



Creating a Classroom Team

How teachers and para-professionals can make working together work

Another in a series of classroom tips from the American Federation of Teachers



A Union of Professionals

“How can I get my para more involved? I could do so much more if she had a bigger role.”

“Five playground

duties a week is a little too much. When I try to talk about it to my teacher, she just shrugs and says, ‘That’s your job’.”

“My teacher never explains how she wants anything. Then she’s on my back because it’s not done the way she wants.”

“My para doesn’t seem able to do anything right. It’s like having another kid in the room. I have to redo everything.”

“I’d like more input in planning classroom activities, but

I’m not sure how to bring up the subject with my teacher.”

“My para gets so upset about playground duty. That’s his job, isn’t it?”

Respect and communication. That's what teachers and paraprofessionals say makes an effective classroom team.

In speaking with paraprofessionals and teachers, the AFT has gathered the following tips about how to make working together work.

1

Create a healthy, open relationship between teacher and paraprofessional.

Set aside time to get to know each other. That could include discussing each other's background, experience, special interests, and strengths and weaknesses. It also includes setting goals together for your class. The better you understand your co-worker, the easier your day-to-day life together will be.

2

Active listening is the key to true communication.

Active listening is a way to really get to know another person and to understand their side of a problem or issue. Active listening helps the person you're talking with speak freely, explain his/her side of a problem, and work out a solution. It includes the following elements:

- ▶ **Encouraging:** an example of an encouraging phrase would be: "Can you tell me more?" or "Could you give me more detail about this

problem?” Being encouraging shows you’re interested in what the other person is saying and keeps the other person talking when he or she might be shy or reluctant. It helps to use neutral, nonjudgmental words and to keep your voice free from anger or ridicule.

- ▶ **Clarifying:** Clarifying includes asking who, what, why, when, and where questions, such as “When did this happen?” “Can you tell me exactly what the student said to you?” “How did you feel about the principal’s comments in front of the class?” Clarifying helps you get clear information from the other person and understand his/her point of view so you can find a solution that works for both of you. Ask questions if you don’t understand what the other person is saying or if you need more details.
- ▶ **Restating the facts:** This technique shows you’ve been listening to the other person: “So you’d like a larger role in planning small group activities?” or “I guess you’re saying you need more backup in dealing with the problem kids.” By repeating the basic ideas and facts you’ve just heard the other person express, you make sure you’ve understood.
- ▶ **Reflecting:** In reflecting, you describe the other person’s feelings: “You seem very upset about what happened today,” or “You sound angry about playground duty.” Reflecting shows you understand how the other person feels and brings those feelings out into the open.
- ▶ **Summarizing:** Review the problem or issue you’ve discussed and how you’ll handle it: “I’m glad you’re willing to offer me more

“Know your strengths and limits and don’t be afraid to share them.”

Kathy Chavez
Albuquerque Education
Assistants Association

input in what we do in the classroom. It will make me feel more excited and productive. We've agreed to coordinate our planning periods so that we can sit down together and exchange ideas." Summing up pulls together your entire conversation and sets the stage for further discussions.

- ▶ **Validating:** Validating recognizes the other person's dignity, efforts and opinions. Validating phrases include: "I really appreciate your willingness to help solve this problem," or "I know it took courage for you to bring this up. I'm glad we talked about it."

3

Avoid communication barriers.

Roadblocks to communication include:

- ▶ **Destructive criticism and name calling:**

Examples of criticisms or put-downs include:

"How could you be so insensitive to that student?" "You really

went about that the wrong way," or "That's typical of your lousy attitude." This

approach puts the other person on the defensive. They may be so hurt or angry that they can only hear the insult or put-down, not the problem you're trying to solve.

- ▶ **Diagnosing or mind-reading:** This

includes second-guessing the other person with phrases such as: "I know you

"Something as simple as the way [the teacher] introduces me as her co-worker rather than as 'her aide' shows the level of respect she has for me, and while on the surface it may not seem important, it says a lot about our relationship both in and outside of the classroom."

Madeline Cabading
Special Education
Paraprofessional
San Francisco, CA

“A lot of paraprofessionals have complained to me about not being listened to. They don’t like the fact that everything is dictated to them by the teacher.”

