
SPECIAL EDUCATION PARAEDUCATOR HANDBOOK



LAKEWOOD
SCHOOL DISTRICT

A Small District Going Big Places

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Welcome

Welcome to the Lakewood School District special education program. As a special education paraeducator, you are not just a support but a crucial part of our team. Your role is integral in assisting our students with disabilities, and you represent the program, the school, the community, the district, and the overall field of special education. Your unique position allows you to impact the lives of the students you work with significantly.

Your Role As A Classroom Paraeducator

Whether you are a new paraeducator or a veteran, it is essential to discuss the role of a classroom paraeducator. The specifics may change slightly from school to school and classroom to classroom, but overall, your role is to assist the classroom teacher in helping students learn and keeping them safe. When it comes down to it, you are there for the students. You provide extra help in a classroom so the student can learn at their individualized level and have their more specialized needs met. These specialized needs may include toileting, self-help, behavior, or communication. You are there to improve their quality of life and teach them to become independent adults.

So, how do you know how to help them learn and meet their needs? The classroom teacher will guide the process. The teacher writes each student's Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) regarding how a child will receive educational services. The teacher knows all of the essential details that must be followed. Your role as a paraeducator is to follow the teacher's lead. Ask the teacher for any concerns regarding student work, classroom setup, or behavioral interventions. Do not change things without discussing it with the teacher. It is the teacher's name on the IEP, and that is who is legally responsible for getting the educational needs of each student.

Your specific job duties will change based on the classroom you are in. You may be asked to take data, run small groups, clean parts of the school, provide toileting assistance, monitor break time, attend general education classes with the student(s), redo work activities, set up activities for the following day, make new class materials and more. Please remember that you are not alone. If you are unsure why you are assigned specific tasks, our team is here to support and guide you, ensuring you feel confident and reassured in your role.

What are NOT Responsibilities for a Special Education Paraeducator?

- Be solely responsible for implementing instruction, related services, or behavior support
- Be solely responsible for preparing lesson plans or initiating the original concept instruction
- Be used as a substitute teacher
- Be asked to perform clerical duties regularly.
- Select or administer formal diagnostic or psychological instruments or interpret the results.

Questions to Ask the School Administrator or Supervising Teacher(s)

- What are your work hours?
- When will you take your lunch and break(s)?
- What records are you responsible for keeping?
- What special services are available in the classroom and school where you work?
- What schedules are you responsible for following?
- When do students arrive and depart?
- For which supervision activities will you be responsible?
- Which classroom or students will you be assigned to support?
- Where are the supplies kept, and how are they obtained?
- With whom should you discuss a problem concerning relationships, interpersonal, supervisory, staff-staff, and staff-student? School policy?
- What should be your response when a parent raises questions about their child's classroom functioning?
- What pupil records are available to you?
- What is expected of you in terms of positive behavior support?
- What is the process for requesting information regarding Classroom Management for special education program support?
- How does your teacher view the teacher/paraprofessional relationship?
- What student information is relevant to my responsibilities?

Professional Standards

Special education paraeducators must follow professional guidelines when working with all students, including those with disabilities. They will be involved with many other educational personnel, parents, students, and administrators and encounter highly sensitive information concerning students and families.

Professional standards include the following guidelines:

Confidentiality

All student information is confidential. This is an essential component of the law. Many federal laws and state statutes protect the privacy of educational records. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) is the primary federal law on student records. Information or records falling under this law must remain confidential. Disciplinary action and legal liability can result from failure to comply with District policies and federal regulations regarding privacy. School staff must recognize that *conversations with non-school or school personnel without educational involvement with a specific child can violate this act.* Information and records covered under this act may include but are not limited to personal and family data, evaluation and test data, psychological, medical, and anecdotal reports, records of school achievement and progress reports, disability information, and copies of correspondence concerning students. Discussing specific facts about the students you work with violates student confidentiality rights. Remember that matters regarding students are confidential and cannot be a topic of public discussion in any public setting, including with other paraeducators who do not work with the student. Even if you do not mention a student's name, talking about an incident can give identifiable information.

Communication

No matter how well a program is designed, success depends on good communication between the teacher and the paraeducator. Poor communication skills and negative statements are at the heart of most problems. The learning process depends on the staff establishing and maintaining good lines of daily communication. However, communication with students and staff goes beyond verbal interaction and includes nonverbal interaction. Your actions may speak more loudly than your words.

