

## **Working with the Paraprofessional in Your Classroom**

### **Helpful Hints Series #10**

**from Dr. Barry Ziff**

**“Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world:  
indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”**

**Margaret Mead**

I was trained, qualified and certified when I was given the keys to Room 7. I had taught general education students for three years and felt confident that I had the skills and disposition to work with students who had learning disabilities. What I wasn't prepared to deal with was managing another adult in my classroom.

The teaching assistant who was assigned to Room 7 was a kind, compassionate and very nice middle aged woman whose own children had all attended and graduated from our school. I met with Mrs. Ortiz a few days before school began and she explained how much she enjoyed reading to the students. Reading to the students, she explained, seemed to keep them calm. “That’s great,” I stated as I tried to think of other ways that Mrs. Ortiz could support and contribute to our class. I told Mrs. Ortiz that I was planning to put together a booklet for her to explain my philosophy of education and provide a list of duties and responsibilities for the paraprofessionals working in Room 7. At that specific moment in time I had no idea of how to best utilize this adult in my classroom. Because I came from a general education background I was used to managing up to thirty-eight children all by myself.

That weekend I prepared a list of duties and responsibilities as well as information regarding classroom rules and procedures for Mrs. Ortiz. When I presented her with the information she smiled and thanked me, but I could tell by her change in attitude that she was a little overwhelmed. I explained that we would discuss the situation at the end of the day and made sure she understood that we would start off slowly depending on her comfort level.

Mrs. Ortiz began working one-on-one with a few students that I assigned her during academic sessions. She also took charge of the morning routine, i.e. roll call, lunch count, calendar, etc. After the winter break she was ready to take on a small group during math. I provided her with the materials and supplies for a week. She was able to organize the resources and pacing until the following week. In time she was also able to take on a group during the reading rotation. She was responsible for reviewing and practicing skills and building vocabulary recognition that was introduced during the week. By the end of the school year we were a good functioning team.

During the past decade the role of the paraprofessional has evolved from clerical assistant to a much more collaborative role with the teacher. The instructional assistant’s role is dedicated to supporting teacher directed instruction as well as supervising students. As the credentialed special education teacher you are expected to be a manager of the adult(s) who work with you in the classroom. It is imperative that as a manager you are professional and assertive with all dealings that relate to the role and responsibilities of the paraprofessional. You are the one who is legally responsible for the students you serve. Therefore, in a collaborative and professional manner you are expected to guide and direct the paraprofessional(s) in your classroom. To promote a professional and collegial atmosphere I

suggest the teacher prepares and presents a notebook for the paraprofessional. Below is a list of those items to be included in the paraprofessional notebook.

- Philosophical overview
- Classroom management strategies
- Important phone numbers
- Emergency procedures
- Yearly calendar
- Weekly schedule
- Daily schedule
- Classroom rules
- TA's role and responsibilities
- Significant names and function of school personnel
- Bibliography of significant and useful books and resources
- Information about issues related to the area being served
- Information the teacher feels is important to the setting

It is important and beneficial to keep an open mind, be flexible and understanding that the paraprofessional has been assigned to your classroom to provide support. They are not expected to develop lesson plans or be responsible for classroom management or be your personal assistant.

### **Utilizing Instructional Assistants**

There are a variety of ways in which an instructional assistant can provide support in your classroom. Take the time to discover your assistant's strengths and use those interests and skills to the advantage of your students. Instructional assistants can provide support in the following ways:

- Collaborative support during a lesson
- Small group instruction
- One-on-one assistance
- Prepare materials
- Grade student work
- Proximity support for appropriate discipline
- Sitting between two students to keep them focused
- Prepare bulletin boards
- Record grades
- Provide points, stickers, happy faces, etc.
- Keep class supplies/materials organized
- Assist students with composition writing
- Correct homework/workbooks, etc.
- Conduct daily classroom routine
- Restroom assistance
- Order supplies and materials
- Provide supervision during lunch, recess, breaks, etc.
- Other duties as assigned by the teacher

## Questions and Answers

Below are suggestions to help support the common concerns teachers have regarding issues when working with paraprofessionals.

