



## PROJECT ACCESS FACT SHEET #15



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### THE PARAPROFESSIONAL'S ROLE IN CURRICULUM ADAPTATION

Ellen was recently hired to be a Paraprofessional for a student with autism. At first, she was excited and enthusiastic but somewhat intimidated. Ellen had a high school education and had not been in a school building since her two grown children were young. She wasn't sure what they meant by autism, but she had seen some TV shows about it and it seemed interesting. A few weeks into the job, Ellen felt much different. She was responsible for the student all day with hardly any breaks. Ellen became very exhausted and was not sure she was doing what she was supposed to do. The teachers would give her scraps of information. Ellen knew that when she was in class, she was supposed to adapt the curriculum for him. But what did that mean? Sometimes the Special Education teacher handed her work to do with the student and at other times, Ellen came up with ideas herself. She really liked working with the student, but she desperately needed help.

What is wrong with this picture? Many times even experienced teachers feel inadequately trained in curriculum adaptation, but we frequently give this task to our least experienced personnel. Paraprofessionals can assist in designing and implementing curriculum adaptations, but the responsibility for curriculum decisions lies with the student's teachers.

The initial decisions on curriculum adaptations occur at the IEP meeting. At that meeting, parents and school personnel negotiate the general adaptation policy. This includes an assistive technology, additional support personnel, percentage of time spent in special services, special discipline procedures, adaptations in the way the teacher presents information or the way the student demonstrates knowledge, modifications of the environment, modified school day, special transportation, and/or any special grading procedures. The Paraprofessional should either be present at this meeting or have a complete briefing on the decisions, including a written copy of those adaptations for which she/he is responsible.

Immediate decisions on curriculum adaptations should occur at regular team meetings. Sometimes the team consists of the regular education teacher and the special education teacher getting together to make plans for the curriculum for the next week or month. Sometimes the team includes other support personnel and the parents. At these meetings the regular teacher shares what is to be the class content for all the students. The team, using the principles laid down in the IEP, plan specific adaptations that will be meaningful for the student.

The Para should attend these meetings, if possible. Again, if she/he is not able to be present, a complete briefing is important, including written notes to follow.

Within the day-to-day functioning of the classroom, the teacher is responsible for making curriculum adaptation decisions. However, as the Para becomes familiar with the way curriculum adaptations are planned, she/he will be able to take more responsibility and need less direction.

The Para may soon be able to make judgments about whether the student would be able to participate in the same activity as the other students without any adaptations. She/he will quickly see when the student might partially participate given additional support or modification of the materials. The Para might think of ways that the same materials the others are using could be used to work on a project on the student's skill level. There will be times when the para might suggest to the teacher that the activity is not beneficial to the student and she/he might use that time better to work on an individual IEP goal with similar or different materials.

At times the Para might take a small group of students to work together, thus giving the student with a disability an opportunity for interaction. When Para assist other students, they create good will toward themselves and students with disabilities. The Para must learn to fade out of the picture as much and as soon as possible to allow the student with a disability to become more independent and to allow peer friendships and assistance to occur. There is a delicate balance for the student with disabilities--having enough support to be successful, but still doing as much as possible for him/himself.

Paraprofessionals can become very competent at doing on the spot adaptations that allow the student to participate successfully in a classroom, but the Para must be fully informed and supported by the student's professional team. Being a Paraprofessional is a complex and challenging job. We appreciate those individuals who choose to assist us in the role of teaching children.

*See also FACT SHEET #16: "Practical Tips on Adapting Curriculum for Diverse Learners"*

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