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What is mentoring?
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This chapter will explain the role of the mentor. It will look at current models of mentoring, and will identify a framework for mentoring in the context of early years values, traditions and emerging social policy. This chapter will identify some of the structures that need to be in place to ensure effective practice. Overall, the aim is to allow mentors in early years to gain an understanding of the complex nature of their role and its significance to quality in training, practice and delivery of services to young children and their families. 'Pause for thought' boxes are provided to raise issues that are developed as practical strategies in subsequent chapters.

Terminology

In this chapter the terms 'mentor' and 'practitioner' are used to cover all possible contexts. 'Mentor' is role-specific in that it will apply to all those in formal 'advisory' relationships with practitioners. As 'practitioners' will not necessarily be students in the formal sense of the term, but will usually be based in early years settings, this term is chosen to reflect the work-based situation. 'Manager' in this chapter refers to those who are responsible for the organisation of mentoring, for example a course leader or workplace manager.

The evolution of mentoring and current practices

The role of mentor is recognised across all areas of society. From the responsibility accepted by Mentor for the son of Odysseus in Greek mythology, through the pre-industrial guilds and later apprenticeships in industrial trades, the idea of a more experienced individual assisting the transmission of knowledge and skills has become culturally embedded. The corporate business world has

developed systems of mentoring which are integral to the induction and supported development of new company employees. In recent years such practices have spread to the wider community. There are programmes in schools and universities for peer/pupil mentoring, church and youth organisations, parent support (through organisations such as Home Start as well as other voluntary self-help groups), access to employment programmes, mentoring as part of commitment to promoting diversity and overcoming barriers to inclusion – among other examples.

In the field of initial teacher training, Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) induction programmes and continuing professional development, mentoring is highly significant within both training institutes and schools. Understanding the process in education has become more refined as a result of action research, such as that undertaken by Furlong and Maynard (1995) and more recent DFES-sponsored studies (www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank) which are noted in Chapter 3. As a result school-based practice mentors have many resources to draw on, with national guidance expected to be published in the near future. However, developments in early education and the breadth of provision in the early years sector have resulted in the use of mentoring across conventional professional contexts – for example, the use of visiting teachers as practice mentors in community pre-schools and private day nurseries, reflecting the integration of services and multi-disciplinary work within the field.

An understanding of mentoring and the development of practice does not occur in isolation from organisational or national culture. Similarly, mentoring systems should draw on best practice from a range of models and clarity of definition regarding purpose, expectation and specific context is important to the success of such schemes. This chapter explores these themes with a view to establishing some common principles for the early years.

Policy framework for early years practice

Mentoring practice in the early years has not evolved in a vacuum. Just as colleagues involved in teacher training have adjusted training programmes to accommodate political ideology, government policy objectives for teacher training and funding issues in higher educational establishments, similar external pressures are brought to bear in early years settings.

Early years mentors need to be aware of the social and political context in which they operate. Few practitioners within the sector will deny that the years since 1990 have transformed the status of early years services and education in the United Kingdom. Indeed, taking a slightly longer perspective, change has been an evolving process from the mid-1980s – the 1989 Education Act being identified as one influence for much of what has followed for early years education under both Conservative and Labour agendas.

The key principles underpinning policy under the National Childcare Strategy (DfES, 1997) include partnership, integrated services, continuity and

Informal discussion between mentor and practitioner

progression for children in all services (from birth to age nineteen as the result of *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004) and the 2004 Children Act), inclusion and quality in the full breadth of practice. In concrete terms policy has encompassed a range of measures such as the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, Birth to Three Matters, Children's Centres, Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCP), the DfES/QCA Training Framework and Common Core of Knowledge for practitioners – demonstrating links and progression through to the competence-based model of the Teacher Training Agency. The Work Force Strategy (DfES, 2006) and remodelling of the role of teachers and teaching assistants in schools also impacts on practitioners in the Foundation Stage as does the changing role of schools in the community under the extended schools projects. Most significant is the debate about the 'new practitioner', developments in our understanding of the adult role in these integrated services and more recent moves toward a 'birth to five' progressive framework (Early Years Foundation Stage) for children's early development and learning.

