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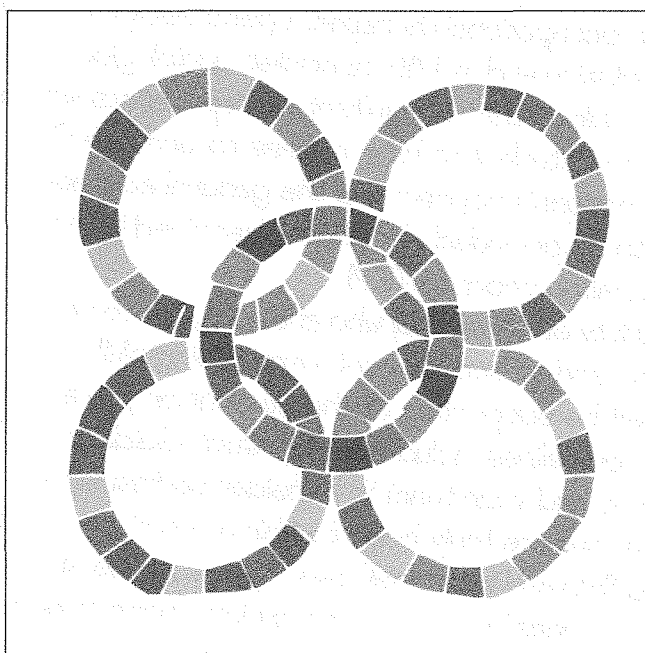
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Quick-Guide #18

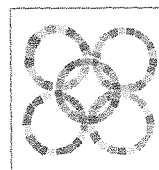
Getting the Most out of Support Services

Susan W. Edelman, Michael F. Giangreco, Ruth E. Dennis,
Patricia A. Prelock, Marie MacLeod, and Marie Christine Potvin



Quick-Guides to Inclusion
Ideas for Educating Students with Disabilities, Second Edition

Michael F. Giangreco & Mary Beth Doyle
Editors



Dear Teacher,

When a student with disabilities becomes a member of your class, that student's success and yours as the teacher may require support from additional professional personnel who have specialized skills that complement the skills you bring to the job. The type and number of support personnel will vary and be individually determined based on the student's needs. Typically, these personnel include special educators, related service providers (e.g., physical therapist, occupational therapist, speech-language pathologist, psychologist, orientation and mobility specialist, audiologist, assistive technology specialist), and possibly other consultants or specialists whose involvement are required for the student to have access to, and benefit from, both their individualized educational program and the general education curriculum. All of the services to be provided should be described in the student's individualized education program (IEP).

Having a variety of personnel who are assigned to support a student and who have diverse, and to some extent, overlapping skill sets, doesn't ensure that the impact will be supportive of the student or you as the classroom teacher. The ten guidelines included in this Quick-Guide are offered as a framework for you and your team to consider so that support services are provided in ways that are truly helpful within the context of your classroom. Each guideline is followed by a brief description. At the end you will find a list of "Selected References" if you wish to explore more in-depth information on this topic. In the meantime, this Quick-Guide should facilitate your first steps in getting the most out of support services.

Good luck!

Susan, Michael, Ruth, Patty, Marie, and Marie Christine



GUIDELINES-AT-A-GLANCE

1. Be Aware of What Support Services Have to Offer
2. Approach Support Service Providers as Collaborators
3. Agree on Expectations and Goals for Students
4. Clarify Your Role as Teacher
5. Know the Types of Supports You Need and Want
6. Distinguish Between “Extra Hands” and Specialized Help
7. Help Support Service Providers Understand Your Classroom
8. Participate in Scheduling Support Services
9. Have a Process for Effective Communication
10. Evaluate the Effectiveness of Support Services



Be Aware of What Support Services Have to Offer

As a classroom teacher, you may have had previous experiences working with special education support personnel, or this could be a relatively new experience. In either case, it is important to become knowledgeable about what your team members have to contribute to the team, both professionally and personally. It is equally important for support personnel to learn about the professional and personal skills you bring to the table.

