

## Family Life Coaching

presumed to be the child's father. The legal presumption that the husband was the father of the child could only be challenged under very limited circumstances. The paternity of nonmarital children was more problematic. Many legal systems treated nonmarital children as inferior to marital children and afforded them fewer legal rights. Today, the conventions governing the biological parentage of children are changing to adapt to the modern realities of the increase in numbers of nonmarital children, the ease of DNA testing, and advances in reproductive technologies including in vitro fertilization, the use of donated gametes and embryos, and gestational surrogacy arrangements. The traditional laws deeming a man to be the father of a child born to his wife are also evolving to adapt to the newfound legal recognition of same-sex marriages.

Parent-child relationships are also created through adoption. Adoption has ancient roots in the civil law as a means of ensuring that a man had an heir; it was unknown in the common law. The notion of adoption as a mechanism for giving children new parents when their biological parents are unable or unwilling to care for them is a uniquely American creation. The Massachusetts Adoption of Children Act of 1851 is widely credited as being the first modern adoption law. In addition to ensuring that adopted children would inherit from their adoptive parents (an idea imported from the civil law), the act required courts to ensure that the adoptive parents were able to adequately provide for the minor child. Today, that second aspect of the act is a defining feature of many of the laws governing adoption. Modern adoption laws also seek to ensure that the parents who surrender their children for adoption give informed consent to do so.

**SEE ALSO** *Adoptive Families; Annulment; Divorce, Custody and Visitation; Divorce, Mediation; Family Policy; Family Preservation Services; Inheritance; Interracial and Interethnic Couples; Same-Sex Marriage; Same-Sex Parents.*

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## Family Life Coaching

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Family life coaching (FLC) combines the fields of coaching psychology and family life education (FLE) as a practice to help families improve familial relationships (Allen 2013). FLC is a strengths-based process between coach and client(s) working collaboratively on goals specifically pertaining to family life. The process utilizes specific coaching practices that foster positive familial change. FLC engages families as partners in the change process, working alongside families as they gain insight, knowledge, and skills to make meaningful life changes in the family realm.

### Family Life Coaching and Family Life Education

Although the fields of FLE and coaching psychology are closely related, there are differences. The field of coaching psychology has long been exploring the differences between coaching and therapy, and more recent literature looks at similarities of and differences between FLE and coaching (Allen and Huff 2014). Vicki Hart, John Blattner and Staci Leipsic (2001) found that differences in coaching and therapy fall into three categories: focus of attention, timing of delivery, and types of conversations. The authors also found that strategies used by coaches to promote growth in their clients is significantly different than therapists.

Coaches tend to focus on goal setting and an action-oriented process that is outwardly defined. Coaches also tend to create looser boundaries and are more flexible in their coaching relationships. Coaching sessions are focused on current and future events as opposed to dealing with the past. Overlap in the two fields include methods of inquiry, advice giving, boundary issues, and power differentials as well as a need to recognize danger signals that could require a referral.

In the realm of family life, there is need for more literature on the similarities of and differences between FLE and FLC. FLE is a theoretical foundation for FLC (Allen 2013). Similarities of FLE and FLC include a strong background in the field of family science, a focus on enhancement of familial relationships, and the practice of tapping strengths to support familial change (Machara et al. 2017). FLC, however, focuses on specific goals identified by the clients and utilizes coaching strategies to encourage families in meeting those goals.

## DEFINITION

Family Life Coaching is a process where a client and a trained coach work together to achieve client-identified family goals. The process is collaborative and client-directed, working from a strengths-based perspective.

Family Life Coaches utilize research-based coaching strategies and techniques to encourage and support the competence and achievement of client-identified goals. They build respectful, trusting relationships with parents, children, and/or families in order to facilitate positive growth in family life, enabling families to maximize their strengths and potential.

SOURCE: Family Life Coaching Association.

Although education is a component of coaching, the emphasis is not on educating families but rather the process of creating change. A family life coach may or may not convey specific family science information, whereas, a family life educator creates programming around education. Power differential is also noted as a difference in FLE and FLC. FLE practitioners often utilize the expert model in which an expert educator works in groups or directly with a client to educate in an effort to create growth, whereas a family life coach works as an equal partner, viewing the client as the expert in their own family life. A family life coach will likely facilitate a families' knowledge growth but will always seek to empower growth through coaching techniques.

### Family Life Coaching Practices

Coaching has become a fundamental element of practice in the leadership and business sectors. It is quickly establishing its place as a promising practice in the realm of family science. This begs the question, what exactly are coaching techniques and how can they help couples, parents, and families? The literature on coaching highlights models and the process of coaching rather than specific strategies. Most coaching resources focus on evidence-based practices in the field of coaching psychology as they relate to learning and psychological theories. It is common to see coaching strategies connected to models and theories, including cognitive behavioral theory, adult learning theory, motivational interviewing, the appreciative inquiry model, person-centered therapy, and solution-focused therapy (Palmer and Whybrow 2008). Within these theoretical models are common coaching practices of goal setting, rapport building, action steps, and accountability steps combined often with strengths-based inquiry and use of assessments.

