look briefly at each one.

Step One: Be Present to Coach

To be present means having an inner quiet, allowing you to think and make decisions about your words and actions with maximum clarity and effectiveness. This is the core of intentionality.

Ever feel like there's so much going on in your mind that you can't focus on just one thing? We call this noise *static*. It's like the annoying crackling sound when there's interference on your phone and you can't hear your friend tell you what time and where to meet. Static can drive you crazy!

In a quiet, static-free space, you can be mindful about what is going on inside of yourself and around you. You can pay attention "on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment to moment" (Kabat-Zinn 2003, 145).



Video 3

Shanti and Irene Having a Coaching Conversation. Shanti and Irene discuss an interaction Irene observed Shanti having with a child in her classroom earlier that day. To watch this video, visit [NAEYC.org/coaching-powerful-interactions](https://www.naeyc.org/coaching-powerful-interactions).



Reflections

Think of a time when you felt static. Can you put the feeling into words? How might static interfere with you building a relationship with a teacher? What is one thing you can do to quiet your static as a coach?





Video 4

Tychawn on Static. Tychawn offers insights about static. To watch this video, visit NAEYC.org/coaching-powerful-interactions.



Ripples of Change

Your decisions about what to say and do and how you are as a coach determine your effectiveness as a coach. When you help teachers see that they too make these decisions about their own interactions, you support them in becoming more intentional.

Being Present Leads to More Effective Coaching

When you are present, you can pay attention to another person and connect with them. This allows you to decide how best to respond to that person in the moment and, at the same time, to move your work together forward.

Practice Intentionality

When you are present in the moment with an inner quiet, you can be deliberate, purposeful, and thoughtful as you decide what to say and do in your coaching interactions with a teacher (Epstein 2014). You are freed from thoughts and feelings of past exchanges and future experiences, plans, or expectations that can lead you to operate in autopilot mode. You can take a breath, put your judgments on hold, listen, and reflect on the many facets of a situation. This makes your thinking clearer, opens the door to new possibilities for how you might respond, and makes it possible to be open and engage with a mindset of curiosity and acceptance (Broderick 2013).

Draw on Your Strengths and Use Yourself as Your Own Best Resource

When the static in your head quiets, you can draw upon the strengths you bring to your practice. These may include

- › Your unique way of being and engaging
- › What you know about the person you are working with
- › Your knowledge and skills around communicating effectively and supporting another adult's learning and professional development

Pause for a Moment to Observe Yourself and the Teacher

Interactions are filled with meanings for everyone. Everything you do—your facial expression, the tone of your voice, your body language, whether you are relaxed or exuding tension—and everything you say engages the personality, beliefs, likes, and dislikes of the person you are interacting with (Pawl & Dombro 2004). When you are present, you can observe yourself and others. Whether during a planned coaching session or an informal hallway exchange with a teacher, pausing for a moment or two to pay attention and become more aware of the impact that you have on others and that they have on you allows you to respond rather than react. By being present, you can interact thoughtfully and as usefully as possible.

Be Mindful and Adopt an Optimistic Mindset

As you pause to decide how you want to be in this moment, adopting an optimistic mindset helps you see opportunities, strengths, and a path forward. Leading for Children (LFC) introduces a framework of Optimistic Leadership that defines optimism and clarifies how it differs from positivity:

Optimism means hopefulness. It requires confidence about the future and the successful outcome of what we are working toward. Optimists see a path forward and move beyond disappointments to find solutions. Simon Sinek (2020) says there is a difference between being positive and optimistic. While positivity is telling ourselves and others that everything is good even if it isn't, optimism accepts the truth of reality and looks forward to a brighter future. The Optimistic Leader has conviction that when the inevitable obstacles occur, they can be hurdled with analysis and persistence. Think of optimism as the light at the end of the tunnel, rather than as a smiley face. People with an optimistic outlook have healthier relationships, enjoy better mental and physical health, and live longer. We must embody optimism for ourselves and the children and families we serve, which requires a mindset driven by purpose and focused on outcomes. (Jablon, Parks, & Ensler 2021, 18)




