



AT A GLANCE

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Beyond Helicopter Helpers

October 2012 Newsletter

The special education staffers who support students with disabilities are key members in creating inclusive education opportunities. Their skills and commitment are making a difference in classrooms across the country. Para-educators are important members of the team, but what is their role and how do their efforts impact students? My guess is that many paras are told their job is to help a student. What does this helping look like?

I recently observed a student in a classroom who had a para “assigned” to him. The close relationship between the two and the genuine care the para felt for the student were evident to all. However, it seemed the para was performing many tasks for the student that the student was capable of doing for himself. The para took his folder out of his desk when the teacher gave directions to the class to do so. The para opened the student’s folder and pulled out the packet for the morning’s work. The para repeated the teacher’s directions to the student.

Throughout the day there was little independent work done by the student, and there was only one 15-minute period when the student was without a para constantly sitting next to him. The day ended with the para opening the student’s backpack, putting his reading book in it and zipping it closed.

What are some of the unintended consequences of a para hovering over a student throughout the school day? The student most likely feels he is not very capable if he always needs an adult doing tasks for him. The student may be confused about why he has to do things at home for himself but not at school. The student learns he doesn’t have to listen to the teacher’s directions; he’ll just wait for the para to repeat the directions. The para is left to make instructional decisions and decide when and how a student is praised or not. His classmates will likely decide the student can’t do very much for himself, so he looks incompetent in their eyes. Chances are the teacher will not have a very good understanding of what the student can and cannot do since the para is the one interacting with the student all the time.

Para-educators are very dedicated and want to do what’s best for students. However, when their job is to help only one student, and when they do so in a way that generates helplessness, dependence, and other unintended negative consequences, they’re doing more harm than good. So, how can this situation be changed?

Collaboration between the classroom teacher, special educator, and para-educator is critical. The staff can review the student’s strengths and emphasize that no one will do something for the student that he can do for himself. The para’s role can be redefined to be an assistant for the classroom teacher, not an aide for the individual student. The expectation is the para will move about the classroom assisting any student who may need help.

The positive consequences of this scenario can generate positive outcomes for the student with a disability. He’ll see himself as a competent learner who receives assistance only when he truly needs it. He’ll know there are expectations for him to listen to the teacher’s directions and to perform and learn at school. Peers will notice the student is capable. The classroom teacher will take the responsibility of this student’s learning, just as she does for every other student in her class. And the para-educator will contribute to the success of all the students in the class!

Identify your vision: How teachers can be more engaged with *all* students and model that every student belongs.

Use your voice: To have on-going conversations about roles, expectations, and how to use natural peer supports.

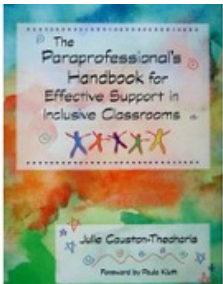
Work together: To help students learn how to support each other in cooperative learning groups and build friendships.

Take an action step now and email this newsletter to others!



Resources

Websites



The Paraprofessional's Handbook for Effective Support in Inclusive Classrooms
By Julie Causton –Theoharis

This national website has an abundance of resources including presentations from conferences, state links, researched based articles and much more! [Click here](#) to go to the website.

Teachers and paras will glean so many practical tips and guidance on how paras can provide respectful support for students. This is an excellent professional development resource!

Please let me know if you're interested in one of my presentations and/or customized consulting and coaching.

Remember, what we anticipate, determines what we find!



As a parent and an educator, I bring 35+ years of experience and enthusiasm to create positive change for students, families, and educators!

How may I support you? Click the links below to learn more.

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