To become familiar with the professional skills of other team members, we suggest you become knowledgeable on two levels. First, it is important to understand the scope and roles of various disciplines, as well as how those roles differ from, and overlap with, other disciplines. For example, what do occupational therapists or orientation and mobility specialists do? How do the activities of these disciplines differ from, or overlap with, other disciplines such as physical therapy or special education? Your knowledge of other disciplines can be increased through face-to-face interactions and by sharing written information from your professional organizations or other sources. Second, we suggest that team members share their unique professional abilities. Within professional disciplines, there may be specialization through professional development or specific professional certification in a particular approach or area of expertise. For example, the speech-language pathologist on your team may have specialized skills in augmentative communication systems or computer applications, while the psychologist may have a background in positive behavior support approaches to deal with challenging behaviors. In choosing which of the specialized skills you would like to incorporate in your classroom, the team should consider the level of evidence behind these specialized skills and approaches.

On a more personal level, you might be surprised to find out how handy knowledge of interests, hobbies, sports, or community activities (e.g., gardening, woodworking, music, art, baseball) can be throughout the team process. Personal interests or skills can be hidden assets that, if known and applied, might enhance the capacity of the team. We suggest you share this information with your team as well. Becoming aware of both the professional and personal knowledge and talents of the various team members should provide a foundation for the team to more fully understand each other and work together.



Approach Support Service Providers as Collaborators

We can't expect every team member to have specialized skills in all areas—that's why we need to rely on each other. Working together as a team allows professionals to identify new skills they will need to obtain through training, technical assistance, or consultation from others with specialty skills.

Team members have been identified because they have important contributions to bring to the team. While we look to support service personnel to provide needed expertise, we may inadvertently establish unproductive hierarchies within the team if we always defer to specialists. Reliance on an “expert” model can create unrealistic expectations among team members and interfere with the very collaboration that is so essential to solving many of the complex challenges presented by students. Yes, many support service personnel may be more or less “experts” in their areas, but you, too, have unique knowledge and skills to bring to the team's efforts.

Traditional skills associated with particular disciplines and the actual skills of individual team members vary widely, so we cannot assume the nature of the expertise of any team member. We also cannot assume support service personnel have been trained to provide school-based services, given that there are many subspecialties within each discipline. For example, a physical therapist may have spent several years working with senior citizens or in a sports medicine clinic and may not necessarily possess the knowledge and skills needed to work with a wide range of children with disabilities in general education settings. A speech-language pathologist may have general knowledge and skills in the assessment and treatment of children with language disorders, but may not have expertise in augmentative communication for students who are essentially nonverbal and require a specific communication system.

Even when a professional's focus has been school-based services for children with disabilities, the same issues may exist. For example, a special educator who is trained and accustomed to working with students who have learning disabilities may be asked to support a student who has severe or multiple disabilities. These types of distinctions only reinforce the importance of sharing expertise to compensate for each other's gaps in knowledge and define our roles as collaborators. Through collaboration you can avoid the trap of simply dividing up roles into slots of expertise and deferring to one another.



Agree on Expectations and Goals for Students

Many general education teachers grapple with the question, “What am I expected to teach the student with disabilities who is part of my class?” When team members do not share the same expectations about what the student will learn or who should do the teaching, it can be a source of conflict. It is vital for the classroom teacher to play a substantive and ongoing role in the instruction of the student with disabilities.

The first step to getting the team on the same wavelength is to reach a consensus about the components of the student’s educational program. This should include a small set of individualized priority learning outcomes (i.e., individualized education program [IEP] goals) and a set of additional learning outcomes that reflect access to the general curriculum in the classroom. General supports that are provided *for* the student should also be determined. Sometimes support service providers suggest having their own set of goals; this should raise a red flag! Separate goals lead to confusion, fragmentation, and disjointed services because team members are moving in different or individual directions rather than agreeing to head in the same direction. Having separate goals for each discipline is a recipe for disaster! In order to truly function as a team, the team members need to support and encourage the student’s progress throughout their educational program by having shared student goals.