**Goal Setting.** Goal setting is often considered a foundational strategy of coaching. The definition of and models of coaching often begin with the process of goal identification (Allen 2016; see Fig. 1). Early in the coaching process, the client will identify what they hope to gain from the coaching process. The process is guided by the coach but led by the client, meaning the coach sets up a clear understanding in the partnership process, but the client acts as the expert in the family and the one who makes decisions about what to focus on during the session, what the action steps will be, and how to have accountability. Together, the two collaborate to help the client reach self-identified goals.

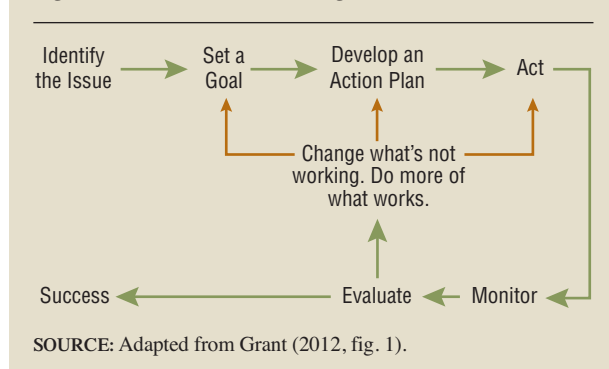
**Rapport Building.** Building rapport is a coaching practice that includes the communication strategies of active listening, reflection, and partnering to reach goals. The coach will typically use a strengths-based approach by working with the client to identify strengths, talents, and past successes to foster change. Clients will often come to work on family issues without a clear idea of what they want but rather an idea what they want changed. The coach works with the client to identify past successes and looks at common elements to see how to utilize a similar process in the current situation. For example, if a parent is struggling to get a teenager to show respect, the coach might ask about times when the parent has been successful at changing a family dynamic. Based on the skills and processes used in the past, the client is asked to see how he or she could use similar skills and processes in the current situation. Capitalizing on past success and building on the client's strengths is conducive to building rapport, increasing the client's perception of success and confidence, and creating the desired change.

**Assessments.** The use of assessments is another common practice used with coaches. Strengths-based assessments can be used as both a rapport builder and a facilitation tool. Reviewing results of a strengths assessment can help the client better understand their own talents while also helping the coach better know the client. These strengths can then be a part of the action step process when determining next steps for growth. Assessments can be used to help the client gain a better understanding of their environments and their own perceptions and, when used with other family members, can help families understand one another. Assessments can aid in the formation of powerful questioning, which is a tactic many coaches use to help the client come to their own understanding and decisions. Coaches ask questions; they rarely tell or give advice.

**Action and Accountability Steps.** These coaching practices ultimately lead to the development of plan of action to help reach the desired goal. The coach will use powerful questions to get the client to generate a list of possible

## Family Life Coaching

**Figure 1. Goal-directed self-regulation model**



action steps and accountability. While the coach facilitates the conversation, the client does the work of identifying the steps and an accountability plan. The process is repeated on subsequent sessions, with the process focusing on what is working and what additional steps need to be taken to move toward goal completion. The coaching process concludes when the coach and client agree that the coaching process is over. Ideally, the client will have learned self-coaching skills that can then be utilized in subsequent family life events.

### Efficacy of Family Life Coaching

The need for couple and family psychology to consider FLC as an approach to serving families is gaining momentum (Allen and Huff 2014; Sexton 2014). As with any emerging approach, there is a question of efficacy. Is coaching effective? Specifically, is FLC effective? The field and literature of coaching psychology has grown exponentially over the past two decades, establishing evidence of the efficacy of coaching in many realms (Theeboom, Beersma, and van Vianen 2014). Likewise, the literature on the efficacy of FLC is also growing (Machara et al. 2017). There have been a variety of FLC efficacy studies, including evidence of efficacy for parent coaches with families mandated to attend parent coaching through social services, in emotion coaching of children, of coaching families with children with special needs, coaching couples and individuals requesting relationship support, and as an approach to home visits in infancy, just to name a few (Allen 2016). The process of FLC is relatively new, but as a promising practice, is a forward-moving field that deserves additional research and interest.

### Conclusion

As the field of family science continues to evolve, there is a growing need for innovation in how families receive support and services (Hamon and Smith 2014). Although there are many innovative practices in family science, FLC is a prominent emerging practice that is being used

in a number of fields, careers, and situations (Allen and Huff 2014). The science on the efficacy and practice of FLC continues to advance, as do the number of practitioners being trained and credentialed (Kruenegel-Farr, Allen, and Machara 2016). FLC is growing a connection between the fields of coaching psychology and family science, and it is coming into its own as a unique profession and approach to supporting and serving families.

**SEE ALSO** *Familism; Family Life Education; Family Science.*

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### RESOURCES

- Association for Coaching. <https://www.associationforcoaching.com/>.
- Family Life Coaching Association. <https://www.flcassociation.org/about/>.