### **1. My TA stands and chats with other adults during supervision time.**

This is a common concern of teachers and administrators. By assigning designated areas to supervise you separate the adults. For example, place one supervisor near the basketball courts, another by the handball area and another where the students eat their snacks. Also, explain the importance of supervising playtime and the issues of liability if students are bullied or injured on their watch.

### **2. My TA speaks inappropriately to students using degrading language.**

Explain your philosophy of education thoroughly and model professional behavior in the classroom. Clarify any misconceptions and provide supportive verbal prompts, which can be utilized with students to encourage on task behavior. If necessary, explain how self-esteem is connected to how a child learns and feels about him/herself. Encourage positive communication as a tool to enhance students' learning and self-esteem.

### **3. My TA gets frustrated with how slowly the students progress and often completes the work for the students.**

Provide specific strategies to help the TA direct the student in a more professional manner. Explain to the TA that by providing prompts, mnemonic devices or giving helpful suggestions allows the students to complete the work on their own and promotes independence and competence in ones abilities to be successful.

### **4. My TA is very unorganized.**

Provide your TA with a daily/weekly schedule as well as a school calendar. Help them to establish a daily routine and utilize verbal praise to reinforce their contributions to the class. Provide a notebook and folders to help establish a filing system that works well for both the TA and the teacher.

### **5. Who is in charge?**

Remember, the TA is not your personal secretary. Their obligation is to support your efforts in meeting the educational needs of the students. The TA takes directions from you, however a collaborative relationship is beneficial for the best results in this type of working relationship. If the TA is assigned to a specific student by an outside agency then it is important for you to know the contractual agreement and what limitations there may be in providing large or small group support by this individual. Be aware of their role in your classroom environment. You are ultimately responsible for all the students that you serve. You are in charge. Know the contact agency personnel to call if you have an issue or concern.

## **6. My TA dresses inappropriately.**

Model appropriate attire for your TA in the school environment. The TA Handbook can reinforce your expectations for proper dress at school by listing those items, which should and should not be worn at school. Explain the safety issue regarding wearing proper shoes. Also refer to the general school code for acceptable professional attire.

## **7. My TA uses their cell phone in the classroom.**

The adults need to follow the same rules as the students. If the use of cell phones is prohibited in the classroom during academic periods then no one should be using their phones. Model appropriate behavior and point out that it is against school regulations for cell phones to be used during class time. Be assertive in explaining the rules to your TA.

## **8. My TA does not know the subject matter.**

If possible, provide resources and encourage the TA to conduct a little research and study the content area. If this is not possible, then have the TA work in a non-academic role such as classroom management, scoring papers, setting up bulletin boards, etc.

## **9. We need more time for planning.**

It is important to build a trusting and respectful relationship with your TA and this takes time and effort. Plan on meeting in September before school begins to establish a positive working relationship. If your school does not provide planning time then you must meet during the school day. The teacher can organize the TA's duties and responsibilities so each day follows a pattern and a routine is established. The teacher and TA can meet during break times for verbal discussions. However, be cognizant that conversation may be confidential and should not be held in front of students. Try to develop a time when you can schedule in a weekly meeting to discuss issues and concerns.

## **10. My TA needs help with behavior management and classroom discipline.**

Many schools provide training workshops for all faculty and staff members in this area. If this is not possible in your school, then the TA Handbook can be utilized as a guide to share rules, consequences, behavior plan and any forms which are used to inform administration and parents about a student's inappropriate behavior. The TA can get involved in the classroom management program by providing positive verbal support to students, passing out stickers, points, and happy faces. The teacher needs to model appropriate behavior management skills and step in when the TA needs extra support with an unruly student.

## Conclusion

As a special education teacher you must be prepared to act as a role model, supervisor and colleague. No longer are teachers expected to work in isolation. Building a positive and collaborative relationship with your staff is beneficial for everyone in your classroom. It is not necessary to be friends with your teaching assistant outside the work environment in order to build a positive and effective collegial relationship. By planning together and working to meet the unique needs of your students you will be able to build a powerful bond that will enhance the educational opportunities for all your students.

However, when you feel overwhelmed or concerned about an issue you do need to have a colleague with whom you can share in confidence your concerns. Build a respectful and trusting relationship with a colleague who will support you in becoming the best teacher you can be. At times we are all in need of support and advise. By taking care of yourself, you are more available to meet the needs of your students and you will be more successful and happy working with special needs students.