



Children's Health Orange County (CHOC)
Best Evidence and Recommendations (BEaR)

Best Practices to Support Preceptors

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Abstract

Luhanga, Dickieson, and Mossey (2010) emphasize the critical role of well-prepared nurse preceptors in ensuring a successful preceptorship experience. Their qualitative research identifies key factors influencing preceptor effectiveness, including comprehensive education and robust support systems. The purpose of this evidence-based practice project was to identify the best practices from existing literature and healthcare organizations to enhance preceptor education and support, ultimately improving preceptor outcomes and reducing burnout.

Several key changes are proposed to augment current practices to achieve these goals. First, the development of enhanced web-based learning modules that are accessible to both internal and external learners is essential. Additionally, allowing preceptors to complete these modules during their paid work hours will support their professional development without adding undue burden. Furthermore, a preceptor needs assessment, distributed to all nursing staff, will also provide valuable insights to tailor the program and clarify role expectations.

Investing in these enhancements, improved preceptor satisfaction, reduced stress, increased retention, and decreased burnout rates are anticipated. Program evaluation scores are also expected to improve, reflecting the initiative's success in creating a more positive, sustainable, and effective preceptorship environment (Shinners & Franqueiro, 2015).

Keywords

Preceptor education; preceptor support; preceptors; preceptor practices; best practices for preceptors; preceptor training

PICOT

What are the best practices within a hospital setting for the onboarding, training and ongoing support of nurse preceptors?



Background and Significance

The recruitment and development of skilled nurse preceptors is a continuous process closely tied to the onboarding cycles of new nursing staff. Preceptors play a pivotal role in the successful integration of new hires, helping them navigate organizational systems, policies and priorities while ensuring a smooth transition into their roles (Hillman and Foster, 2011)

Preceptor programs are designed to create a supportive environment by providing preceptors with the tools and resources needed to be effective educators and role models. Evidence suggests that strong preceptor support not only enhances clinical nurse retention but also leads to improved patient outcomes. (Smith et al., 2024). In many healthcare settings, preceptors are required to complete training courses at regular intervals, often every two years, with ongoing access to resources through dedicated online platforms.

However, a recent survey of preceptors at our institution highlighted the difficulty of managing a heavy workload while balancing precepting responsibilities with patient care. Many preceptors reported feelings of burnout due to the constant demands of mentoring nurses while maintaining their own clinical duties.

Addressing these challenges aligns directly with our organization's strategic goals, which focus on improving staff retention, enhancing the quality of patient care, and fostering professional development. Reducing the workload burden and better balancing teaching with clinical responsibilities are critical steps toward creating a healthy work environment, mitigating burnout, and decreasing staff turnover.

This evidence-based project aimed to identify best practices from the literature and other healthcare organizations for improving preceptor education and support, with the goal of enhancing role satisfaction and preventing preceptor burnout.

Framework

This EBP project utilized the “Translating Evidence into Practice: CHOC’s Approach to EBP” model, adapted from the EBPI Model © 2007 Brown & Ecoff (Ecoff, Stichler & Davidson, 2020).

Search for the Evidence

Databases searched for this review included CINAHL, Medline in EBSCO, and Pub Med. Key search words: preceptor education; preceptor support; preceptors; preceptor practices; best practices for preceptors; preceptor training. This search yielded 14 articles.

A survey regarding this topic was sent through the Children’s Hospital Association listserv to over 100 key children’s hospitals. This survey yielded 3 responses. Best practices and policies



from Lucille Packard Children's Hospital, Children's Medical Center Dallas, and Emory Healthcare were examined.

