



Education & Children's Services  
Educational Psychology Service



# Coaching Conversations

**Fife Council Educational Psychology Service**



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## Coaching Conversations

*Too often we give children answers to remember rather than problems to solve.*

(Lewin, 74)

This pack is designed as an introduction to the practice of coaching conversations between adults and the children and young people they work with and know well. It provides a brief evidence base for this practice, and some practical guidelines. Please speak to your link Educational Psychologist for further information and training.

### Why coaching conversations?

Research findings consistently indicate that children and young people experiencing emotional well-being or mental health issues will, in most cases, be best supported by adults who know them well and with whom they feel familiar, comfortable and safe to talk e.g. parents or carers, other family members, peers and/or school staff (Bowlby, 2005; Hattie & Yates, 2013).

Regular, planned contact with a trusted member of school staff, using coaching conversations, is likely to be successful in supporting many young people to find their own solutions to overcoming their emotional wellbeing difficulties and developing their resilience to cope with adversity in the future (Sutherland, 2017).

Rogers (2012) describes how coaching can be a powerful way to help children become more self-aware while understanding their thoughts and feelings, and how these thoughts and feelings impact on their behaviour. It can also support the development of skills in problem solving and responsible decision making.

### Benefits for children and young people

Research has shown that coaching helps them to:

- think more clearly about things
- feel valued and listened to
- recognise and appreciate their skills and resources
- increase their range of options
- clarify how they'd like things to be as they get even better
- understand what they need to do to get there
- become more creative and optimistic
- feel more positive and confident about change

*(Hook et al., 2006)*

## **Coaching and a solution focused approach**

Children and young people often turn to adults with problems, and we often respond with an answer, because we are busy, or want to 'fix' things. When we do this, we might offer some temporary relief for the moment, but it does not prompt children and young people to think for themselves about their problems, how they are feeling and their options for moving forward.

Working within a solution-focused framework means we are helping young people to move towards the future that they want (their preferred future), and to learn what can be done differently by using their existing skills, strategies and ideas – rather than focusing on the problem (Sutherland, 2017).

Solution focused thinking involves certain assumptions:

- People generally want things to get better
- People usually have the necessary resources to make changes
- Change happens all the time and is inevitable
- If something works do more of it. If it doesn't, do something else
- There are always exceptions to the problem
- Co-operation enhances change
- The problem is the problem, not the person
- Use the client's own view of the way to go
- Big 'problems' don't always need big solutions
- Understanding the cause of the problem isn't always necessary to make progress

## **Defining Coaching Conversations**

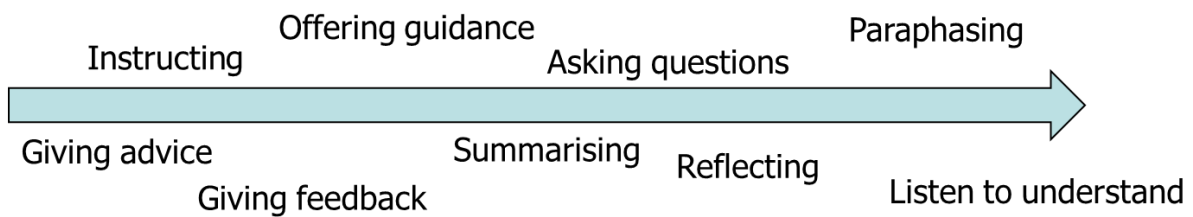
Coaching is defined here as a non-directive conversation that has the assumptions of solution focused thinking at its heart.

Coaching conversations have three identifiable characteristics:

- they are intentional rather than just spur-of-the-moment informal interactions
- they are focused on the other person – their strengths, challenges and attributes they bring to the conversation
- their purpose is to stimulate thinking, growth and change that leads to action

**Mentoring: involves offering guidance and giving advice to help to solve problems**

**Coaching: helping the person find their own solutions**



Coaching conversations are focused on the present or future, on tasks, on finding solutions, with an emphasis on the person being coached achieving their goals.

