

Collaborating with classroom assistants: Making it work for you

"She constantly undermines me."

"I wish he knew what to do when they misbehave."

"What can I do to help her 'get it'?"

"How do I get him to understand?"

We often hear statements like these from teachers about their classroom assistants. An early childhood teacher can find it difficult to supervise teacher assistants, especially when they are new to the job or have a different approach to teaching children.

For us as teachers, the majority of our training focuses on the growth and development of children. We rarely are taught how to collaborate with, and supervise, other adults. For the benefit of the children, however, it is essential that you learn to work together and that you help your teacher assistant grow as a professional.

Five simple ideas

To learn how to work and grow together, we offer five simple ideas, all supported by research:

1. Respect and trust your teacher assistant (Griffin, Kilgore, Winn, and Otis-Wilborn 2008; McLaren, Bausch, and Ault 2007).
2. Help your teacher assistant to learn about the field of early childhood education and child development (French 2001; Maggin, Wehby, Moore-Partin, Robertson, and Oliver 2009; Telzrow, McNamara, and Hollinger 2000; Salzberg and Morgan 1995; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, and Stahl 2001).
3. Clarify the responsibilities and expectations you have for your teacher assistant (Bos and Vaughn 2006; French 2001; Griffin et al. 2008; Maggin et al. 2009; Salzberg and Morgan 1995).
4. Be specific when assigning tasks (French 2001; Wallace et al. 2001).
5. Provide regular feedback to teacher assistants about their performance in the classroom (Maggin

et al. 2009; Salzberg and Morgan 1995; Wallace et al. 2001).

Build respect and trust

As classroom teachers, we can easily view teacher assistants as less qualified than ourselves. Many of us have degrees in early childhood education or child development, while our teaching assistants do not.

However, we need to treat them as early childhood professionals and trust that they will do their jobs to the best of their abilities. We have found that thanking our assistants for their work either in spoken words or a written note is a simple way to make them feel appreciated. From our experience, when teacher assistants feel appreciated, they work harder and are better at their jobs. You can also say thanks through actions, such as bringing them coffee or fruit in the morning, or taking them out to dinner or a professional meeting after school.



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A teacher can show respect by asking the assistant's opinions. Many times, assistants have ideas for teaching lessons or addressing problems that we have not yet thought about. An assistant may suggest using milk bottle caps for checkers in the manipulatives area, for example, or e-mailing digital photographs of a child's block constructions to parents before the upcoming parent-teacher conferences.

Another way to show respect is to discuss each other's strengths and weaknesses, as well as areas of interest so you can incorporate those into the classroom roles and responsibilities. For example, one teacher's assistant had fabulous artistic skills, so she worked in the arts center with the children and did most of the creative work in the classroom.

Treating your teaching assistant as an equal or partner helps the children understand that you are both in charge.

Increase learning

As a general rule, teacher assistants want to learn more about children and teaching (French 2001; Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, and Stahl 2001). They want to learn the skills that will help them be more effective at caring for, and teaching, young children. In fact, many of them aspire to one day become classroom teachers and many are hoping to gain the necessary skills as classroom assistants. As teachers, we can encourage our assistants to learn and grow as professionals. We need to share the things we learn and ask them to share anything new that they learn.

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In our classrooms, we have learned a variety of simple ways to help our teacher assistants to grow as professionals.

First, we provide them with specific information about each child in the classroom. This includes information about the child's abilities, interests, needs, and families. We explain, for example, that Caleb can write his name without help, loves all the *Madagascar* films, needs encouragement to be more physically active, and lives in his grandmother's home.

TEACHER ASSISTANTS WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT CHILDREN AND TEACHING.

Second, we provide information about developmentally appropriate expectations for the children. We talk with our assistants about the lessons we have planned and explain why those particular lessons and activities are appropriate. In a collage art activity for 3-year-olds, for example, we explain that children at this age may not yet be able to use scissors for cutting, so we start by having them tear pictures or shapes from magazines. Over time, we teach them how to hold scissors in their hands and practice by cutting straight lines.

