

CHAPTER 6

Case Examples

The following case examples illustrate in narrative form the coaching process with elementary- and secondary-age students. Although names have been changed, the examples are real. We have selected them because we feel they are authentic depictions of how coaching works. They illustrate both the creativity and flexibility that exemplifies good coaching. As coaching progresses, circumstances change, and students often decide to change their focus. The coaches who provided these case examples always respected the students they were working with and often let them steer the process. Even at the preschool level, the coach let the child make important contributions and determine how and in what setting they wanted to practice the skills they were learning.

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ELEMENTARY CASE EXAMPLE 1

James is a 10-year-old fourth grader whose parents felt that he would benefit from being enrolled in Executive Functioning Coaching sessions due to their observations at home and school. During the intake process, the coach noted that James's parents listed a variety of skills that they thought James could work to develop over the course of the sessions.

Together, the coach and parents spoke about James's hobbies and the material he was learning at school. In the initial intake session, James mentioned that he loved his old school and missed his friends. Over the past year, he had changed schools and was struggling to find his bearings. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, James felt that his learning was constantly stopping and starting. Switching between online and in-person classes felt overwhelming to him,

disrupted his learning flow, and disadvantaged him socially. James felt that he did not have an opportunity to acclimatize to the new social landscape at the new school and solidify new friendships with his peers and make connections with the teachers.

At first, James told the coach that he was doing well in school and did not feel that he needed any support. Later, when chatting with James, he reevaluated and mentioned that he could do better when listening in French. As a goal, James decided he wanted to try to raise his grade in his French class. His coach asked him if he had any ideas for workable strategies to achieve this goal, and James said that he needed to pay more attention in class. That way, he would understand what was happening as lessons progressed and he would perform better on in-class tests. He disclosed that he often became distracted by classmates. James settled on the goal of “listening in French.” James worked toward this goal over the course of a month before meeting back on Zoom with the coach to discuss how he was progressing toward this goal. Together, James and his coach co-constructed a checklist with a yes/no framework for James to use to see how often he was able to listen during class.

The following session, when James was asked about how he was managing in French class, he told the coach that he did not need strategies to listen because he felt he was not learning much since the classes moved back online. The coach and student agreed to resume coaching when in-person learning started up again.

During the next meeting, James and the coach discussed how he was managing with in-person learning again. James felt that he was once again distracted because he needed some catch-up time with his peers. The coach and James brainstormed strategies that would help him focus in class. James suggested that he could ask the teacher for a few minutes to chat with his peers before the onset of the lesson; that way, he would not be distracted by his friends. When the coach asked if he had any other suggestions, James mentioned that he could use a fidget tool when he felt that he was getting distracted and possibly draw on a piece of paper at his desk. The coach suggested he could ask his teacher for a break to get a drink or take a walk. James was reluctant to go for a walk because he said that does not really work for him. They again together cocreated a yes/no checklist to help keep track of his listening skills over the course of a 2-week period.

The next time they met, James shared his checklist, which was partially complete. When asked about why he did not complete the checklist for the full 2 weeks, James said that school was online again, and he did not feel that it was necessary until he went back to in-person learning. When asked how he was doing in class, he said that he was doing well and did not need support anymore, although he did mention that he still was talking a little bit in class. Together, James and his coach decided to cocreate a rubric to keep him accountable:

- 4—Listened the entire time
- 3—Talked a little
- 2—Talked a lot
- 1—Did not listen at all

At the next meeting, James told his coach he was doing really well in his French class and his marks had improved significantly. His teacher was giving the class more time to chat at the beginning of class and James felt that he was able to use his social energy before the lesson began. He told his coach that he could use some support in another subject area with the same

skill: listening. Together, James and his coach discussed the new goal and the coach reviewed how James could use some of the same strategies to achieve this new goal. By setting a new goal that utilized some of James's previous strategies, James will be able to develop transferrable skills that he can employ in a variety of circumstances. In addition to improving his marks, setting small, achievable goals and co-constructing the strategies and checklist will improve James's confidence in his listening skills, allowing him to improve his ability to sustain attention and listen attentively when those strategies are used.

ELEMENTARY CASE EXAMPLE 2

[*Note:* This is an example of a coach working with a 5-year old, primarily addressing behavioral issues in the home. However, the child exhibited the same issues at school, and the coach included a classroom modification to help the child in that setting as well. Coaching children this young can be difficult—and is not for everyone—but we've included this example because Ryan's coach used some very clever techniques to engage Ryan in the coaching process and to help him practice the coping strategies that helped him get control over his feelings.]

Ryan is a 5-year-old in a PreK program. His parents told the coach that he was typically shy but once he was comfortable, he didn't stop talking. His parents called upon the coach to help him learn strategies to manage emotional outbursts when he became frustrated. Ryan's parents explained that when Ryan got frustrated at home, he would throw things, get really angry, and stomp his feet. This type of episode could last more than an hour. Ryan's parents told the coach that when this type of outburst occurred, they typically gave him a warning first followed by a time-out if the behavior persisted.

