



# How to Build a Successful Special Education Department

10 EASY STEPS

Struggling with how to work with the paraprofessionals in your classroom? These 10 easy steps will get you started on building a cohesive team.





# Hey Friends!

I'm so excited you downloaded the 10 Easy Steps to Building a Special Education Team.

The job of a special education teacher is hard enough without having to manage paraprofessionals. If you're like me, you didn't go into special education thinking how great it would be to be a boss to adults! But alas it is a critical part of the job. With these 10 steps you'll find that building a team who all work in the best interests of the students is so much more productive for everyone involved, and it minimizes your need to "manage" anyone.

If you find these steps helpful, you might want to purchase my whole para binder. It's packed full of forms, templates, and information that every teacher and para will find useful.

Thanks again!

 jennifer



## Step 1

### Clearly Communicate Your Expectations

This is #1 for a reason. If you do not clearly communicate your expectations from day 1, things can get off track in a hurry. I have very high expectations for my paras, yet they aren't unreasonable or difficult to follow. I suggest you write all your expectations on a paper, go over them before they are hired and ask them if they feel able to meet these expectations. Once they begin work, review your expectations again and have them sign off on each one. Review them as necessary and use the documentation during evaluations or when problems arise.

## Step 2

### Define Roles & Responsibilities

Everyone wants to know their responsibilities in a job. The roles and responsibilities of the teacher versus a paraprofessional should be clearly explained at the beginning of a working relationship and visited again if those roles get confused. Give the paras a written document defining the duties the para MAY perform and the duties they MAY NOT perform. This helps to develop an open line of communication for when roles get confused.

## Step 3

### Give Them a Place To Call Home

Everyone wants to feel as though they belong in the space in which they work. Paraprofessionals often feel less important because they don't have a desk. Create a space within your classroom that they can call home, leave their purse, their coffee and their notebooks. I currently use cubbies with their names on them, but you can use a spare teacher or student desk, a closet, or a bookshelf.

## Step 4

### Provide Them Lesson Plans

Paraprofessionals, while they are truly the glue that holds the department together, are not teachers. They have not received the training you have to write lesson plans, nor are they knowledgeable about the in's and out's of an IEP. It is your job to provide them with the specific lesson plans of each child or group of children they work with. This includes any specific behavior plans. Write them and give them to them in advance so they have time to look over them and ask any questions.

## Step 5

### Provide Them Training

I know as a teacher, I often take for granted that not everyone in the world knows the characteristics of a child with ADHD or the accommodations needed for a specific learning disability. Don't make this mistake. Train your paras on the characteristics of learners. Train them on specific accommodations for each child they work with. Train them on methods that work best for behavior issues. Teach them all the special education acronyms. They can never have too much training and they will eventually feel more prepared and more comfortable in their role.

## Step 6

### Evaluate Their Performance

Everyone needs to know how they are performing at their job. Paras are no different. Some districts have specific requirements/forms for evaluating classified staff, but in my opinion paras need to be evaluated a lot more often than once a year. In my department, we evaluate once every 9 weeks and more often if there is an issue that needs addressed. We use a rubric created specifically for special education paras. It allows regular classroom teacher to have input on performance in an inclusion setting.

## Step 7

### GIVE FEEDBACK

It's not enough to evaluate someone and give them a sheet of paper. Paras need specific feedback about what is going well and what needs improved upon. There needs to be opportunity for dialogue about how things are going, what training needs they may have or schedule conflicts that might have come up. Communicating on a regular basis is a huge key in having an effective team approach.

## Step 8

### VALUE THEIR INPUT

I swear I learn something new from my paras every day. They seem to know things about students that I somehow missed. Ask for their opinion and value what they have to say. If you don't agree with it, do so in a manner that is respectful. Trust them keep data on student progress and ask their input for present levels on IEPs. They can be a wealth of knowledge if you see them as a co-worker and not someone beneath you.

## Step 9

### GIVE THEM CHOICES

At the beginning of every school year, I have my paras complete a survey asking for input on what types of things they like to do and what things they shy away from. For example, not everyone likes going on field trips. Some paras have no problem with toileting and vomit while others would rather not engage in those tasks. Younger students might be somebody's jam while the older kids scare them. I know...I know...it's not always possible to make everyone happy all the time, but letting them have little wins helps create a sense of Team which goes a long way in having a productive working environment.

## Step 10

### KEEP THEM BUSY!!

I can't stress this more! I am not a chit-chatty kind of person. I'm the kind of person who intentionally stays away from work rooms and other locations where teachers like to gossip. I've found when paras don't have enough things to keep them busy they get to visiting with other paras or teachers within the building and this creates a breeding ground for negativity and provides opportunities for confidentiality to be broken. I make it an expectation that if a teacher doesn't need them for whatever reason, that they are to check in with me to see what can be done.

Thank you!

Thank you so much for your purchase. You have no idea how much I love sharing my love of all things special education with others who can benefit from my experience. If you have a product request please email me at [jennifer@caffeinebeforechaos.com](mailto:jennifer@caffeinebeforechaos.com).

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