

Create Effective Teacher–Paraprofessional Teams

PATRICIA DEVLIN

Keywords: paraprofessionals; collaboration processes



Any given year, general and special education teachers may find themselves managing and supervising one or more paraprofessionals within their classrooms. Paraprofessionals represent a growing and important segment of personnel used to provide support for students with severe learning or behavioral needs in self-contained and inclusive settings. The experience of working as an instructional team may be a positive or negative one, having various implications for students. When teacher and paraprofessional are clearly working as a team, an educational atmosphere exists that is favorable for positive student learning. This article provides teachers with useful strategies and tips when working with paraprofessionals for creating an environment that is beneficial for adults and students.

1 Discover your paraprofessional’s interests and skills. This important step conveys respect and a positive team atmosphere from the start. Getting to know one another’s skills, interests, and talents can also help identify responsibilities and training needs (Riggs, 2004). Each member brings experiences and skills that are valuable resources to the classroom.

2 Communicate that you are a team. Individuals cannot be effective team members unless they see themselves as being important

to the team effort (Friend & Cook, 1996). Extending this notion, others should also view individual members as contributors to the work of the team. It is important to communicate to your paraprofessional that each member brings valuable skills (e.g., “We are better working together”). Likewise, other members of the instructional team (e.g., parents, related service personnel, administrators) should see a cohesive classroom team working for the benefit of all students.

3 Talk about work style preferences. Preferences are not inherently good or bad, but they do exist. Failing to recognize initial differences creates a breeding ground for interpersonal problems (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001). A conversation about such issues as punctuality, classroom organization, and supervision style can eliminate the conflict that may occur when adults who do things differently work in the same space.

4 Develop a personal job description that includes ethical guidelines. It is wise to create a list of duties and responsibilities for the paraprofessional based on his or her input. You will need to find out the paraprofessional’s level of skill and confidence in performing tasks, and you will need to provide or request the necessary training accordingly. It is also wise to include, as a component of the job description,



ethical guidelines in dealing with students, families, and others. Trautman (2004) suggests the following:

- Keep information that pertains to school, school personnel, students, and parents or guardians confidential.
- Direct communication that concerns the student's program to the child's classroom or IEP manager.
- If concerns arise, go directly to the supervising teacher.
- Team with all school and itinerant staff.

5 Convey your role as instructional leader. Explain to the paraprofessional what can be expected from you. It is important that you are aware of and clearly communicate what your responsibilities and jurisdictions are in the classroom. Your legal responsibility for the education of your students should guide this conversation.

6 Be proactive regarding classroom and behavior management. A difficult working situation can develop between teacher and paraprofessional because of a difference in philosophy regarding classroom and behavior management issues. Your students can sense when you and your paraprofessional are not on the same page, and they will act accordingly. A discussion regarding the code of conduct for the classroom should

happen before the 1st day of school, and it should include the following questions: What are the classroom expectations for students and adults (i.e., the classroom rules)? How will the classroom expectations be communicated to students? What is the plan to address unacceptable student behaviors in a timely manner? What are the roles of the teacher and the paraprofessional? To minimize future problems, be explicit about your paraprofessional's role in supporting student behavior and overall classroom expectations (Doyle, 2002). In addition, providing "What happens if . . . ?" examples may help your paraprofessional to visualize his or her reaction to a situation before it occurs.

7 Discuss the issue of confidentiality. As the team discusses necessary student supports, all members must have a firm understanding of the legal responsibility to keep information confidential. Talk about how difficult it is to think of something to say that is tactful and ethical when a temptation arises to gossip about students, teachers, and other school personnel. You may find it helpful to provide examples of situations and easy-to-use responses.

8 Set clear priorities for student learning, and communicate these to your paraprofessional. Setting priorities includes not only listing a particular task but also conveying purpose, specific student needs to address, and student strengths on which to capitalize. It is important for the paraprofessional to understand how a task fits into the broader goals and outcomes for a student.

9 Give frequent constructive feedback. A simple statement such as "You were great with that activity" or "Perhaps switching the order of activities would help John stay on task" is important to express to a paraprofessional. This kind of formative or frequent feedback helps paraprofessionals know what things they are doing correctly or what changes they can make to improve their effectiveness.

10 Be aware of how you communicate. Different approaches work better with different people. Avoid personal attacks, and take steps to ensure that you are conveying information in your paraprofessional's preferred communication style (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2006).

11 Delegate decision making to your paraprofessional. For some tasks (e.g., updating a classroom bulletin board), allow the paraprofessional an opportunity to make decisions while



emphasizing guidelines, quality, and a time table. Delegation empowers and motivates a paraprofessional, thereby allowing you to make the most of your time with students. Being a perfectionist can hinder delegation of tasks. Before delegating, ask yourself, “Does this task need to be done to a level of perfection?” The next question is then “Can my paraprofessional do the task to an acceptable level?” (French, 2002).

