

Directing and Communicating with a Classroom Paraprofessional

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Paraprofessionals can:

- Assist with informal documentation (e.g., tallying notes for the teacher/service provider to use), prepare materials, and assist with other clerical duties as directed by the supervising teacher/service provider.
- Schedule activities, prepare charts, records, graphs, or otherwise display data.
- Conduct screenings (without interpretation) with specified screening protocols developed by the qualified supervising teacher/provider.
- Assist in providing supplementary work and reinforce learning in small groups or with individuals while the teacher/provider works with other individuals.
- Record student progress toward meeting established objectives as stated in the individualized plan, and report this information to the supervising teacher/provider.
- Provide direct supplemental instruction/intervention services included in the individualized plans as identified and directed by the supervising teacher/provider.
- Use positive behavior supports consistent with those used by the supervising teacher/provider.
- Assist the teacher/provider during assessment of students.
- Participate with the teacher/provider in research projects, in-service training, and public relations programs.
- Assign the paraprofessional to one subject area, rather than a specific student or group of students. This allows them to gain more information and experience in the subject, develop a more defined role, and encourages pupils to think of them more as a classroom resource rather than as a "minder" for an individual student, thereby maximizing their benefit.

-Encourage paraprofessionals to attend parent-teacher conferences and meetings. If possible, hold these meetings when paraprofessionals are available.

Communicating

-The classroom teacher should ask the paraprofessional for suggestions and ideas about content, process, or evaluation strategies that would be useful in relationship to the participation of the student with disabilities.

-The teacher should be explicit regarding the paraprofessional's role in supporting the classroom expectations

-Daily communication between the classroom teacher and the paraprofessional is vital. Simple conversations and gestures of welcome can make the difference between a successful professional relationship or the isolation of the paraprofessional.

-Paraprofessionals need to understand each classroom teacher's thoughts and practices on the topic of assessment so that they can be supportive even though paraprofessionals do not maintain significant roles in assessment and evaluation.

-Joint planning time is critical to the communication between professionals and paraprofessionals. The paraprofessionals' daily interaction with students can provide important information in planning for the classroom. Including the paraprofessionals in classroom planning makes them a part of the classroom community. Setting up a regular joint meeting time creates a stable environment and a specific time when questions and/or concerns can be addressed.

-When appropriate, professionals and paraprofessionals should attend trainings together for greater collaboration.

-Good classroom management provided by the teacher is essential to this model. By delegating tasks, meeting regularly with the special needs assistant to discuss the aims of specific lessons, and maintaining focus in the classroom, the teacher retains his or her position as classroom leader. The effectiveness of the paraprofessional is largely dependent on the individual teacher's management skill.

-Make sure your expectations and directions are understood and that paraprofessionals have the knowledge and skills to fulfill your expectations. Ask the paraprofessional what his or her expectations are of the teacher.

-Provide clear explanations and guidelines for paraprofessionals' role in instruction (drill-and-practice, assessments, adapting lesson plans according to teacher directions, and monitoring student performance).

-Make sure the paraprofessionals have the resources available to be most effective (including training).

-The best teacher paraprofessional teams are built on trust, recognition, respect, communication, and collaborative problem solving. This may not be easy to achieve. Many issues come up that might make effective teamwork a challenge.

-Understand that you and a paraprofessional may have different working styles, different cultural backgrounds, and different educational strategies that can affect your working relationship. Take time to discuss these differences when you first start working together.

-Use the terms "we" and "us" instead of "I" and "you" to reaffirm that you each have a responsibility in the learning process and are both accountable.

-Provide a schedule with a set meeting time at least weekly. Discuss how you will communicate if you don't have time to meet. Discuss this with your principal if there is a problem finding a set time to meet.

-Take time to listen to the paraprofessional's concerns and questions.

-While plans do not have to follow a certain format, planning forms may help to clarify what the teacher expects the paraprofessional to do in an instructional situation.

-Evaluation should be an ongoing, continuous process designed not only to provide feedback for the paraprofessional but also to evaluate the team relationship.

-Discuss the evaluation criteria that will be used to assess the paraprofessionals' performance. Let them know how often and when they will be evaluated. Provide an opportunity for paraprofessional to offer feedback on your working relationship. When giving feedback, start with telling them what they do well, and then follow with constructive suggestions for improvement.

-Teachers should determine what unique skills, special interests, and training paraprofessionals have that can complement their own. Paraprofessionals need to know what their role is with students. How much authority do they have in correcting student behavior, assisting students with interpersonal issues, or overseeing student activities must be clear and communicated.

Resources:

<http://www.nwrel.org/request/may2002/whatare.html>

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