In such a context the role of the mentor has increased in importance and complexity, especially as work-based training is an established element of vocational qualifications as well as academic programmes across further and higher education. One example is the SureStart-recognised Sector-endorsed Foundation Degree in Early Years (FdA EY) which incorporates a substantial mentoring component, the aim of which is to encourage practitioners to go beyond a minimum level of competence and encourage reflective practice.

In order to clarify the features of mentoring for those involved in the early years, it will be useful to progress discussion in terms of first principles for the role of the mentor. Subsequent chapters will build on these key issues, providing techniques and strategies for meeting the challenges of the role.

Common themes in theory and practice: role and qualities of the mentor

One part of the mentor role has been identified with reference to the policy framework. The mentor assists in the transmission of knowledge and skills and encourages practitioners to develop reflective practice. In this respect, the mentor is a 'bridge' between the academic forum and the day-to-day experience encountered by practitioners in early years settings. Most important, the mentor promotes reflection, because this develops the confidence and competence of individual practitioners working with the theories, principles and philosophy of the early years sector.

Whilst the role will be common to all contexts, mentors will take account of the fact that student practitioners are not always young and/or inexperienced. For example, a requirement of the FdA EY is that students are established practitioners with at least two years' post-qualification experience. Similarly, in business practice, experienced professionals may be assigned a mentor to help with focus on a new range of skills or specific responsibilities. The relatively new professional and management qualifications in school headship and integrated centre leadership reflect the emerging emphasis on ongoing professional development for managers in early years settings. As a result, there is a mentor function within these programmes.

It is recognised that the usefulness of mentoring in terms of *continuing* professional development has become an accepted justification for mentoring practice and is consistent with the fact that practitioners in the workplace also contribute to training through such 'in-house' variations as professional critical friend or the formalised mentor teacher schemes initiated through local authorities.

With these general themes in mind the remainder of this chapter will concentrate on practical definition of the mentoring role for early years, the qualities of the mentor and the value base for good mentoring practice.

A mentor in early years

Dictionary definitions suggest that mentoring has something to do with passing on wisdom. In a well established guide to mentoring, Clutterbuck (2004) notes that such general understandings are too vague to be helpful, as they lead to confusion with other similar roles such as coaching or buddying systems.

In developing a clearer definition, Wilkin (1992) argues that the role of the mentor should be framed in relation to specific frameworks, such as training or qualification requirements. This approach provides a principle that can be broadly applied to early years contexts. If we accept that the framework within which both mentor and practitioner operate is determined by the 'curriculum' for the child and the vision of the professional practitioner within it, then it is possible to propose a more specific definition for mentoring.

The mentor will help practitioners find answers to challenging situations, assist with strategies for action in the job role, promote both nurture and challenge within the boundaries of the relationship with the practitioner and encourage sustained motivation in the work place. The mentor in the early years will therefore work within a role defined by the requirements of the philosophical and political tradition outlined above. This in turn suggests a set of qualities and a philosophy of mentoring with which to develop the early years model.

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

Who are the people who have influenced you in your personal and professional development as an early years practitioner? Why were they so influential? Are there common characteristics that they share?

Qualities of the 'ideal' mentor

Good humour, enthusiastic, inspirational, problem solver, supportive, knowledgeable and competent in subject skills and practices, creative thinker, good communication and interpersonal skills, good partner skills, able to resolve or defuse conflict, effective time manager, prioritises and sets targets, action plans, report writing, 'politically' astute beyond the immediate context, reflective.

To be fair, such perfectly formed individuals may not exist and the importance of ongoing training and professional development for mentors must be an accepted part of good practice. However, Pegg (2000) notes that such qualities provide mentors with credibility for the role. Underpinning this skill set is the fact that mentors will be/have been successful practitioners in their own right and be recognised as 'streetwise' in this respect in order to encourage evaluation and reflection in the practitioner. The particular mix of qualities will also enable the mentor to bring realistic expectations and a sense of proportion to a role which is complex and can be challenging at times.

In line with other models of mentoring, the early years mentor will inevitably combine these qualities with a mix of approaches and strategies – adviser, teacher, buddy, guide, coach, facilitator, counsellor, role model and leader. Clutterbuck (2004) suggests that these each have distinct purposes, and as specific activities they are further explored below.