12 Practice effective listening. Attention, willingness to listen, and ability to obtain accurate information are necessary for an effective working relationship. Using effective attending skills (e.g., eye contact, positive body language) and responding skills (e.g., paraphrasing, reflecting, clarifying) can help in the long run. Practicing these skills may save you from going back and redoing things or repairing misunderstandings (Pickett & Gerlach, 2003).

13 Establish formal planning times. Regularly scheduled meetings foster a sense of teamwork. Try meeting at either the beginning or the end of the week to discuss plans, implementation, and results. Although there may be other things to do, taking time to plan and reflect in a formal manner will result in benefits for you, your paraprofessional, and the students whom you serve.

14 Hold brainstorming sessions. Some highly effective teams report that regular brainstorming enhances their effectiveness and cohesiveness as a team. The topic can revolve around a problem, an activity, or an occasion pertaining to your classroom. More times than not, it may be that two heads are better than one.

15 Include your paraprofessional. Invite the opinion and presence of your paraprofessional to individualized educational program meetings and parent–teacher conferences. This is especially beneficial if she or he has worked extensively with a student. The paraprofessional’s contribution may be invaluable in providing firsthand input toward the learning and growth of a student.

16 Provide training beyond what is expected by the school system. Although many paraprofessionals are now highly qualified, you most likely will continue to provide on-the-job training that is meaningful and useful within the context of your classroom. You may utilize techniques similar to those that you use with your students, although adapting such techniques to recognize an adult learner’s needs. The literature also notes a strategy of goal setting, data collection, and reflection among members of a team, which can be useful in teaching many skills related to paraprofessional responsibilities (Devlin, 2005).

17 Use a collaborative problem-solving process. You and your team may encounter difficult decisions to make, which may be both frustrating and challenging to see objectively. Spending time answering the following questions can provide a systematic way for a team to work through such problems (Morgan & Ashbaker, 2001; Pickett & Gerlach, 2003):

- What is not working in this situation?
- What do we want to happen?
- What could be done to make the situation better? (Generate all ideas.)
- What solution has the greatest chance for achieving our outcome? (Considerations: ease, what is within our control, what is least disruptive)

- Action plan: Who, what, where, and when?
- Did the plan effectively achieve our desired outcome?

18

Integrate your paraprofessional into the entire classroom setting. To the extent possible, rotate responsibilities and students working with a paraprofessional. This practice promotes a sense of fairness within your classroom. Assigning a paraprofessional to work with only one student over a prolonged length of time can establish overreliance and so interfere with the interaction between student, general education teacher, and peers (Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron, & Fialka, 2005).

19

Be open. Paraprofessionals can bring insight and ideas that contribute to the quality of the program. Provide an atmosphere that is open to suggestions, discussion, and clarification. Inquiries such as “What would you suggest?” “Do you have thoughts about her participation?” and “Let me know if you have any questions” can go a long way in creating a collaborative environment.

20

Incorporate laughter into each day. Learning experiences should be fun for all. Although some days may be more stressful than others, an environment that is lively, active, and tension-free and includes a sense of humor is one that is healthy for both students and adults!

About the Author

Patricia Devlin, EdD, is an assistant professor in special education at the University of Toledo. Her current research focuses on strategies and support systems to enhance individuals with moderate to severe disabilities. Address: Patricia Devlin, University of Toledo, 2801 West Bancroft, Mailstop #106, Toledo, OH 43606; e-mail: patricia.devlin@utoledo.edu.

References

- Ashbaker, B., & Morgan, J. (2006). *Paraprofessionals in the classroom*. Boston: Pearson / Allyn & Bacon.
- Devlin, P. (2005). Effect of continuous improvement training on student interaction and engagement. *Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities*, 30(2), 47–59.
- Doyle, M. B. (2002). *The paraprofessional's guide to the inclusive classroom: Working as a team*. Baltimore: Brookes.
- French, N. (2002). *Managing paraeducators in your school*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Friend, M., & Cook, L. (1996). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Giangreco, M. F., Yuan, S., McKenzie, B., Cameron, P., & Fialka, J. (2005). “Be careful what you wish for . . .”: Five reasons to be concerned about the assignment of individual paraprofessionals. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 37(5), 28–34.
- Morgan, J., & Ashbaker, B. Y. (2001). *A teacher's guide to working with paraeducators and other classroom aides*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Pickett, A. L., & Gerlach, K. (Eds.). (2003). *Supervising paraeducators in school settings: A team approach*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Riggs, C. G. (2004). To teachers: What paraeducators want to know. *The Council for Exceptional Children*, 36, 8–12.
- Trautman, M. (2004). Preparing and managing paraprofessionals. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 39(3), 131–138.

Copyright of Intervention in School & Clinic is the property of PRO-ED and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.