Critical Appraisal and Synthesis of the Evidence

- **Preceptor Education and Training:** Numerous studies highlight the significant impact of comprehensive preceptor training on the quality of precepting experiences. Offering structured training sessions that cover essential topics including effective communication, mentoring strategies, clinical skills assessment, and delivering constructive feedback, has been found to be crucial. Additionally, focusing on "soft nursing skills" like critical thinking, prioritization, teaching methods, conflict resolution, clinical reasoning, and teamwork further enhances preceptor effectiveness (Blegen et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2019; Key & Wright, 2017; Liao et al., 2019; Robbins et al., 2017).
- **Flexibility in Learning:** As adult learners, preceptors require flexibility in accessing educational resources to accommodate their diverse schedules and learning preferences. An integrative review of best practices for developing nurse preceptors determined that supplementary learning modules, offered after initial training, can help reinforce and expand upon foundational knowledge (Powell, 2013). Providing ongoing educational opportunities allows preceptors to refine their skills and knowledge over time.
- **Web-Based Resources:** The availability of a preceptor website, accessible both during and outside of work hours, has proven to be an effective tool for delivering self-directed, on-demand education. Such platforms not only offer flexibility but also foster networking opportunities among preceptors, creating a sense of community and shared learning. Research by Myrick et al. (2011) suggests that preceptor websites not only support continuous learning but also improve retention and motivation by offering a convenient and engaging platform.
- **Evolving Educational Needs:** The needs of today's learners are shifting, and traditional educational methods are often insufficient alone. Integrating dynamic tools such as educational podcasts and videos has proven highly effective. These resources offer preceptors the flexibility to engage with content at their own pace, whether during commutes or focused study sessions, allowing for both concept reinforcement and the introduction of new material (Blum, 2014).
- **Incentives and Support:** To ensure preceptors feel valued in their roles, it is crucial to provide incentives such as paid educational time. This approach has been shown to increase preceptor satisfaction and motivation, making it easier for them to complete required learning modules (Nash, & Flowers, 2017).

Preceptor Needs Assessment: Conducting surveys among preceptors is a valuable strategy for identifying specific learning needs and areas for improvement. Chan et al. (2019) demonstrated



that preceptor surveys offer insights into areas where preceptors felt confident and those where additional training or support might be beneficial. This feedback can inform the creation of tailored educational programs that address knowledge gaps, enhancing the overall effectiveness of preceptor training.

- **Tiered Skills Acquisition Model (TSAM):** Emory Health's Tiered Skills Acquisition Model is a structured framework designed to guide the development and progression of new graduates through different levels of competency. The model helps preceptors build their skills in a step-by-step manner, starting with foundational knowledge and advancing to more complex, higher-level skills. Each tier represents a stage in the learning process, providing clear goals and expectations for preceptors as they move through the program. The model emphasizes ongoing education, mentorship, and support, which fosters engagement and satisfaction among preceptors. The adoption of the tiered skills acquisition model has led to significant improvements in preceptor engagement and satisfaction. As a result, preceptors feel more valued and motivated, which contributes to better outcomes for both the preceptors and the nurses they mentor. (Dossier 2024)

Practice Recommendations

- **Enhance Preceptor Education:** Restructure existing institutional preceptor classes to offer more comprehensive learning opportunities, integrating both theoretical skills and practical skills necessary for effective preceptors.
- **Promote Self-Directed Learning:** Implement self-paced modules covering essential topics such as managing difficult conversations, teaching adult learners, and fostering critical thinking. These modules will allow preceptors to enhance their teaching skills at their own pace.
- **Provide Paid Educational Time:** Allocate dedicated paid time for preceptors to complete self-learning modules in settings free from patient care duties. This will support their professional development without conflicting with their clinical responsibilities.
- **Develop an Online Preceptor Platform:** Create a centralized online platform for preceptors to streamline training, communication, and access to resources. This platform fosters ongoing development and facilitates networking among preceptors.
- **Adopt the Tiered Skills Acquisition Model (TSAM):** Implement the TSAM to optimize the use of available resources, equip preceptors with the structured teaching tools they need to progress through different competency levels, and enhance their effectiveness in mentoring new nurses.



Outcome Measures

- **Preceptor Satisfaction:** Use surveys and interviews to regularly assess preceptor satisfaction. This will provide insight into their experience to identify challenges and highlight areas for improvement. It will also ensure that preceptors feel valued, supported, and engaged.
- **Retention Rates:** Monitor the retention rates of both preceptors and learners to evaluate the program's long-term effectiveness. High retention rates will reflect the program's success in fostering a supportive and appealing environment for both groups.
- **Program Evaluation:** Conduct regular evaluations of the preceptorship program's structure, content, and outcomes. These evaluations will help identify strengths and areas for improvement, ensuring the program evolves to meet the needs of preceptors and learners.
- **Completion Rates:** Track the completion rates of both preceptors and learners to assess the effectiveness of the support provided throughout the program. High completion rates will indicate that participants are adequately prepared and supported.
- **Preceptor Effectiveness:** Evaluate preceptors' ability to provide meaningful guidance, constructive feedback, and strong support to learners. This measure will assess how well preceptors mentor and foster the development of their assigned nurses.
- **Comprehensive Summary of Findings:** Integrate data from preceptor satisfaction surveys, retention and completion rates, program evaluations, and assessments of preceptor effectiveness. Use these insights to continuously enhance preceptor support, ensuring a positive and productive experience for both preceptors and learners.

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