Considerations for Working with Students with Disabilities

As an essential part of the educational team, paraprofessionals are committed to maintaining ethical standards of behavior in their relationships with students, parents, supervisors, and other school personnel. Teachers have a responsibility to help paraprofessionals develop moral responses to situations that arise. A code of ethics, such as the one provided below, can establish guidelines for appropriate behavior.

Basic ethical responsibilities:

- Engage only in non-instructional and instructional activities for which qualified or trained.
- Do communicate progress and concerns to supervising teachers.
- Do not communicate progress or concerns about students directly to parents
- Refer concerns expressed by parents, students, or others to your teacher or supervisor.
- Recognize that a supervisor is responsible for students' instruction and behavior support and follow the supervisor's directions

Relationship with students and parents:

- Discuss a student's progress, limitations, and educational program only with the supervising teacher in the appropriate setting.
- Discuss school problems and confidential matters only with appropriate school personnel and when students are absent.
- Do not discriminate based on a student's disability, race, sex, cultural background, religion, or sexual orientation.
- Respect the dignity, privacy, and individuality of all students, parents, and staff members.
- Present yourself as a positive role model.
- Use positive behavior support strategies consistent with standards established by the classroom teacher, school, and local district.
- Maintain a professional relationship with students and parents.
- Refrain from personal social media relationships with students and parents.

Supporting Instruction

Become aware of the specific needs of the students you are assigned to work with. Understanding each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals helps eliminate confusion and provides a better understanding of what the expectations are for the student. It is essential to know precisely what each student's limitations are. At the same time, however, it is equally important to know each student's abilities to receive the appropriate level of assistance. Students need to be as independent as they can be. "Hovering" over them and doing too much for them can hinder their progress toward independence.

You are always encouraged to give verbal praise to children or high fives for good work. Be mindful of physical contact with students. Hand-over-hand procedures or physical prompts should only occur if you are trained, and the teacher approves such action. Also, never verbally berate a child or call them negative names. If in doubt, ask your supervising teacher for guidance.

Supporting Behavior Intervention Implementation

In some cases, paraeducators are tasked with managing and addressing challenging behaviors exhibited by students. They work closely with teachers and other professionals to implement behavior intervention plans, helping students learn appropriate behavior and cope with emotional challenges.

Paraeducators and Related Services

Related services are defined in IDEA's regulations as transportation and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services required to assist a child with a disability in benefiting from special education. Related services are provided to children with disabilities from birth to age 22. This may include prevention and pre-referral services for students suspected of having an area of need and intervention service for students with special needs who meet the service eligibility criteria under IDEA. The need for Related Services is individual to each student and is prescribed as part of the student's Individual Education Program (IEP). All service provision is based on the student's assessed need and is provided by the mandates of the IEP and state and federal guidelines. The role of related services is to support the unique needs of the student with a disability in their educational program. The foundation of this approach is the collaboration between general education and special education teachers and service providers.

Ten things every paraprofessional needs to know about related services:

1. Related services support a student's access to their curriculum that the classroom teacher cannot provide.
2. Related services programs include audiology (AUD) and the deaf and hard of hearing (DHH); occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), and adapted physical education (APE); speech and language (LAS); vision impairment program (VI); orientation & mobility (O&M); and orthopedic impairment (OI).
3. Related services are given at the time and frequency identified on the student's IEP based on assessed needs.
4. Paraprofessionals have an essential role in supporting students with disabilities and should work under the direction of the related service providers to know what support to provide.
5. Paraprofessionals should develop sensitivity to the specific disability exhibited by the student and respect and maximize the student's total need for independence (i.e., not to do everything for the student).
6. Paraprofessionals should ask specific questions of the related services provider(s) to know what to do or say to support the student's skill development.
7. Paraprofessionals should expand opportunities for skill development outside the classroom (i.e., on the playground, lunchroom, or the locker room).
8. On the playground, the paraprofessional can help the nonverbal child use an alternative augmentative communication (AAC) device to ask for a turn at bat; help the child in the wheelchair play basketball; help the child who is hard of hearing focus on the direction of the game; help the child who is visually impaired get around the playground.
9. In the lunchroom, the paraprofessional can help the nonverbal child use his or her communication system to make a food choice; help the child with acceptable motor delays use the techniques designed by the occupational therapist to open a milk carton; help the child who is hard of hearing, find a quiet place to talk to his friends, and help the blind child use braille to choose food.
10. During physical education (PE), the paraprofessional working with a student can provide supervision for a student and assist with dressing and opening lockers; attend the PE class and participate with the student, providing the necessary motor support, providing assistance to the PE teacher.