Reality Check

Coaches often grapple with how to be present for a teacher when part of their role might be to evaluate the teacher. Like many coaches, you probably wear many hats, or have a variety of roles to perform. At the very least, these roles include being a learning partner and sometimes an evaluator. It takes intentionality to connect and foster a partnership with a teacher despite the fact that you might also be responsible for conducting formal program assessments. Think of yourself as wearing two hats: one with a sign that says *coach and learning partner*, the other with a sign that says *assessor*. It is important to articulate which hat you are wearing to the colleague you are coaching. Explain that it is part of your role to assess at times and that those times will be identified clearly. The rest of the time, you are sharing an ongoing conversation during which you and the teacher will reflect on practice, develop new knowledge and skills, and problem solve.



Step Two: Connect as a Coach

Most people in our field would say they are good at connecting with others and building relationships, and in many cases, they are. Yet all too often, it stops there. A Powerful Interactions coach intentionally builds on the relationships to extend a teacher’s learning. When you use the Powerful Interactions approach, you convey to the person you are coaching, “I notice you, I’m interested in you, and I want to get to know you even better.” This moment of personal connection deepens the trusting relationship growing between you.



Connecting and Building Trusting Relationships Lead to More Effective Coaching

As you and the teacher you are coaching jointly build a trusting relationship, the teacher is likely to feel safe, supported, and nurtured. Feeling this way, they may be open to taking risks, sharing practices, and trying new approaches (Tschannen-Moran & Tschannen-Moran 2011b). Sometimes we talk about relationships as if they are a task that can be completed and checked off a to-do list, freeing us to turn our attention to the “real” job of coaching. For an effective coach, connecting to build relationships is an ongoing, necessary part of promoting and supporting a teacher’s learning.

After thinking about relationships in this way, Morgan, a coach from New Jersey, shared this insight:

“ I set aside time for paperwork, meetings, and more meetings. But after the beginning of the year, I never think about taking time to focus on relationship building,

which is what lets me be effective. I'm going to start writing relationships at the top of my calendar every month to remind me to focus on them all year long.

Step Three: Coach to Extend Learning

It's easy to enter a teacher's classroom and tell them what to do or offer a fix. We've all done it. Perhaps you've rearranged some furniture or the dramatic play area. You might have felt effective for a minute or two, but chances are your "fix" didn't stick.

With Powerful Interactions coaching, coaches and teachers collaborate as learners to create meaningful change. When coaches extend learning, they make sensitive and responsive decisions about what to say and do in the moment to help a teacher move their learning and practice forward. To do so effectively, a coach must be open to learning with and from a teacher, even as the coach offers a rich array of experiences, information, strategies, and insights.

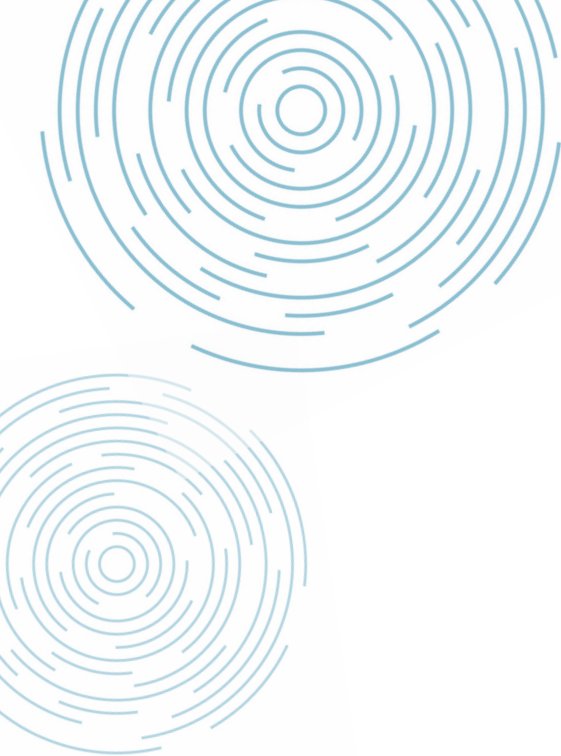
Coaching to extend learning includes helping a teacher put goals into words, then breaking down goals into clear and achievable steps. It means pointing out moments of effectiveness as the teacher moves toward their goal and describing why their actions and words matter to children. It means inviting them to think about their intentional decision making. In this way, the teacher can acknowledge, repeat, and build on their strengths. They can become a more intentional decision maker, able to apply and adapt what they have learned day by day, during, between, and after their work with you.