Early years: values and principles for mentoring

In addition to these personal and professional qualities, mentors in the early years will have a philosophy of mentoring and training that also fits with the traditions of the sector. Many practitioners will recognise the concept of 'scaffolding' for learning and development from early years theoretical approaches. Just as this sets the qualitative framework for work with children, the mentor will be similarly consistent in applying underpinning beliefs and strategies with regard to adult interactions. The way in which the mentor role is conducted in early years practice will set the tone for the experience and outcomes for the practitioner. Clutterbuck (2004) explains mentoring as providing the 'reflective space' in the teaching and learning spectrum – the mentor poses questions and uses discussion in order to enable the building of 'wisdom'. Mentoring serves the practitioner in that it encourages, empowers and enhances a continuing commitment to experiential learning at the heart of work-based practice and offers the possibility of change. The guidance offered by the mentor is carried out in the spirit of mutual respect, where power is shared as far as the situation allows, and there is an expectation of two-way learning. Both mentor and practitioner are stimulated in their thinking through the process so that aspects of practice are examined with depth and clarity. In other words, the conduct and process of the mentoring function are as important as the product and there is a strong emphasis on collaboration.

Stephens (1996) notes that there is a strong ethical element to mentoring which can involve helping practitioners to deal with such complex issues as children's rights, inclusion, diversity and social justice – all of which are important elements of informed early years practice. Mentors will therefore need, in addition to the personal qualities already noted, a commitment to open access to training, training as a co-operative venture, an enthusiasm for the practicalities of training and an understanding of mentoring as a means by which meanings about practice can be shared. This places mentoring at the heart of the reflective practice cycle. The mentor offers the practitioner both organisational and personal strategies for handling the challenges, responsibilities, pressures and stresses of early years practice – issues that are further developed in Chapter 3.

Being a mentor

Mentoring in the early years is a dynamic system of advice and support in the context of ongoing professional training and development which makes sense of reflective practice. The mentor helps this process by:

- Assisting the transmission of knowledge and skills.
- Guiding the induction and nurturing of practitioners.
- Linking theoretical models and philosophical approaches to practice.
- Reflecting standards and understanding of quality issues.
- Promoting shared good practice and professional values.

- Presenting solutions to professional challenges.
- Enabling the exercise of professional judgement.
- Focusing on the ability and potential of the practitioner.
- Enhancing the development of individuals and organisations.
- Drawing on and developing the research base for the sector.

> ### PAUSE FOR THOUGHT
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> What will be the criteria and prerequisites for success as a mentor? How can the mentor ensure that both parties involved in the relationship have the same understanding of the role?

It may be helpful here to acknowledge that there are different models of mentoring. Clutterbuck (2004) describes a distinction between mentoring which is essentially 'developmental' or 'sponsoring' in its purpose. The difference being that the sponsoring model reflects situations where power and control in the relationship are not shared – the mentor has the primary responsibility for managing the process. As a result strategies and styles utilised by the mentor will be more directive, such as coaching or guiding. (This is outlined later in the chapter.) Non-directive styles such as counselling and facilitating are more suited to the developmental model, which is concerned with personal and professional change through reflection on experiences.

Whilst this may be an oversimplified interpretation of the two models, the point is that the developmental model is more suited to the early years context because of the value base and traditions noted above. The development model is a balance of formal and informal arrangements, where formal interventions enable planning and will give meaning to the mentoring process. The fact that this also supports the practitioner in their responses to experience enables the relationship to flourish through more informal interventions. This should not detract from the importance of being clear about contexts, boundaries and outcomes, as discussed in the context of good practice below.

In short, the early years mentor will operate within an appropriately staged framework of facilitating the development of the practitioner. This developmental framework will take account of needs but also operate on the basis of professional expectations to which all partners to the training of the practitioner agree. The discussion, negotiation and agreement of the mentoring framework are described by Wilkin (1992) as prerequisite for good practice.

