

Guiding and Supporting Volunteers

(http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/guiding_volunteers.pdf)

Volunteers can be especially helpful working under the direction of the classroom teacher to establish a supportive relationship with students who are having trouble adjusting to school.

Volunteers may help students on a one to one basis or in small groups. Group interactions are especially important in enhancing a student's cooperative interactions with peers. One to one work is often needed to develop a positive relationship with a particularly aggressive or withdrawn student and in fostering successful task completion with a student easily distracted by peers.

Volunteers can help enhance a student's motivation and skills and, at the very least, help counter negative effects that arise when a student has difficulty adjusting to school.

The majority of people who seek out the opportunity to volunteer at school are ready, willing, and able to get into the classroom and interact well with students. These individuals are *naturals*.

All they need is a clear orientation about what is expected, as well as ongoing supervision designed to help them learn to be increasingly effective in working collaboratively with teachers and dealing with problems.

There are some volunteers who are not naturals. Many of these individuals can learn rapidly and be extremely helpful with just a bit of investment of time and effort. The following are some guidelines that may help to avoid losing or prematurely giving up on a potentially valuable volunteer resource.

1. Take some time to appreciate what a volunteer can do. In some cases, it takes a while to see the positive qualities a volunteer can bring to the classroom. Try to work with a volunteer for a few weeks before deciding what (s)he is or isn't able to do. (Obviously, if a volunteer is completely inept, there is little point in keeping him or her on, and steps should be taken to kindly redirect their good intentions.)

(Note: Despite the best of intentions on everyone's part, some volunteers do not work well with students. If a volunteer continues to demonstrate an inability to do so, [s]he may be willing to help with other tasks such as preparing and organizing materials.)

2. Watch for the need to re-clarify points made during the initial orientation. Volunteers have a lot they are trying to learn and remember when they first start. If they are not following-through on points made during the initial orientation, it may be that they didn't, assimilate the information.

3. Initially, some volunteers will need to spend more time observing than working with students. It usually does not take long before most of them will be comfortable with the students and class routines.

4. Initially, some volunteers (like some students) need a little more support and direction. At first, they may need to be told specifically what to do during the class. After they have a little experience and with a little encouragement, they can be expected to show greater initiative.

5. All volunteers need to know the teacher's plan for helping a particular student and to feel they can play a positive role in carrying out that plan. It is important for them to feel they are part of the teaching team. Volunteers who do not understand a teacher's plans tend to get confused and upset, particularly when the teacher must deal with the misbehavior of a student the volunteer is helping. Clarifying the plan and even including a volunteer in planning helps them to feel they are working collaboratively with the teacher.

6. Volunteers need a maximum of positive feedback and a minimum of evaluative criticism. Although they may not be clear about what specifically they are doing wrong, most volunteers are aware that they are not well-trained to work with students. Thus, they tend to interpret the lack of positive feedback from the teacher as an indication that they are not doing very well and often interpret relatively mild negative feedback as severe criticism. Volunteers respond well to daily appreciations; in place of critiques, what seems to work best are comments from the teacher that recognize how hard it is for even trained professionals to deal with some problems -along with suggestions about what to try next.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563 Phone: (310) 825-3634.

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