Once the team has agreed on a student’s educational program components, it’s not uncommon for some teachers to feel anxious about how they will address the student’s individualized goals within class activities. Through activity-based experiences, students can pursue individualized goals at appropriate levels in varying curriculum areas. For example, during a Social Studies board game about world geography, the student with disabilities might be working on geography goals at a different level or might be pursuing learning outcomes from other curriculum areas (e.g., communication, social skills) via the geography activity. Remember, you are part of a team and are not expected to do this alone.

As a teacher, you are familiar with the requirements for grade-level content, assessments, and individual student progress reporting. The team needs this information to determine how, when, and who will assess student progress. Clear and shared expectations for both the student and support personnel will help your team function more smoothly.



Clarify Your Role as Teacher

As the classroom teacher, you have many responsibilities to all the students in your class, such as planning, implementing, monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting instruction. Doing these same things for your students who have disabilities is also part of your role. The basic principles of teaching and learning are the same, regardless of the labels assigned to children. Therefore, with the right kinds of support, a capable teacher can teach just about any student. Support may come in the form of specially trained personnel (e.g., a physical or speech-language pathologist) or from others such as peers, paraprofessionals, other school personnel, or volunteers.

The role of related services providers is to assist the student with disabilities in accessing instruction. For example, a physical therapist can assist you in appropriately positioning a student with physical disabilities to ensure participation in class activities and account for disability-related characteristics. Your role is to co-design the curriculum and instruction with the special educators. The related services providers are there to assist with their specialized knowledge and skills when necessary. As the instructional leader, it is your responsibility to make your support needs known to the team so the appropriate related services providers can be called upon for support and you can work together to assist your students with disabilities.

If you have a paraprofessional who is providing assistance, this support is most effective when the classroom and special education teacher maintain the responsibilities to design, implement, and evaluate curriculum and instruction. Paraprofessionals may assist you in this work, but they should not become the de-facto “teachers” for the students with disabilities. Several guiding questions might help you to clarify your role versus the paraprofessional’s role. Do you:

- Plan instruction for the student with disabilities to about the same extent as other students?
- Spend as much time teaching the student with disabilities as other students?
- Spend time with the student with disabilities during non-instructional times?
- Play a primary role in evaluating the progress of the student with disabilities?

If your answers to these questions are “yes” then you are being the teacher for all of your students. If there are any “no” answers, ask your team to help you to balance your role as the teacher of all students in your class, with them as support personnel.



Know the Types of Supports You Need and Want

A mismatch between what teachers want from support personnel and what they get is a common problem. For example, you want someone to demonstrate a teaching method but instead you are handed an article to read, or you need certain materials and instead you are invited to a meeting. It is important to clarify for yourself and your team the types, content, and intensity of supports you need and want on an ongoing basis. Listed here are four basic types of supports that you may need at various times.

Resource support includes: 1) tangible materials (e.g., adapted equipment), 2) financial resources (e.g., funds for community-based learning for the student), 3) informational resources (e.g., professional literature), and 4) human resources (e.g., parent volunteers, peer tutors).

Moral support includes interactions that validate the worth of people's efforts, by sending the message, "You are headed in a positive direction—keep going." This includes active listening characterized by nonjudgmental acceptance of ideas and feelings. When moral support such as this is provided, enough trust exists between people so that perspectives can be shared without fear of put-downs, criticism, or breaches in confidentiality.

Technical support includes concrete strategies, methods, approaches, and ideas. This can be accomplished through in-service training, staff development activities, peer coaching, collaborative consultation, demonstration, modeling, or problem-solving sessions. Technical assistance results in the acquisition of new skills that can be implemented, adjusted, and re-implemented in a cyclical fashion as necessary to meet student and team member needs.