Additionally, we explicitly teach assistants how to respond in an age-appropriate manner to children's undesirable behavior. A child may talk too loudly at naptime, for example, or grab all the apple slices off the snack platter. To ensure that our assistants respond appropriately in these situations, we teach them how to respond. One effective way is modeling and role play. To the loud child, we may say, "Elsa, use your quiet voice, please. The other children are trying to sleep." Or we (the teachers) might pretend to be the loud talker and have our assistants practice responding. During the practice, we provide our assistants with feedback on how they handle the situation. (For more on feedback, see below.)

Clarify responsibilities

With two adults in the same room, it is not uncommon

for disagreements to occur because roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined. In many cases, assistants do not know what is expected of them. They need specific information about what to do.

One way to clarify separate responsibilities is to write them down in a list (see chart below) and share this with your assistant. Be sure that you both have a printed copy of the list, so there is no question about each person’s responsibilities. At the same time, however, we have found that it is best to be flexible with these roles. We help one another as needed.

Additionally, both the classroom teacher and the teacher assistant need to be willing to do the less desirable work (changing diapers, cleaning up messes, and bandaging wounds, for example).

Be specific

When you ask an assistant to complete a task, be specific. You cannot assume that she understands what you are asking unless you give details about what you want. This is especially true for new classroom assistants who have little experience.

On the other hand, it is not uncommon for more experienced assistants and teachers to have different ideas about how to do something, so you might still need to provide instructions. For example, if you want the assistant to prepare a bulletin board you have designed, you might sketch a picture of what you want or show photographs of your previous successful designs.

As assistants gain experience, you might entrust the design to them. But you may still need to explain the theme (how the bulletin board will introduce or reinforce a concept), what children will learn (objective or benefit), art materials available for use, and budget limit.

When we assign assistants to prepare materials for lessons and art activities, we have found it helpful to use Post-it® notes to specify how many of each item to make or copy. Instructions that we think are simple (“Pour paint in the pots and put them on each easel”) may need more details: “Fill the paint pots only one-fourth full. Use the red, blue, and yellow colors that you will find in the supply closet. Place one pot of each color on the tray of each easel.” In time, your assistant will understand an instruction with fewer details.

While being specific, we also try to be flexible and allow the assistants to use their own creativity to prepare these materials whenever possible.

Provide feedback

Teacher assistants, like all professionals, benefit from feedback on their performance. Teachers need to inform their assistants about how they are doing at their jobs. We have found that assistants need to hear both positives and negatives and that they often respond better to criticism when it is given after compliments. Our positive-to-negative ratio for feedback to children is usually 4:1. That is, we give four

Classroom responsibilities

Task	Classroom Lead Teacher	Classroom Assistant
Planning lessons/circle time	✓	✓ — with teacher
Teaching lessons/circle time	✓	✓ — as requested by teacher
Completing daily parent communication form	✓	✓ — as requested by teacher
Supervising children during unstructured playtimes	✓	✓
Supervising children during outdoor playtimes	✓	✓
Reporting problems/concerns/ needs to administration	✓	✓
Attending to children’s needs (diaper changes, toilet training, bandages, meals, for example)	✓	✓

positive comments for every negative comment. A similar ratio may be useful when working with assistants.

When we provide corrective feedback, we have often found it beneficial to sandwich it between positives. For example: "You used a quiet voice instead of yelling when Billy bit you. By being calm, you managed to diffuse the situation. In the future, I would appreciate it if you move him to the 'thinking chair' as a consequence instead of sending him to the hallway. The 'thinking chair' is the consequence that I have used when he has bitten in the past. If we are consistent with our consequences, he will more quickly learn the expectations of our classroom and the consequences for not meeting those expectations."

GIVE FOUR POSITIVE COMMENTS FOR EVERY NEGATIVE COMMENT.

By explaining to assistants what to do differently and why a different approach is necessary, we can help them become better at their jobs. Through regular and consistent feedback, assistants can grow as professionals.

Expand your training

In our training to become early childhood educators, we are taught various classroom management techniques. One that is often missing is how to work with or supervise teaching assistants. Many of us must learn this skill on the job or under the guidance of a mentor.

Sometimes working with teacher assistants can be tedious. But when you have information from experienced teachers and you plan ahead, working with assistants can be helpful to both you and the children. It can be challenging, but the results are well worth it.

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