Additional Duties When Working with a Teacher

- Make instructional aids.
- Put up students' work for display.
- Create bulletin boards.
- Encourage students to keep the learning environment clean.
- Operate audio/visual equipment and assistive technology equipment.
- Prepare lesson material (easel, clay, finger paint, and other project supplies).
- Participate in discussions and lessons.

Effective Behavior Support Techniques

- Students should be taught behavioral expectations.
- Students should be reinforced for rule-following behavior.
- Be firm; communicate that you mean what you say.
- To increase compliance, use clear commands with less than five words in the sentence.
- Offer choices.
- Reinforce attempts to comply (shaping behaviors) consistently; Follow through with all discipline and reward situations.
- Give immediate feedback; encourage students to correct mistakes.
- Let the students know when they do well; show enthusiasm.
- At all times, encourage students to think through situations and be independent.
- Talk to students regarding specific behaviors, not about the student.

Communicating with Students

Practical communication skills are essential with students with disabilities.

- Make sure only one person gives instructions.
- Use simple words and sentences to give directions.
- Good Example: "Sit in your seat."
- Poor Example: "Settle down right now!"
- Provide structured choices where the student can choose from two preferred options. For example, "Would you like to finish your assignment or participate in the group activity?"
- Allow time for the student to respond to the directions or questions.
- If necessary, repeat the directions calmly.
- Avoid hurting feelings.
- Model appropriate behavior
- Reinforce appropriate behavior.
- Use good judgment in what you say around or about students.
- Be patient and supportive.
- Assist students only as required.
- Develop a strategy to communicate with students who do not speak.

What is Reinforcement, and Why is it Important?

Would you go to work if you did not get a paycheck? Probably not. Then, you should not expect a student to work without a paycheck, either. The paycheck is reinforcement. Reinforcement happens after a behavior that will increase the behavior in the future. Reinforcement can take many forms, such as praise, laughter, tokens, etc.

For many children, praise, approval, and finishing something reinforce things. However, for some children with disabilities, those things are not reinforced. You and your teacher must find what is reinforcing for the students in your class. It would be best to reinforce behaviors you want to see more of, such as appropriate communication, social engagement, task completion, compliance, listening, etc.

Reinforcement is the key to increasing behaviors. Think about your behavior. When you tell a funny joke, and everyone laughs, you will likely say that joke again. When a child asks politely and appropriately for juice, and you give them the juice right away, along with praise and a smile, they are likelier to ask politely and appropriately in the future.

Why is This Child Being Aggressive?

Behavior always serves a purpose, even aggression. If a behavior is not successful, eventually, the behavior stops. When an elevator is broken, you usually press the button a few times and then give up and take the stairs. Pressing the button is not successful, so you stop. Aggression is resulting in something beneficial for the child. It is giving them attention, getting them out of an undesirable situation, getting an item, and giving them some sensory input. Watching a child be aggressive towards others or himself can be challenging. If you view aggression as communication, you can begin to develop strategies to decrease the aggression.

Take note of what typically happens before and after the aggression occurs. Are there certain situations where aggression is more likely? Does time of day play a role in how often aggression occurs? If aggression frequently occurs when the child is not getting attention, such as when you are working with other students, that may be a sign that aggression is happening to get attention. If every time the child is aggressive, people give him preferred items, such as an iPad or food, to try to get him to stop, aggression may be occurring to get access to those items. It makes sense that if the child does not have a way to ask for these things appropriately, he has no other options.

When you understand why aggression is occurring, you can take steps to decrease it. The first and most crucial step is to teach the child appropriate ways to communicate what they want. For nonverbal children, consider using visuals or pictures. Make sure the communication method is easy and that they can do it.

How You May (Accidentally) Increase Problem Behaviors

Very often, teachers and paraeducators unintentionally increase problem behaviors. They do not realize what they are doing, which can be terrible. You need to ensure you are not accidentally causing and increasing problem behaviors.