Evaluation support includes assistance in collecting and presenting information that allows the program and supports for a student with disabilities to be monitored and adjusted. It also provides ways to assess the impact of support services on students, families, and professionals through meaningful methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Being clear about the kind and amount of support you need, as well as what helps and what doesn't help, will facilitate the work of the whole team.



Distinguish Between “Extra Hands” and Specialized Help

When teachers need human resources, it is important to distinguish between the need for someone who has specialized skills and the need for someone who can provide an extra pair of helping hands—both can be important. Making this distinction clear will help ensure that resources are beneficial and efficient.

Sometimes teachers come to rely on support service personnel (e.g., special educators, speech-language pathologists, physical therapists) as an extra pair of helping hands and can feel let down when these support personnel schedule other activities and are not available. If teachers need extra hands, but not necessarily specialized services, we suggest first drawing on natural supports such as classmates, cross-age peer tutors, parent volunteers, or community members.

The next level of human resources may be to hire an instructional assistant for the classroom. Sometimes teachers really want and need the knowledge and skills of specialized support personnel to solve problems, suggest adaptations or accommodations, or demonstrate specific strategies. Teachers should be clear about the type of support that will most benefit the student’s success in the classroom.

Consider the following scenarios as examples to help distinguish between the need for an extra pair of hands and the need for specialized support:

- The instructional assistant is absent, and the teacher needs someone to help run some teacher-planned activities. (helping hands)
- The teacher is having difficulty finding a writing implement that works well for a student with physical disabilities. (specialized support)
- The teacher has planned a field trip to the local science museum and needs assistance supervising the students. (helping hands)

Each time you find yourself needing human resources, ask yourself, “Do I need an extra pair of helping hands, or specialized support?”



Help Support Service Providers Understand Your Classroom

As the only professional staff member in your classroom all the time, no one is in a better position to know the flow of activities and classroom routines better than you—the teacher. Teachers have repeatedly told us that many of the recommendations they receive from support service personnel simply won't work in their general education classes because support service personnel are not sufficiently aware of the classroom context and dynamics (e.g., cooperative groups, class rules, routines, other students).

Even the most skillful consultant needs to apply her individual skills within the context of the classroom to be most effective. Although we hope that support service personnel will become increasingly aware of the importance of learning and understanding the classroom context and dynamics, this needs to be a primary concern of every teacher who hopes to receive meaningful support.

First, invite support personnel in to observe your classroom so that their recommendations can align with your classroom routines and expectations. Then generate a list that can be posted in your classroom or shared with team members regarding the types of contextual information you think are most critical for people to know. For example, a student approached a support service staff member to ask for the answer to a question on a class assignment. The support service provider thought she was being helpful when she answered the student's question. She didn't know that the teacher had established a protocol for students to first "look it up" and then "ask a classmate" before asking a teacher, who would then guide students to the information rather than simply telling them the answer. Although the support services provider's intentions were good, they were a mismatch in this context.

What information do you want support service personnel to be aware of in your classroom? Do you prefer that support staff jump right into activities with students or that they observe and join at a transition point that you designate? What class governance rules and routines should they be aware of? Do they know, for example, that every Friday afternoon you have a special science activity? When all team members have an understanding of your classroom, they can learn quickly how best to interact with you and the students in your class in ways that align with your established routines.



Participate in Scheduling Support Services

Teachers sometimes tell us that they feel they are at the mercy of the many support service providers' schedules. The result is that support service providers may show up in the classroom at inopportune times.

Sometimes the presence of support service personnel can become overwhelming or distracting when they arrive in groups, whether planned or unplanned. This potential disruption to the classroom can be avoided with collaborative team planning.