### **What are the key components of a good coaching conversation?**

For an effective coaching conversation with a young person, a good coach will already have an existing positive and trusting relationship with that young person, and will:

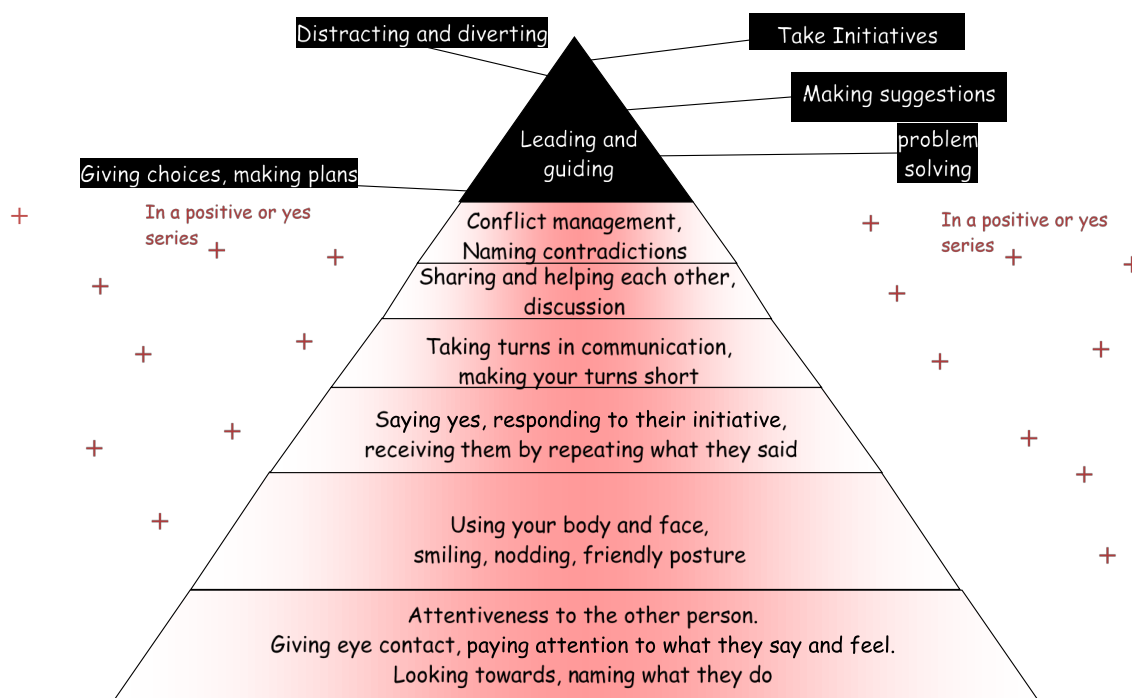
- **Listen with commitment**
- **Be attuned**
- Ask open questions
- Clarify points made
- Avoid 'telling'
- Build further rapport
- Be non-judgemental
- Challenge beliefs
- Help to see the bigger picture
- Encourage commitment to action
- Develop trust and respect
- Be solution focused
- Have a strong belief that others have the capacity to learn, develop and change
- The coaching conversation will be planned, given dedicated time and take place in a calm, quiet environment

**Listening with commitment: active listening skills:**

<b>Be attentive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Let the young person speak without interruption</li> <li>Resist finishing sentences</li> <li>Don't start thinking about your response before the young person has finished.</li> </ul>
<b>Ask open-ended and probing questions</b>	Try to encourage the young person to reflect and problem-solve (not to defend or justify)
<b>Request clarification</b>	Double-check you have understood and clarify any confusion you are feeling
<b>Reflect back</b>	Recap what you have heard – don't assume you have understood correctly or that the young person feels heard
<b>Be attuned and reflect feelings</b>	What is the feeling underlying what is being said?
<b>Summarise</b>	Briefly restate the key issues that have been raised – now you can move to a problem-solving conversation

**Being attuned:**

**The Contact Principles of Communication**



Consider what principles of communication allow you to be attuned and actively listen to a young person. What needs to be in place first?

The Solihull Approach (Douglas & McGinty, 2001) is a theoretical approach that supports a way of practitioner thinking and considers the development of children's emotional well-being within their everyday relationships. It is an approach that has been introduced in all of Fife Council's early years provisions and holds concepts relevant for any relationships.

Two of Solihull's core concepts are containment and reciprocity which inform the quality of those relationships within which emotional development occurs (Davidson, Jessiman & Kerr, 2016).

In a coaching conversation context, containment refers to the process whereby an adult might hold and understand the young person's emotional reactions without feeling overwhelmed by those reactions. By effectively conveying this understanding, the adult calmly supports the young person to explore the issue and arrive at their own solutions. Reciprocity describes the attuned and appropriate interactions that allow you to understand where the other young person is 'at' – to be attuned to their communication and feelings.

## **Climate for coaching**

Consider your own thoughts and feelings before you go into a coaching conversation. Are you in the right emotional and psychological place to offer containment to a young person? Are you able to be non-judgemental and able to engage in active listening? Is there something you need before you enter into the conversation with a young person?

You might consider also:

- Finding an appropriate time and relaxed place to have the conversation
- Communication style and ability of young person
- Orientating it around an activity
- Sitting on a low chair if you can – less height difference/more approachable. Think about your seating position. Consider your body language.
- If you invite a young person to tell you their personal issues, be clear about what you will do with the information. Consider how you will respond if asked 'not to tell anybody'. In keeping with Child Protection guidelines, you should be clear that you cannot offer confidentiality if you are concerned that the child (or some-one else) may be hurt.

