AIDES/PARAPROFESSIONALS FOR SCHOOL-AGE STUDENTS

School aides are individuals who assist students and teachers during the school day. Depending on where you live, they may be called paraprofessionals, instructional paraprofessionals, para-educators, educational assistants, instructional assistants, one-o-ones, personal care assistants, TSS (therapeutic support staff), or teacher’s aides.

Aides are usually employees of the school or school district. However, some schools and districts contract with outside organizations to provide aides; in this case, the aide is a contracted employee. An aide may also be a service your child receives through another service system.

As the term one-on-one implies, an aide can be assigned for a particular student. Some classrooms have classroom aides who are there to assist all students in a particular class. If your IEP team determines that your child needs an aide, an aide will be listed as a service or support in your child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Typical roles for an aide include providing assistance with organization (for example, getting materials ready for class, packing up a backpack at the end of the day, organizing notebooks and folders), prompting a student to focus, helping to develop behavioral skills, and assisting with personal care and daily living tasks. In particular, an aide may collect behavioral data if the student has a behavior plan. Some aides are allowed to deliver specialized instruction, under the supervision of a licensed teacher. A certified teacher must be the primary source of instruction for every student, however. The name used for the aide may help you to know the aide’s role. For example, the titles “educational assistant” or “instructional assistant” may imply that the assistant may assist with specialized instruction, while a “personal care assistant” is more focused on supporting students in activities of daily living rather than instructional needs.

Your child may have more than one aide during the day. For example, if your child needs an aide on the school bus, this likely will not be the same person who attends class with your child. However, whenever possible, it is a good idea to have the same aide for school hours. This cuts down on the number of transitions and provides consistency – two strategies that are frequently helpful for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).
If your child has an aide, it is important to continuously monitor how the aide is supporting your child. Overuse of an aide may have unintended effects, such as reduction in the amount of time a student receives direct instruction from a teacher (as opposed to an aide), limitations of peer interactions, increased unwanted behaviors, lack of motivation or self-confidence to work independently, and less student independence and self-advocacy. Remember: an aide should be helping your child to develop skills; the aide’s job is not to do the work for your child.

Over time, the role of the aide should diminish. Whether or not your child has a behavior plan, your child’s aide should be keeping data on how frequently he or she needs to prompt your child and what kind of prompts are needed. For example, if your child needs prompting to get materials out during class, at first your child may require a direct, verbal prompt – “take out a pencil and piece of paper.” Overtime, this may transition to an indirect question – “what should you do now?” and eventually a non-verbal point or other gesture to the materials.

The IEP team should develop a plan to fade aide support over time, including a timeline with systematic reduction in aide assistance and ultimately an exit strategy. The support of an aide in most cases should be only a temporary support, with the ultimate goal being your child’s independence.

Having an aide can be stigmatizing for some students. In elementary school, a good aide may be able to blend into the classroom and be seen as a resource for all students. Aides for students with ASD in middle or high school are less likely to blend in. As a result, your child may resent having an aide as he or she gets older. It is important to talk to your school and your child about this issue, and make sure the amount of time your child spends with a one-on-one aide is appropriate and there is a plan in place to fade the aide’s assistance over time.

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