Although balancing the scheduling needs of many people is always a challenge, we suggest that teachers be proactive about: 1) the purpose of the support service provider's visit (e.g., to observe the student's participation in a large-group language arts activity and collaborate on problem-solving ideas for meaningful inclusion), 2) when it would be most helpful for support personnel to be in the classroom (e.g., particular times of day or days of the week), 3) when they want to sit down and meet with support service providers (e.g., during fourth period when the students are in physical education, during recess, or after school), 4) whether or not they want more than one support service person in the room at a time (e.g., overlapping support service personnel may or may not be beneficial or necessary), and 5) what actions and follow-up will take place as a result of the visit (e.g., development of an action plan or follow-up activities).

Of course, the solutions to these and other scheduling-related problems will undoubtedly be different across situations, requiring individualization and flexibility. Some classroom teachers prefer to have the student's special educator arrange and coordinate the visits of support service providers. Even if this is agreeable to the classroom teacher, all of the aforementioned points are still relevant to consider and act on. Being proactive about scheduling support services can ensure that services are used most efficiently and, we hope, that teachers will find the involvement of service providers increasingly helpful.



Have a Process for Effective Communication

The hallmark of collaborative teamwork is effective communication among team members. When team members interact with students and other team members on varying schedules, it is often a challenge to share accurate and adequate information with everyone in a timely way. Nothing can undermine your efforts, or the efforts of support personnel, quicker than misunderstandings that come from miscommunication or lack of communication.

Relationship experts all agree that communication is the key to most any interpersonal interactions. So, it is no surprise that a successful team has an established plan or process for effective communication.

When considering interpersonal communication skills and strategies for face-to-face interactions, we recommend team members establish norms, or agreed-upon standards, to guide communication. During formal meetings, norms can be reviewed and adjusted by the team as needed. They might include an effort to practice such skills as active listening, paraphrasing, using language or terms understood by all, and speaking one person at a time.

Norms for informal communication might address the expectation for confidentiality regarding the student and family. Positive working relationships can emerge from communication that is clear, complete, and cordial.

It is equally important to have a process or plan for how best to communicate when team members are not together. Support professionals often have differing schedules, and it is rare for the team to be all in the same place on a day-to-day basis. Decide with your team about best ways to share information about the student, about classroom activities, notes of progress or observations, and so on. Decide with your team if you will use e-mail, phone contacts, a logbook of notes, sub-group meeting minutes, or other strategies.

Keep in mind that all members of the team, including parents, should have equal access to information that affects their interactions with the student while maintaining confidentiality. Your team will work more effectively if you can establish a process to support communication that's clear, complete, accessible, and timely.



Evaluate the Effectiveness of Support Services

Because there are national shortages in many support services (e.g., speech-language pathology, physical therapy), parents and school personnel alike often feel fortunate to have a service available and listed on a student's IEP. We often, however, fail to evaluate whether the service is having the effects we originally intended. Sometimes it is unclear from the IEP just what the intended impact of support services is supposed to be. When this is unclear, support services can become parallel services rather than *related services* as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 as "required to assist a student with disabilities to benefit from special education."

Related services must be both educationally relevant and necessary. This is different than asking, "Can a service help?" The answer to this question will almost always be "Yes." It is not the team's job to provide every conceivable service that might help, but rather to provide those services that are *necessary* for the student to receive an appropriately individualized education.

Once services are provided, we need to continually evaluate their impact. To adequately evaluate support services, we must know: 1) explicitly which parts of the educational program they are intended to support, and 2) the kinds of support approaches being used (e.g., making adaptations, training others, providing individual services, planning for collaboration).

To evaluate these aspects of support services, it is important to ask how the approaches of support personnel are related to the student's educational program and to what extent. Next, we need to ask whether support services have been effective in increasing the student's access to educational opportunities or have had a positive impact on student learning. For example, has the introduction of an augmentative device increased the student's opportunity to respond in morning group, or has the physical therapist's support to the physical education teacher facilitated the student's participation in the physical education class?

Finally, and most importantly, we must consider whether the student's life is better as a result of receiving support services. The team's responses to these and related evaluation questions will provide substantive information to assist with future decisions.

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