Lydia Valdez
Teacher
San Antonio, TX

just did that to annoy me,” or “It’s obvious you have a self-confidence problem. That’s why you can’t deal with rowdy kids.” Like destructive criticism, mind-reading keeps the other on the defensive and may keep you from getting what you want from them, which is a solution or approach to your common problem.



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- ▶ **Ordering or threatening:** “You’ll do the Xeroxing and that’s final!” or “I’m talking to the principal about your negative attitude.” Commanding or controlling language may get you a result in the short run (for example, the Xeroxing might get done immediately) but hurts the paraprofessional/teacher relationship in the long run (for example, a complaint to the principal can cause lasting resentment).

4

Planning together keeps you productive and motivated.

While the teacher may be the person to initiate a plan, the paraprofessional should feel free to give his/her input and sug-



gestions. Planning weekly schedules and daily activities can make both your lives easier. You may want to use a daily “things to do” list that assigns a priority to each task. You could also work together to create bulletin board displays, instructional games, and special activities.

5

Assertiveness and mutual respect cement the bond in a classroom

team. Assertive behavior means expressing yourself clearly (but without resentment or rage), asking questions when you need to, and addressing problems in a nonconfrontational way as soon as they arise. When asked what “respect” between co-workers means, teachers and paraprofessionals mention that both parties should:

- Show a positive, caring attitude towards students.
- Be dependable, prompt, and reliable.
- Share perceptions of students.
- Assist each other without being asked.
- Value each other’s contribution. Of course, they acknowledge, no two co-workers can live up to this dream list every day—it’s just something to shoot for.

6

Defining roles and responsibilities can prevent confusion and conflict.

Often, the paraprofessional starts a job with only a vague idea of the teacher’s needs or the tasks he or she is expected to perform. The first weeks in the classroom together can be confusing, especially since teachers can vary in the kind of help and the specific job duties they expect from a paraprofessional. While it’s the teacher’s job to communicate this information clearly, both colleagues can move the process along by asking questions, speaking in a direct and honest way, and bringing up problems before they become crises. A paraprofessional has right to ask questions such as: “What are my regular

duties?” “What is the daily routine?” “What student records are available to me?” “How much contact should I have with parents?” and “What’s expected of me in terms of student discipline?” In turn, the teacher has the right to expect the paraprofessional to be reliable, flexible, and cooperative.

7

Feedback builds a working team.

While the teacher takes the lead in the classroom, both teacher and paraprofessional should have the chance to share feedback. Feedback cuts down on confusion, duplicating tasks, and resentment between paraprofessional and teacher. You may find that a “tune-up” checklist like the one below is helpful:

Sample Tune-Up Checklist:

- Are we meeting frequently enough?
- Are we sharing information about student performance, behavior, and growth?
- Do we need to work further on defining job roles, setting goals, and evaluating students?
- What areas would we like to see improved? What areas can we congratulate ourselves on?
- Are we treating each other as co-workers rather than supervisor and subordinate?
- Do we each feel free to offer suggestions or bring up problems?
- Are we both fulfilling our job descriptions so that neither of us is overburdened or underutilized?

“Teachers and paraprofessionals need to develop a rapport that allows the paraprofessional to know sometimes what a teacher needs without having to be told. The teacher, in turn, should be appreciative of what the paraprofessional does.”

Gwen Snell
Paraprofessional
Detroit, MI

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AFT can help teachers and paraprofessionals build good working relationship.

We hope you've found these tips helpful.

If you'd like to explore this subject further, AFT offers a training program, "Paraprofessionals and Teachers: Collaboration in the Classroom," aimed at defining and improving the relationship between paraprofessionals and teachers and creating an atmosphere of professional cooperation and harmony. Developed by the union's Paraprofessional and School-Related

Personnel division and the Educational Issues department, the program draws on role playing and team-building exercises to explore the ingredients that are essential in a successful paraprofessional-teacher team.

"My teacher makes me feel really comfortable. She's constantly telling me what's going on in the classroom and lets me do different things with the children that I'm particularly good at."

Terecita Martinez
Paraprofessional
San Antonio, TX

"Keep the lines of communication open. Teachers should include paraprofessionals in everything that goes on in the building. We should let them know they have a voice, as well as make them feel they are part of the team."

Carol Pacheco
Teacher
Boston, MA

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