

Paraprofessional for special needs children



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Paraprofessional for Special Needs Children

For the past eleven years I have been a paraprofessional for special needs children. During those years I have learned about the different treatments and intervention techniques used for the various disorders among children. Through hands-on activities at work, various workshops , seminars and my own research, I have acquired knowledge about the different disabilities. I now feel I know what to expect from a student and can make the right judgment calls in different situations in order to facilitate learning. I have learned to manage children in both groups and individually, clerical responsibilities, organizational and creative abilities, , written and spoken communication skills, following instructions given by the teacher, and classroom management.

Children with special needs have certain deficits, which warrant special support to “ survive” a day at school. Room preparation and preparation of class materials is very important. The classroom should be set up so that there is a smooth “ flow” to it. From the moment the child arrives in the morning, the daily routine should start. An example of a classroom for special needs children will be found at the end of this paper. Preparation of classroom materials is also important. Children should have a “ bin” of some sort filled with materials to use for their programs and tasks. For example, if John is working on counting, alphabet and colors then the flash cards, manipulatives and picture cards should be in the bin labeled with his name on it. This way, when it is time for him to work everything is ready. Also, if there is an art project scheduled, all necessary materials should be ready. Children with special needs find it very difficult to wait for any lengthy period

of time. It is very important to have the day flow as easily and as smoothly as possible.

The daily schedule is important aspect in having a successful day. Each child has his own schedule due to the different services that each one has. Not all children receive all services, which may be OT (occupational therapy), PT (physical therapy), or speech. Some schedules may be in pictures and other in words. Not all children are capable of reading and therefore some children may be more adaptable to pictures. The classroom teacher would determine this.

All of these supports and organizational aids help in supporting children with special needs especially those with ASD (autism spectrum disorder) and AD/HD (attention deficit/hyperactive disorder). Their information processing difficulties and auditory weaknesses require much support. In addition, their problems in the areas of social understanding make it difficult for them to distinguish between what is important and what is not. Their problems with organizational skills sometimes make them look lazy which is another reason why they need visual supports such as pictorial or written schedules. An example of a child's schedule is as follows:

- Independent work
- Work session 1
- Work session 2
- Lunch
- Group work
- Work session 3

- Speech
- Music All done
- Pack-up
- Go home

A piece of construction paper is laminated as well as all the instructions. Each instruction is velcroed onto the construction paper. When the child enters the class in the morning he removes the first instruction over to “Time for”. Then when that task is done the child goes back to his schedule and places the completed task into the pouch marked “All done” and moves the next task over to “Time for”. This is done throughout the day.

Directing and facilitating attention to the teacher and/or task is another responsibility of the paraprofessional. Children who are more able – those with mild learning disabilities and attention problems – can basically take in and process information that the teacher is presenting and just need to be refocused toward the teacher. Less able students are less capable to take in information successfully so in this case the paraprofessional needs to take a more directive role with regard to instruction. The Para also needs to take on a greater responsibility for using the modifications and supports needed to promote the student’s attention. This is where the role of the Para is extremely important. He/she needs to make effective decision-making in selecting the best supports to aid in the student’s understanding and which promote learning.

Another important aspect, which I have learned, is pre and post-teaching. They are the backbones of direct Para support for students with significant disabilities especially in the inclusion classroom, which is at a much faster

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pace that a self-contained class. (A self-contained class is a class which has only special education students in it.) Pre-teaching is a concept or lesson that helps the student to become more familiar with the materials and activities at their own pace. Therefore when the lesson is given in a group the student will have already become familiar with the topic. It would be like going to Spain without any knowledge of the Spanish language. Your anxiety level would be very high when spoken to and you would have no idea what was said. However, if you had taken a few Spanish speaking classes you would at least be familiar with some of the conversation and able to put the whole idea together. Post-teaching is also very important because it reinforces any question the student may have. It also promotes generalization, which is one area in which children with ASD have great difficulty. Many children with ASD can learn in one setting but when taken out of that setting they can't seem to know what was taught in the original setting. The importance, which I have learned, of pre and post-teaching cannot be over-exaggerated because it can help the student become more comfortable and more responsive in the learning environment.

In working with ASD children I have also learned that breaking down tasks into smaller units is very helpful because then the task will not be so overwhelming. For example, during a math lesson the teacher will instruct the students to do the twelve problems on a certain page and when they are done the whole class will go over it. For a child with ASD these twelve problems may look like 100 problems. Not able to verbalize what the problem is, the student may act out and become disruptive in the class. It may appear that the student just didn't want to do it. There may be several

solutions to this problem. One may be to cover half the problems with a sheet of plain paper so that visually there are fewer problems that need to be done, or have the student do them at intervals throughout the day. This will result in the student being successful with the task and will also eliminate any behavioral disruption.

