

Understanding the Role of the Educational Assistant

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By Joyce Mounstevan, Ph.D., ASD and Education Consultant

Educational assistants are hired by school boards to provide, under the direction of the teacher, additional support to students in the classroom or the school. It is important that, as a parent, you understand the scope of this role and what is involved in allocating an educational assistant to a classroom.

Team Membership

The educational assistant is a member of your child's educational team and as such may be asked for input into setting goals or for commenting on progress towards the Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals. It is not the role of the educational assistant to set up a programme or goals for your child – this is the role of the teacher. The attendance of the educational assistant at team meetings is at the principal's discretion. You may request their participation if you feel that this would be important for the decisions that are to be made.

Communication

Although the educational assistant may be delegated the responsibility of daily communication with the family, it is the teacher's responsibility to approve the content of the communication and to have the ongoing communication regarding a student's programme and services, including academic updates and progress reports. Communication with the educational assistant is limited to pertinent information that could affect a student's day (e.g. missed breakfast, slept poorly, will be picked up for an appointment, etc.). It is not the role of the educational assistant to provide parents with an academic update or progress report.

Allocation of Educational Assistants

Educational assistants are members of a union and as such are placed in schools based on seniority. This may result in an educational assistant being placed in a position requiring training in the specific needs of the students they are being asked to support. As a parent, you can ask the teacher about the training that is available to the educational assistant. It is, however, the responsibility of the principal to arrange any training he/she feels is necessary. The number of educational assistants assigned to a school is based on a review of the needs within the entire school board. Responsibilities assigned to an educational assistant within a school are based on the needs of the school as a whole and may vary over the course of the year as these needs change.

Supervision and Evaluation

The educational assistant is under the direction of the teacher. Performance evaluation and supervision of their work are the responsibility of the principal. Some school boards have a formal process for on-going evaluation of educational assistants but this is not standardized across the province.

Key Roles

The educational assistant serves a myriad of functions throughout the school day and can be an invaluable asset in the running of a smooth and effective classroom. Some of the ways in which an educational assistant can support the teacher are:

- Preparing visual charts and reminders for either individual students or for the entire class to use

- Priming (preparing) students for upcoming events so that they can make an easier transition to the next activity or location
- Prompting students when they require some additional assistance and fading prompts as soon as the student is ready to complete a task more independently
- Supervising students in both structured and unstructured settings
- Re-teaching material the student requires more time to learn or that needs to be broken down into smaller chunks (under the direction of the teacher)
- Facilitating interaction with peers and encouraging friendships with classmates
- Assisting with personal care as outlined in the IEP (e.g. washroom routines, eating, etc.)
- Becoming the student's voice – not allowing time for the student to make independent choices or speaking for them
- Providing too many prompts, too often thereby severely impacting skill development. Spending all of their time with one student resulting in a student's inability to work with anyone but 'their' assistant

Each teacher/EA team will develop their own unique working style to reflect their shared skill set and the unique strengths and challenges of the students. As a parent, it is recommended that you meet with the teacher and the educational assistant as a team so that you are fully aware of how their roles blend and how you will communicate with them as a team.

The scope of the support and services required by the students must be carefully planned so that the goal of increased independence is always foremost in people's minds.

In some settings, the role of the educational assistant has shifted from one of providing assistance as needed to one of dependence. This can become a barrier to inclusion and to independence. It is very important to be aware of the roles that are not helpful in moving a student towards independence. These include:

- Taking on the role of parent (this can sometimes happen when a parent employs an educational assistant outside of school time for home support)
- Becoming the student's 'best friend' or 'hovering' over the student – constantly being at a student's side can significantly impede his or her interaction with peers

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