## A coaching map with supporting questions

<b>Statement of problem</b>	<b>Listen and acknowledge utilise active listening</b>
<b>Past, related experiences</b>	<b>What worked / helped?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has this or anything similar happened before?</li> <li>• What did you do?</li> <li>• What helped? Who helped?</li> <li>• Do you know anyone else who has had this or a similar experience?</li> </ul>
<b>Current strategies</b>	<b>What works, who helps?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What can you try?</li> <li>• What are your options?</li> <li>• What else can you do?</li> <li>• What would happen if you did nothing?</li> <li>• What is the hardest part of that for you?</li> <li>• What advice would you give a friend?</li> </ul>
<b>Exceptions</b>	<b>When are things better?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When are the times when things go a bit better?</li> <li>• When you don't have this problem what's different then? What were you doing differently?</li> <li>• When was the last time that things were a little better? What was different then?</li> </ul>
<b>Planning/target-setting</b>	<b>What will be done differently next?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What would need to happen to help you feel better about.....?</li> <li>• What are our next steps?</li> <li>• Let's talk about how we are going to do that?</li> <li>• What's the first thing we will do?</li> <li>• Who do we need to help us?</li> </ul>
<b>End point and Support</b>	<b>When will it be over / good enough? Clear picture of finish time.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• So we have a plan, how will we know we've succeeded?</li> <li>• What will be different when things are going better?</li> <li>• If things were better, what would other people see? How would they know?</li> </ul>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>Feedback of main points. Appropriate pace.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agreement of each person's actions</li> <li>• Who you will both share the information with?</li> <li>• When will we review?</li> </ul>



### **Miracle Question**

Hook et al. (2006) describe this question as encouraging curiosity about the young person's preferred future:

*Imagine when you go to sleep tonight...a miracle happens...and the difficulties you have talked about disappear...As you were asleep you didn't know a miracle had happened...When you wake up what would be the first signs that the miracle had happened?'*

### **Scaling**

Scaling is about the young person identifying where they currently are on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is their preferred future and 1 is the opposite. Coaching questions to follow:

- *How come you gave yourself that number rather than one?* (identifies what is working well for them)
  
- If they score themselves quite low on the scale, ask how they:
  - *Got through or got by so far*
  - *Stopped things getting worse*
  - *Still come to school every day*
  
- To focus on the preferred future:
  - *What would the next small step on the scale look like to you?*
  - *What would you need to do to get to 6?*

*(Hook et al., 2006)*

### **Does coaching work for all young people?**

Some children and young people are much more articulate and able to reflect than others. You will know which of the young people you work with are likely to respond well to approaches described. Others may need an approach that is less language-based and involves an activity, for example, using tools that scaffold a coaching approach.

The NSPCC Solution Focused Practice Toolkit includes lots of tools to support conversations.

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2015/solution-focused-practice-toolkit/>

Some of the tools in this pack will be helpful in supporting younger children, but also those children who may be older but less developmentally mature.

Other approaches that may helpful include using a visual stimulus like Boardmaker and/or Emotion Works.

## Conversations when you have concerns about emotional wellbeing

### Potential conversation starters:

- You don't seem your usual self today. Would you like to talk about anything?
- I can see you look sad/worried. Do you want to have a chat about it/is there anything I can do to help?
- You said something interesting in circle time about how you felt when... How do you feel about it now?

### Points to remember:

- Find an appropriate time and relaxed place to have the conversation.
- If a child discloses in class, offer empathy, invite them to talk in a safer, more private setting and talk to your Child Protection Coordinator for advice about how the situation should be managed.
- If you invite a young person to tell you their personal issues, be clear what you will do with this information. Consider how you will respond if asked 'not to tell anyone'.
- Sit on a low chair if you can – so there is less height difference and you will be more approachable.
- Check with the child if there are other trusted adults (parents, the wider family, teachers) or friends they have talked to or could talk to.
- Actively listen, be non-judgemental, friendly and give your full attention.
- Check your body language so that the child knows you are focusing on them.
- Take what they're saying seriously. Don't over-react but don't try to minimise or dismiss what they are saying. Ask open questions to encourage them to talk.
- Be calm and acknowledge their feelings.
- For young children drawing, modelling or playing with toys while the conversation is progressing can be helpful.
- Offer empathy and understanding rather than solutions. When a child receives empathy they begin to develop trust.
- Remember we are all different and children will respond in their own unique way to their experiences.

*(Mentally Healthy Schools, 2019)*

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