In addition, Ryan's teachers had been starting to witness similar behavior during the school day, especially during small-group games where the game concludes with a winner. His parents told the coach that when Ryan won the game he was very happy but if he did not come in first place, he lost emotional control and was very hard to calm down.

Outside of the home, Ryan's teacher told his parents that when he got frustrated at school, he would not talk or interact with anyone for a long period of time. If pressed to talk, he would frequently burst into tears and would not participate until the game had been over for a while. The same occurred in sports as well.

Ryan and the coach met with a special guest, a puppet, coincidentally named Ryan. The coach used the same name as the child as a tool to open up communication. The coach explained that the special guest was very shy and usually would come out when a special song was sung. Ryan happily joined in. When the "puppet Ryan" came out, Ryan excitedly told the puppet that they had the same name! The coach used the puppet as a tool for fostering communication between the coach and Ryan. The coach learned that Ryan liked soccer, loved art, and loved to play with cars.

The next time the coach met Ryan with the puppet, he was eager to show the coach how he remembered the song. He also remembered that the puppet was a little shy to come out. The puppet shared that he had a problem and was hoping Ryan could help solve it. The puppet explained that he got so angry when he was not chosen to be the line leader in his class. He told Ryan that he broke his pencils and threw them on the floor, which did not make his teachers happy. At this point, Ryan opened up and explained what happened when he got upset.

The coach explained to both Ryan and the puppet what coaching was and both the puppet and Ryan said they wanted to try to do things to help them when they got upset. The coach taught Ryan a calm-down strategy, which Ryan then taught the puppet. The silly puppet kept forgetting the calm-down strategy and Ryan had to run through it again and again. Eventually, Ryan was making up his own scenarios for the puppet to practice. This gave him ownership and a feeling of self-worth.

The following sessions involved creating make-and-take projects, which were based on Ryan's interests. The coach used these opportunities to induce a little frustration to give Ryan a chance to practice his strategies. The projects included making a worry pet, a visual reminder of steps to take a break, and a sign that said "I need a break," which had a Velcro piece on his door and on his sign. He was eventually able to grab the sign on his own and put it on his door, and his mom and dad were instructed to not come in until he came out. He used a visual timer or a sand timer and came out when the time passed. If he needed more time, he told his parents but at least by that time he was no longer emotional and could actually be spoken to without any outbursts.

The coach also worked with Ryan's teacher to create a cozy corner in the classroom that Ryan could use when he needed a break in that setting. He was able to teach his classmates how to use it as well.

After 6 months, Ryan was using strategies to calm down on his own, and he learned to identify the feelings in his body that happen before he became emotional. He also continued to teach the puppet, who always seemed to forget what to do. Ryan's mom and dad were so happy with his progress that he taught them what to do when *they* got upset.

SECONDARY CASE EXAMPLE 1

Elizabeth was a 16-year-old honors student in her junior year of high school. Her parents reached out for coaching services in order to help Elizabeth figure out what was getting in her way of succeeding in certain classes. During the initial meeting with Elizabeth, she shared her love for dance, musical theater, and singing. She told the coach that she was usually in one or two local musicals during the school year.

After explaining the coaching process, Elizabeth told the coach that in some of her classes, she understood the topics and concepts but still did not do well on her exams. She also told the coach that she found it difficult to pay attention during class because she got bored easily.

Elizabeth was most concerned with her grades in her AP U.S. History class. She revealed to the coach that she had failed all of her exams and was concerned she would fail the class. The coach asked Elizabeth how she typically studied for her exams. Elizabeth said that she usually reread class notes, went to get extra help, and watched YouTube videos on the subject. She admitted to the coach that she found it difficult to study because it was so boring. Since this was the class Elizabeth was struggling in, she chose to set a goal to improve her grade in AP U.S. History by the next marking period.

Drawing on her acting experience, the coach asked Elizabeth how she learned her lines for the plays she was in. Elizabeth described a multistep process that included highlighting her lines, recording scenes with the lines of others in the scene, and leaving enough time on the recording for her to fill in her own lines, practicing several times while looking at the script,

and then practicing without the script. It was evident that Elizabeth had good strategies for memorizing material when it was important to her.

The coach wondered if she could help Elizabeth use her interest in theater to help her meet her goal of improving her U.S. History grade. Together, the coach and Elizabeth came up with the idea of making a study guide out of a playbill. Since her teacher divided U.S. History into “periods,” they decided to turn each period into a play and created a playbill to summarize the important information from each period. They identified the actors (the key historical figures), the scene breakdown (the historical timeline), and the plot summary (the critical events of the period). For each period they created a mock playbill that she then used as a study guide.

When the marking period ended, Elizabeth’s grade had increased from a 78 to a 92. Elizabeth had met her goal. She told the coach that she was going to try to use the playbill template to make a study guide in another subject.