Common themes for good practice: managing the process, ethics, training

The general principles noted above stress the importance of clarity in defining the mentor role. This clarity must also be extended to include a clear 'contract' between mentor and practitioner. As stated, the precise nature of the contract

will reflect the context and purpose of the mentoring – for example, the practice mentor in work-based foundation degrees will be facilitating the outcomes of the programme in the first instance, rather than the agenda set by the workplace organisation. A visiting mentor teacher will be promoting national quality frameworks and local interpretation of standards for practice and may be involved in 'coaching' related skills to a group rather than an individual – whatever the context an early agreement and understanding about roles, responsibilities and expectations of the members of the partnership is crucial to any criteria for 'success'. Confidentiality is paramount to professionalism and is an underpinning requirement for successful mentoring in that it promotes trusting relationships – a prerequisite for honest, constructive evaluation and self-assessment in supported reflective practice.

In drawing up the mentoring contract, examples of best practice in all guidance emphasise the need for a discussion and agreement on what is expected within the relationship

Expectations of the mentor	*Expectations on the practitioner*
S/he is professionally competent, has a current knowledge base, responds to needs, manages the process, gives time in preparation, observation and feedback, keeps confidentiality, believes in the potential of the practitioner.	S/he is realistic in expectations of the mentor, accepts their own responsibilities for the process, is willing to action plan or set the direction for self-assessment, is willing to be challenged, behaves appropriately towards 'third parties' (e.g. the course tutor/leader and/or work-based line manager, whatever is appropriate to the context), keeps confidentiality.

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

Why is discussion and agreement necessary at the start of a mentoring contract? What pitfalls might it help to avoid? What would be the role of the 'manager' in facilitating this agreement?

It may be useful to explore these issues by thinking about the ideal 'product'. All good mentoring contracts/relationships described in terms of the developmental model are reciprocal, based on trust and mutual respect, and will come to an end which is usually negotiated in advance. The relationship and process will be characterised by a high degree of mutual learning – indeed, a prime benefit for the mentor is the intellectual challenge that opportunities for a 'reflective space' will provide for self-development, continuing contact with practice networks and enhanced management skills. The practitioner will feel

able to begin winding down the contact as s/he is able to identify positive out-
comes and celebrate 'success' (however defined) within the process. The
practitioner will move to new sources of learning and opportunities for reflec-
tive practice as s/he is able to identify strategies for working through challenges
and choices independently. A good 'mentee' may go on to become an effective
mentor and continue the cascade of reflective practice with other colleagues.
Contact may continue informally if the mentoring was workplace-based rather
than externally driven. Overall, the establishment of clear goals and expecta-
tions in the contracting stage avoids conflict. Time given at the beginning of
the process to thinking about the conduct of the relationship and its end will
hopefully avoid the difficulties presented when, for example, a practitioner
might be overly dependent on the mentor, or confidentiality principles are not
clearly understood.

The 'manager' of the mentor programme therefore has an interest in
allowing time for the contracting process. Good practice also suggests a man-
agement commitment to mentoring *per se* to the extent that there will be
support systems in place such as mentor training, reward and release for the
full range of mentor activities. Dedicated mentor group meetings could be
useful in enabling mentors to establish their own support networks. Thought
will have been given to an ethical code of practice and clarity of roles
between the mentor and the line manager, as noted above. In the training
context, the manager will facilitate appropriate participation of the mentor in
the planning and organisation of the student/practitioner's training in order
to enhance the credibility and effectiveness of the mentor role. Again, the
contribution of mentoring to overall quality of organisations cannot be
ignored and is increasingly incorporated into management training for early
years practitioners at all levels of continuing professional development. It
should also be stated that the manager's role will be to ensure the effective-
ness of the mentor by encouraging the support and co-operation of all
colleagues relevant to the process.

Management of good practice is challenging. It is as well to acknowledge
that the early years model of mentoring may involve practitioner contact with
'multiple mentors'. As a specific example, Smith and West-Burnham (1993)
identify that there may be five possible practitioner contacts with a greater or
lesser degree of mentor responsibility for trainee teachers. Foundation degree
students may encounter a similar number – module tutors, course academic
tutors, professional critical friend, practice mentor – in work-based pro-
grammes. In a sector where resources are scarce it is necessary to be certain
that there is a clear demarcation in roles and responsibilities in such cases, as
cost implications for courses and employers alike may retain barriers to train-
ing that work-based programmes have struggled to break down. Those
practitioners in contact with mentor teachers may also feel that the service
duplicates advice and support roles taken by EYDCP officers or field workers
within bodies such as the Pre-school Learning Alliance. Clarity is the essence,
as noted above; a key difference in the later examples would be that these roles

would involve group rather than individual mentoring so all partners to the mentoring process will need a clear understanding of the precise nature of their own activity and its contribution to mentoring in a wider context. Managing the implementation of a mentoring structure is examined more fully in Chapter 5. To conclude an understanding of what mentoring is and might involve in the early years, an introduction to the range of different mentoring behaviours will assist new mentors to identify activities that suit their own role and setting.