What does **NOT** work for Attention Behaviors:

Verbal reprimands, threats, yelling, lectures, etc., because you are giving the child exactly what they want: attention. Don't worry; they aren't "getting away" with the behavior if you don't yell at them or correct them. They are getting away with it when you do because they are getting what they want: your attention. Work on this with your staff. This is a hard habit to break, but you must!

What does **NOT** work for ESCAPE Behaviors:

Time out: do not use time out/breaks right after bad behavior, long lectures, etc. - make sure that the student is only getting a break when using an appropriate way of asking. No time out. Time out is giving them exactly what they want. They get out of work. Do not use time out with escape behaviors because they will keep using the problem behaviors to get precisely what they want.

There are some situations where you may need to reinforce a behavior.

Safety: This is the end all be all. When the safety of the student, other students, or staff is at risk, all bets are off. It does not matter if you are reinforcing the problem behavior if you prevent someone from getting hurt.

Disruption is too high: Sometimes, the behaviors are so disruptive that you have no choice but to intervene; for example, having a tantrum in the middle of a graduation ceremony. Sometimes, you must weigh out the benefits.

Using Planned Ignoring in the Classroom

Some behaviors are done to get attention. It might not always be good attention. Some students like getting negative attention, such as reprimands. One effective intervention for these types of attention behaviors is called planned ignoring. It is a simple concept: The behavior is reinforced by attention. If you remove attention, the student will no longer get anything out of the behavior and will stop.

Planned ignoring happens by simply ignoring the inappropriate response. When the student does inappropriate behavior, do not provide attention for a response. Do not look at the student, do not tell them to stop, and do not make eye contact.

Sometimes, this may feel odd to you. You may feel like you are letting the child “get away with the behavior.” They are not getting away with it. Remember, the behavior is communication. Reprimanding or yelling is not going to help. It will only make it worse. It gives them exactly what they want and further increases this problem behavior.

Sometimes, when this intervention is used, there may be a temporary increase in behaviors and aggression. Think about when an elevator button breaks. You press it once, and you press it again. Then what do you do? You jam and jam on the button, thinking that the strength and frequency of your pushes will pull that elevator down toward you. With planned ignoring, the behavior will likely get worse immediately.

Withstand the increase. Providing attention to increased behaviors will only teach students to escalate their behaviors. The increase will be temporary. Brave the storm and ensure you are not paying attention to the behavior.

References

Los Angeles Unified School District, Special Education Paraprofessional Handbook, 2020

Autism Helper.com, Paraprofessional Training Manual for a Special Education Classroom, 2024

Characteristics of Disabilities and Instructional Strategies

The following information is meant to serve only as an introduction to students with special needs. Each student will have unique needs and may not fit the general descriptions, nor will they be educated similarly. Talk in depth with your supervising teacher to learn how to work with each student. The overall goal of each student is to develop skills that will enable them to function as independently as possible in society and the least restrictive educational setting and in society.

Guidelines worth remembering:

- Treat each child as an individual.
- Be kind, consistent, and firm.
- Allow each student to be as independent as possible.
- Be positive with each student! Give frequent positive feedback.
- Ask your teacher to demonstrate new tasks or skills.

Autism (AUT)

Autism is a developmental disability that significantly affects verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction. Autism is usually evident by age three and adversely affects a child's educational performance.

General Characteristics:

- Communication problems (for example, with the use or comprehension of language)
- Difficulty relating to people, things, and events
- Playing with toys and objects in unusual ways
- Difficulty adjusting to changes in routine or to familiar surroundings
- Repetitive body movements or behavior

Instructional Strategies:

- Implement a highly structured and predictable schedule.
- Provide time to prepare if schedule changes.
- Be consistent with students.
- Allow enough time for the student to respond.
- Give lots of praise.

Emotional Disturbance (ED)

Emotional Disturbance is a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance.

General Characteristics:

- Inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
- An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.
- Emotional disturbance includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to socially maladjusted children unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance.

Instructional Strategies:

- Be very consistent when dealing with behaviors.
- Learn what might trigger a student's non-compliant behavior and work with the student to de-escalate any problems.
- Learn, use, and follow the student's Behavior Intervention Plan.
- Check with the teacher to know what to do when behaviors occur.
- NEVER use physical restraint unless trained and approved by the supervising teacher.

Remember, the student misbehaves because they have a disability; they may or may not be able to control the behavior voluntarily.

