

Working with students with different skill levels  
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As students progress through the process of acquiring clinical skills and reasoning, their needs for preceptor guidance and support will change. As preceptors, it is important to be aware of where the student you are working with is in that process. As a preceptor, you may prefer to work with students at certain stages in the process. You may know that your teaching style or your practice environment offer a better learning experience for either beginning or more advanced students. Please let the faculty liaison from the program you are working with know your preferences so that an appropriate student can be placed with you.

### **Beginning /Novice students**

These students come with little clinical experience but usually mountains of enthusiasm to be starting to learn hands on midwifery. As their preceptor, it is important to talk with the student about:

- What their previous experience is – some students will come with previous experience as a Labor & Delivery nurse, some will have nursing experience in another area of nursing and some will come with experience in other fields
- Learning goals for the overall clinical experience and for weekly progression in learning
- Personal part of the picture – where does student live, commute time, family situation, cultural beliefs/practices

Beginning students will undoubtedly be presented with clinical situations for which they have had little, if any, didactic preparation. As a preceptor, you will help the student pick which patients to be involved with. The focus is on quality, not quantity, of involvement in appropriate clinical encounters. Identify several uncomplicated clients for your student to work with each clinic day. In the beginning, don't focus on how much time students spend in a visit; speed will come with organization and experience. As the preceptor, you can balance observing the student in the visits with seeing some patients on your own to keep your schedule on track. Preceptors of beginning students need to:

- Provide clear strong direction to the student on priorities, focus and appropriate learning goals
- Break down clinical skills so that students can learn skills in a sequence - ie – start student off in a routine prenatal visit only doing the abdominal check, or only doing the history, and then expand the student's involvement as comfort increases with each component of the visit
- Create a calm, supportive learning environment

### **Intermediate students**

Students progress through the process of acquiring and becoming proficient in skills and clinical reasoning at different paces. As their preceptor, it is important to talk with the student about:

- Previous experience before midwifery school
- Clinical placements while in school – what settings have they worked in and what populations have they worked with
- Skill acquisition – how many and level of comfort/independence with births, labor managements, repairs, IUD placements, pelvic exams, history taking, prenatal visits
- Learning goals for the overall clinical experience and for weekly progression in learning
- Personal part of the picture – where does the student live, commute time, family situation, cultural beliefs/practices

At this point in the learning process, students have acquired individual skills but do not yet see how they all fit together in providing care to a woman and her family. The focus is on becoming more systematic in their approach to each aspect of providing care. Preceptors of intermediate students need to:

- Help students prioritize what is important in each clinical encounter
- Help students develop a systematic approach to providing care including preparation for a clinical encounter, history taking, creating a differential diagnosis, making a plan of care, patient teaching, labor management, delivery, third and fourth stage management
- Continue to focus on quality not quantity but ask the student to begin to work within agreed upon time frames for accomplishing clinical tasks
- Encourage students to ask questions and be creative in their approach to clinical problem solving
- Create a calm, supportive learning environment

### **Advanced Students**

These students are near the end of their training. This is the time that all the work done previously is coming together and making sense for the student. This is the time for students to experience increased independence as they prepare to move out into practice as a safe, beginning practitioner. As their preceptor, it is important to talk with the student about:

- Previous experience before midwifery school
- Clinical placements while in school – what settings have they worked in and what populations have they worked with
- Skill acquisition – numbers of experiences and level of comfort with the full range of clinical skills needed for competency
- Learning goals for the overall clinical experience and for weekly progression in learning
- Time management in both inpatient and outpatient settings
- Personal part of the picture – where does the student live, commute time, family situation, cultural beliefs/practices

This is the time for you to step back and let your student take the lead whenever appropriate. As preceptors, it is often hard for us to step back, to stay quiet and listen. Our role with advanced students is to be a resource, to mentor the student in challenging situations, to be a sounding board. Students at this point in their learning want to participate in the professional aspects of midwifery practice and will benefit from inclusion in staff meetings, M&M sessions, chart review and other professional activities. Preceptors of advanced students need to:

- Welcome student input on management and allow the student to proceed with their plan if it is safe and there is sound rationale supporting it
- Help the student to be timely and efficient in clinical settings
- Allow the student to do things her/his way rather than your way but share your clinical pearls
- Foster independence in the student – student should take the lead, as appropriate in your practice, in phone triage, communication with staff/nurses, triage, consultation, labor management, birth and repair, clinical visits of all types
- Create a calm, supportive learning environment