Mentoring: activities within the process

Early years mentors should be clear that they are operating in a specific context, with specific outcomes, with specific expectations and through a process based on a combination and variations of the activities (Pegg, 2000) shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1   Mentoring activities

Mentoring – the classic guide who will share their knowledge in a way that empowers others.	**Coaching** – a coach responds to short-term skill-based needs. The coach will encourage, equip and enable others to increase their skills.
Modelling – literally to model effective behaviours and attitudes, demonstrating successful strategies.	**Counselling** – acting as a reflective listener, the counsellor assists others to find their own solutions to problems by posing pertinent questions rather than by directing action.
Teaching – will inspire and enthuse, helping others to integrate knowledge into daily practice.	**Being a 'buddy'** – a system used by some organisations to help with settling in. Sometimes called Mentors but quite distinct from the full mentor role.
Advising – a source of specialist knowledge.	**Leading** – having drive and vision to engage others and deliver results.

> **PAUSE FOR THOUGHT**
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> Which of the 'behaviours' defined in Table 1.1 most closely describe the activities of your own mentoring role? Can the activities be adapted for group mentoring as well as individuals? Are some activities mutually exclusive? Do others have the potential for overlap with other professionals involved in supporting the student practitioner?

Drawing on a repertoire of behaviours enables the mentor to respond sensitively to the changing needs of the practitioner as the relationship evolves. Some of these activities are more directive than others. The clarity of the mentoring contract is crucial to the understanding of both parties about the appropriateness of the mentor's responses. For example, a 'classical' mentor will usually avoid giving advice unless first acknowledging a specific change of role in order to do so. Alternatively, a teacher/guide may also coach or demonstrate specific skills but might not see it as part of this more directive role to counsel or propose alternative strategies for the student's practice. If roles and functions are not clear, this can lead to a great deal of frustration for the practitioner and jeopardise the relationship and its ultimate success. At issue is the operation of power and the extent to which it can be shared within certain of the roles or activities shown. The developmental model favours 'power sharing', so the effective mentor will respond to the need of the practitioner with consistent behaviours. Both partners should agree if the mentor has to 're-position' within the contract in order to facilitate different responses to specific situations. In the variety of possible mentoring activities and responses the nature and type of feedback will also be affected. It must be stressed that the underlying principle of transparency at all stages of the process and how it is communicated will constantly reflect on the outcomes for mentor and practitioner alike.

Where next?

> **PAUSE FOR THOUGHT**
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> **Reflections for further self-development**
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> Mentors may be more confident in some of the activities described in Table 1.1 than others. Do certain activities suit your own philosophy more than others? Which activities fit most closely with the developmental model of mentoring? Does the context of your own role mean that you are driven to use a different model of mentoring or be involved in activities that are at odds with your personal style and ideas?

These questions are intended to mirror some of the thoughts that motivate mentors in a reflective process to seek further professional development and training in order to resolve areas of tension and challenge within the role. In addition such questions will give the opportunity for focused reading within this publication and for the following chapter in particular. How individual mentors develop their practice will depend largely upon resolving the personal dimension of motivation for and within the role – facing their own challenges and responding to difficulties and tensions. Mentors need mentoring, and this facility must be found in the workplace, however it is defined, as well as through continuing training.

Points to remember

- Mentoring is a recognised activity concerned with the sup-ported professional development of practitioners in work-based practice.
- The nature of mentoring is determined by the 'culture' – traditions and philosophy – of the organisation concerned.
- Early years mentoring is shaped by sector requirements as well as specific institutions and settings.
- Effective practice for mentors in the early years can draw on ethics and models of good practice established in other situations, e.g. business and teacher training contexts.
- Mentors will share common characteristics and activi-ties, whilst outcomes of the mentoring process will be context-specific.
- Mentors will also reflect on their practice and will require a supportive and supported framework in which to do so.