As a Para, I learned that there are countless ways to adapt and modify the curriculum to help the special needs child perform and participate more effectively. Appropriate materials and the correct environment can also support the child in the learning process. There are long-standing supports such as daily schedules and short-term supports which would be direct instruction modification. The math example, as stated above, is short-term. For the most part, adjustments regarding teaching materials and modifications are the responsibility of the Para. However, it is the duty of the Para to review any adaptations with the certified staff member. We, as Paras, are the support staff. We are under the direction and supervision of the classroom or special area teacher. Any curricular modification directly affects the content of the student's educational program.

I learned data taking is another important responsibility of the Para. Many times, because of frustration, anxiety and the lack of being able to verbalize what the problem is, children with ASD will have problem behaviors. It is important to understand that problem behaviors are different than a behavior problem. If you consider a student a behavior problem than you look no further than the student himself. However, if you view the student as having problem behaviors, you are more likely to look for causes either from the environment or within the student himself. When a Para recognizes that

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there is a problem behavior, the certified staff member and the psychologist should meet to discuss what behavioral supports may be necessary. You, as the Para, will be asked to take data. This data is called ABC; A-antecedent, B-behavior exhibited and C-consequence.

ABC DATA

Antecedent Behavior Consequence

Math lesson fell to the floor removed from room

When the behavior occurs, the Para will write down what occurred before, what the behavior was and what consequence was given for the behavior. How long you take the data is at the discretion of the certified staff and psychologist. Once the data is taken, it is reviewed and a behavioral support plan is put into place. One type of plan is “if-then” support. For example, “If you throw your worksheet on the floor, then you will lose time on the computer.” It is very important that the child understands and knows what the targeted behavior and consequence is in order for the behavioral support to work. Another type of behavioral support is a token system. The child is told that when he/she gets five tokens (pennies, stickers, smiley faces, etc.) he gets to choose a preferred activity for a certain amount of time. This type of behavioral support reinforces good behavior. There are many other types of behavioral support plans and it is important to know that no two are the same. The type of plans and how it is implemented depends on each child. If implemented correctly it can have a significant impact for positive behavioral change. One important aspect in problem behaviors is to watch that the inappropriate behavior not be inadvertently reinforced. Some children act

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out for task avoidance. In reality the student is acting out to be removed from the situation. When this occurs the Para needs to work through the behavior. However, there are circumstances in inclusive settings where the child must be removed because it is too distracting to the typical peers. If this occurs, the child should be removed but the task must be completed in order to show the child that his behavior will not be rewarded and “ get him out of doing his work”.

In addition to all, which I have learned, clerical tasks are another aspect of being a Para. One clerical task is to provide a written record of the student’s daily functioning. These records are a part of the student’s programming. Giving the team important information regarding progress, setbacks and an insight into future planning is critical. Another part of the clerical tasks is also keeping data on IEP (Individualized Education Plan) goals. A Para should be proactive in consulting with the teacher to find out the goals and keeping accurate records regarding them. One example of an IEP goal would be: John will initiate game playing with a peer with 80% accuracy. A data sheet with data will show if John is reaching the goal over a certain period of time. The data will also show whether John is having difficulty accomplishing this goal and if so, adjustments should be made to the way in which this goal is being addressed. The daily record and the data on IEP goals are very crucial parts of supporting the student and should not be taken lightly. They are essential because they provide records for meetings and will aid the child’s next teacher, and possibly a new Para, in the event you are reassigned.

All of the supports, which a Para gives to a special needs child, serve an important purpose. The support given promotes understanding, minimizes

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anxiety, gives a positive influence on behavior, promotes independence and competence and strengthens the overall student learning. Without these supports, students with special needs are left to help themselves. Under those circumstances stress and anxiety increase and the learning process is compromised. The proper support can mean the difference between success and failure.

Through the past eleven years the knowledge that I acquired is endless and ongoing. I've learned about different learning disabilities, child development, instructional process for different special needs children, and most of all, working together as a team with the certified staff. As a Paraprofessional I know my role is critical to the successful school experience of the student. When a child has accomplished even the smallest goal it gives me great satisfaction and pleasure to know that I played an important part in making a difference in the life of a special needs child. These are positive steps and make me feel proud of the particular child. What happens as a result is that they themselves become encouraged by their achievement. There are days when it is particularly challenging to help a student complete a task, but these challenges are usually overcome by meeting with the team and following specific suggestions. From the Author Unknown "...it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove... but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a CHILD."