- Help the student to determine both positive and negative behavior.
- Don't hold grudges or take issues personally; start each day with a "clean slate."
- Continue to show respect to the student despite continued behaviors.
- Allow enough time for the student to respond.
- Give lots of praise.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH)

Deafness is a hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification, and that adversely affects a child's educational performance. Hearing impairment means an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child's educational performance but that is not included in the definition of deafness.

General Characteristics:

- Language and speech delay
- Different voice characteristics
- Misunderstand information presented
- Difficulty understanding concepts that are not concrete
- Takes things literally

Instructional Strategies:

- Use as many visual cues as possible.
- Speak clearly and at an average pace.
- Face the student when talking.
- Get the child's attention before speaking.
- Make sure the child is seated close to the speaker.
- Allow enough time for the student to respond.
- Give lots of praise.

Specific Learning Disability (SLD)

Learning disability is a general term that describes specific kinds of learning problems. It can cause a person to have trouble understanding and using particular skills. The skills most often affected are reading, writing, listening, speaking, reasoning, and math. Students may have poor achievement in one or more academic areas. They may have difficulty processing information either visually or through spoken language. The specific learning disability varies from person to person.

General Characteristics:

- Usually average to above average intelligence
- Distractible / easily frustrated
- Low self-esteem

Instructional Strategies:

- Teach the student compensation strategies.
- Allow extra time.
- Use the students' strengths to work on problematic areas.
- Allow enough time for the student to respond.
- Give lots of praise.

Intellectual Disability (ID)

Intellectual Disability means significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, which exists concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifests during the developmental period. It adversely affects a child's educational performance.

General Characteristics:

- Difficulty communicating with others
- Often needs assistance with taking care of personal needs (dressing, bathing, going to the bathroom)
- Difficulty with reasoning and judgment
- Impacted social skills (manners, knowing the rules of conversation, getting along in a group, playing a game)
- Delays in reading, writing, and basic math
- Difficulty with skill retention and delays in processing

Instructional Strategies:

- Keep instructions concrete.
- Provide lots of practice opportunities.
- Demonstrate to students; don't just tell them.
- Allow students to be as independent as possible.
- Allow enough time for the student to respond.
- Give lots of praise.

Multiple Disabilities (MD)

Multiple disabilities mean concomitant impairments such as intellectual disability and blindness or intellectual disability and orthopedic impairment, the combination of which causes severe education needs.

General Characteristics:

- Limited speech or communication
- Difficulty in essential physical mobility
- Tendency to forget skills through disuse
- Trouble generalizing skills from one situation to another
- A need for support in major life activities

Instructional Strategies:

- Respect each student's dignity.
- Learn how each student communicates.
- Celebrate current skills and accomplishments.
- Allow enough time for the student to respond.
- Give lots of praise.

Orthopedic Impairment (OI)

Orthopedic impairment means a severe orthopedic impairment that adversely affects the child's educational performance. This includes impairments caused by a congenital anomaly, impairments caused by diseases, and impairments from other causes, such as amputations, cerebral palsy, or spina bifida.

General Characteristics:

- Hard to control limbs
- Involuntary movements
- May need assistance with toileting, eating, and general life skills

Instructional Strategies:

- Remove or accommodate barriers for students.
- Allow students to be as independent as possible.
- Speak to a person at eye level.
- Allow enough time for students to respond.
- Give lots of praise.

Speech/Language Impairment (SLI)

Speech and language disorders refer to articulation, abnormal voice, fluency, or language disorders. Examples include simple sound substitutions, abnormal voice quality, dysfluent rate or rhythm of speech, the inability to understand or use language, or difficulty using the oral-motor mechanism for functional speech.

General Characteristics:

- Improper use of words and their meanings
- Inability to express ideas verbally
- Inappropriate grammatical patterns
- Reduced vocabulary
- Inability to follow directions

Instructional Strategies:

- Model good speech and language at or slightly above the student's level.
- Don't talk to students.
- Encourage student.
- Ask the student to repeat if you did not understand.
- Allow enough time for students to respond.
- Give lots of praise.
- Work with a student or a small group on facts to reinforce skills.
- Monitor small group work.
- Prepare daily positive feedback reports.
- Assist students in using clay, finger paint, woodworking, etc.
- Check on goal setting and provide feedback to students.
- Help students use reading labs, manipulative math materials, etc.