SECONDARY CASE EXAMPLE 2

Sarah was a 14-year-old high school freshman who was academically engaged, was motivated to succeed and challenge herself, and loved running and music. She was a member of her school’s track and cross-country team. Her long-term goal for high school was to enroll in the International Baccalaureate program to prepare herself for college.

During the intake process, both Sarah and her parent independently rated Sarah’s executive skills and identified time management and goal-directed persistence as relative strengths, and organization and response inhibition as challenges. However, they differed in their view on one domain of executive skills: planning/prioritizing. Whereas Sarah viewed planning/prioritizing as a relative strength, her parent reported it to be a challenge; instead, Sarah noted that task initiation was difficult for her. Her parent also noted that metacognition was a relative weakness for Sarah.

Sarah explained that she wanted to use coaching sessions to work toward her running and music goals; however, because it was her first semester of high school, she first wanted to focus on her academic goals. Although she did have a grade goal for each class for the fall semester, she did not reveal that to the coach until the semester was over and she knew how she had performed. Instead, Sarah stated that her goal was to get assignments completed ahead of the due dates so that she would have time to ask questions and get help, particularly for math.

Coaching sessions started with a focus on planning out how many math assignments Sarah needed to do each day to get them completed ahead of time. Sarah and the coach talked about how long each assignment might take and discussed potential obstacles and planned for them. When she and her coach met the following week, Sarah reported that she had not done the assignments as planned and had not met her goal. Sarah and the coach realized that she had a lot of competing and more immediate priorities that week that had taken precedence over the goal of getting ahead with her math work. This demonstrated Sarah’s ability to be flexible and prioritize, which are strengths, but also revealed a weakness in planning a goal with the whole picture of competing demands in mind.

So, Sarah and the coach broadened the scope of their planning, by using coaching sessions to talk through and write up a more comprehensive plan for each week. During coaching sessions, Sarah would explain the work and exams she had to address for the week and would

include in her plans other obligations that took time, such as track, extracurricular activities, and family responsibilities. At the start of each coaching session, they would then reflect on the degree to which Sarah was able to follow the plan:

How well did I follow the plan for week?

Not at all (0/total days)

Once (1/total days)

Somewhat (2–3/total days)

Mostly (3–4/total days)

100% (all of total days)

Over time, with this approach, Sarah was able to achieve more of the tasks and goals that she included in her plan each week.

Sarah and the coach talked about Sarah trying to build some independence around writing down her priorities for the week. She agreed to start using her agenda rather than the form the coach had created. She did do that for a few weeks, but then lost that momentum with a fall break period and an increasing workload after the break. It felt too overwhelming to Sarah to write it independently and see it all, but she responded well to having her coach write it out for her each week, and then share it in an email. So, they made the goal toward independent planning smaller by having her try to update her work plan for just one day of the week. Although they checked in on this each week, this too was not something Sarah was able to do.

The coach noticed that Sarah was reporting more stress as the semester wore on, perhaps due to a heavy workload and busy schedule. So, the coach continued with the role of writing out Sarah's plans for each week. However, the coach also started asking Sarah to reflect on and rate her stress level each week so they could track it.

On average, how stressed did I feel this week?

What made it hard to follow the plan or update the plan?

1: Not stressed at all

2: A little bit stressed

3: Somewhat stressed

4: Very stressed

5: Extremely stressed

Overall, while Sarah showed progress in her ability to plan her work for the week and follow through on most of it, she maintained a feeling of stress and was not able to take on the role of writing or updating her own plan in her agenda or in the form her coach used. However, Sarah did achieve her overall grade goal in three of her four classes and came extremely close to her grade goal in her math class.

Having met her grade goals and gotten through the first semester of high school, Sarah seemed to have a new level of confidence and was ready to shift focus to her personal goals, including music, running, and a morning routine. This time she was able to state specific goals, such as "I want to practice music 10 minutes every day"; "I want to run 20 to 30 miles a week"; "I want to wake up by 6:30 A.M. each morning to have more time to myself"; and "By the start of

the summer, I want to have purchased a guitar so I can be ready to learn to play.” The first few coaching sessions for these goals continued as they had the previous semester with the coach writing the plans that Sarah set for herself, and then reflecting on them together in the next session.

However, after 2 weeks of that approach, Sarah came up with her own rating system for how she felt about each goal:

- 1: Dreading/stressed
- 2: Annoyance/annoyed
- 3: Mediocre/okay
- 4: At peace

Then, Sarah also started taking the initiative to update the document herself with her stress ratings and to update what items she did and did not accomplish. During coaching sessions, she started updating her weekly planning sheet with goals each week with the coach just present and listening. Sarah also started addressing her long-term goal of learning to play the guitar by breaking down that goal into small actionable steps. She has also maintained and stated her goal of achieving A-level grades in each of her classes, and feels she is on track to do so this semester but is willing to pivot to academic planning and goals with her coach if she needs that support.

Sarah has shown tremendous growth in developing her independence toward naming her goals, determining what steps she needs to take toward them and when, and then reflecting on them.