Reflections

Put yourself in a teacher's shoes. How do you think you are perceived when you enter their classroom? How do you convey the message, "I am here to support you and learn with you"?





Continuing to Learn

Coaches we know talk about how important it is to acknowledge that the coaching process is one of mutual learning. LFC (2023) describes mutual learning as a dance of self-empowerment and equitable partnerships. Partners explore together, connect with their sense of agency, and gain insights about themselves and relating to others. Shuronda, a coach from Mississippi, stated in an LFC Learning Network:

“ I’ve grown so much in how I respond to things by thinking about it with my teacher partners.

Recognizing and articulating what you don’t know allows you to extend your own learning. This is easier than it sounds, but it also requires vulnerability. For many of us, this can be scary and seem like a weakness; however, acknowledging vulnerability in a mutual learning partnership strengthens the trust between the coach and the teacher.

Extending Learning and Continuing to Learn Lead to More Effective Coaching

Engaging in a learning partnership as Irene did with Shanti in Video 3 can free both coach and teacher from feeling like they have to figure things out alone. Learning together allows both the teacher and the coach to say “I’m not sure” and opens the door to looking for and discovering answers and possibilities together.

As a coach in a learning partnership, you can keep the focus of your interactions on shared goals. Many coaches have described times they enter into a conversation with a teacher and slip into therapist mode as they listen to a teacher’s personal problems or problems at work. While these conversations sometimes strengthen the coach-teacher relationship, coaches tell us they actually feel frustrated at not accomplishing concrete

goals. Being a learning partner makes it easier to listen for a few minutes, acknowledge what is going on, and then say, “This is our time to continue our work around _____.”

The Three Steps: A Cumulative Effect

Often, we think about steps as being followed one after the other and checked off as “done” when each one occurs. It is different with the three steps of coaching with Powerful Interactions because the steps are sequential *and* cumulative.

You begin with Step One by pausing to be present. In this frame of mind, you can decide to add Step Two, choosing what to say and do to connect with the teacher you are coaching. Staying present and connected, you then add Step Three as you identify a way to extend the mutual learning partnership. In real life, as your coaching interactions unfold, the steps are apt to happen very quickly. Even as the three steps build upon each other during a single interaction, they are creating a history of Powerful Interactions that will help make future interactions even more powerful.

In Chapter 3, we describe each step in detail to help you understand the importance of each one. Before we get to Chapter 3, however, we describe the five principles that guide the Powerful Interactions coaching stance in Chapter 2.



Reality Check

Powerful Interactions are made of the same three steps whether interactions are between adults or between an adult and a child. They are shaped and colored by each partner’s culture, values, temperament, and life experiences, both personal and professional. No matter the age of the individuals or how much experience they bring to the encounter, a Powerful Interaction between any two people is a dance in which each partner’s moves are affected by the other.

Perhaps the biggest difference in Powerful Interactions between adults and between adults and children comes with how you show up. Jill Gunderman, an experienced early childhood educator and coach, offers this look into her own thinking:

“ I find I’m quicker to assume and misattribute intentions when interacting with adults than with children. With children, I tend to assume, ‘Oh, they’re just 4,’ extend more grace, seek harder to find that connection, really quiet my static, and adjust my approach. Whereas with adults, I find myself less willing to self-reflect or adjust—or maybe it’s not that I’m less willing, maybe it just takes more effort on my part. It’s less ‘automatic.’ With children, I’ve worked on being this way, and arguably with adults this is a newer way of being for me, a less practiced skill.”