

10 Qualities of a Great Paraprofessional

What are the qualities of a great paraprofessional? What are the red flags for an unsuccessful placement? For families new to the world of special education, here are 10 character traits to look for in a paraprofessional.

1. **Likes kids unconditionally:** many adults have an idea in their heads of what children should be like, and don't seem to know what to do when children behave outside those expectations. That attitude only generates misery in a paraprofessional's career. A love of children, all children, with all types of abilities, in all situations, is an absolute requirement. An unflappable paraprofessional enjoys being around children and acting as a positive influence in their lives.
2. **Calm:** A paraprofessional's job may be thankless, repetitive and frustrating for long periods, interrupted by meltdowns and medical emergencies. The best paraprofessionals remain calm and patient both in crisis and in tedium. Very few people pull this off successfully, though some can learn with practice.
3. **Organized:** Since many students with special needs lack executive function skills, a big part of a paraprofessional's job is to teach and model organizational skills. That means keeping track of assignments and bathroom breaks, instructing a student about maintaining neatness in a desk or locker, having the right class materials at the right time, and much more.
4. **Team player:** A constant source of stress for paraprofessionals is the tug of war between teachers, administrators, parents and the student. Paraprofessionals follow the instructions of teachers and administrators, but also have to make difficult judgement calls when working one-on-one with a student. Paraprofessionals often act as a go-between, relating concerns and observations to the supervising teacher and to the parents. It's not always clear what is in the student's best interest, and when mistakes are made, paraprofessionals are the team members most likely to lose their jobs. Their role on the team requires thoughtfulness and diplomacy.
5. **Creative:** paraprofessionals are more successful if they have the ability to think outside the box; sometime it can be the only way to work productively with children with special needs. Paraprofessionals need to come up with creative solutions on the spot whenever traditional methods fail, and that happens often in special education.
6. **Knowledgeable:** Most school districts only require a high school diploma for paraprofessionals, and there is no certification process. The paraprofessionals who are more successful are those who have some area of expertise to share with their children; such as sense of playfulness or unrelenting positive encouragement. Other times, paraprofessionals may need to provide more academic support, so knowledge in different school subjects would be more productive.
7. **Intellectually curious:** Paraprofessionals have to be ready to change the way they do things at a moment's notice; they may work with students with different types of special needs at each hour or they may find that traditional methods do not work in a particular situation. They're always looking for a better way to do things!
8. **Knows when to back off:** The best paraprofessionals allow students to develop independence, and encourage interaction with fellow students and the teacher. Instead of guiding the student to the answers, a truly great paraprofessional knows how to remain present or step back while the student figures out the answer for him or herself.
9. **Knows when to step in:** When something is not quite right, a responsible paraprofessional knows how to intervene. Sometimes it is a complex social situation, sometimes an attention issue in class, or even a lesson in life skills.

10. **Positive attitude:** The single most important attribute for a paraprofessional, or anyone working with students who have special needs, is a positive attitude.

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