

Being “less intrusive” means that supports are matched to each individual’s unique needs, with careful and ongoing consideration of those needs and how to move toward independence. In this process, it is important to think of supporting adults as “facilitators” who can help make independence a reality, rather than “helpers”. The following may assist teams in developing a plan to facilitate this.

**Step One:** Schedule team meetings to facilitate/support the fading process.

- The Case Manager, teacher, parent(s) and others involved with the student should meet on a regular basis to evaluate student progress and need for close adult support.
- The supporting adult (paraprofessional, aide, assistant) should be given encouragement, strategies and support for encouraging student independence and stepping back as possible.

**Step Two:** Identify the types and levels of student assistance currently being provided.

- Observational data may need to be collected to accurately identify the types of help and levels of adult support being provided across the entire school day.
- Any staff member who supports the student may also want to provide his/her own input regarding the general levels and types of adult support that he/she has seen being provided.

**Step Three:** Review the assistance currently provided and brainstorming alternatives.

- Use observational data and staff input provided to clarify the current levels of adult support being provided across all subjects and activities, then work as a team to brainstorm less intrusive alternatives.
- It may also be helpful to identify why the student needs that level of adult support for a specific task, then consider what else (other than 1:1 adult help) might help.
- Questions to consider when brainstorming might include:
  - If the student needs 1:1 help from an adult because a lesson is going too fast or seems too difficult, are other modifications needed?
  - If close adult support is for attention or behavior issues--what less intrusive strategies can be tried?
  - Can peer supports be tried instead of relying on the adult for support?
  - Can praise or reinforcement be used to help motivate the student stay on task (instead of an adult continually re-directing the student)?
- Discussing the questions included in the independence and inclusion checklist may help when brainstorming times target for reducing the level of direct adult assistance.
- It may also be helpful to review the tips for Aides/Paraprofessionals about fading support and using appropriate levels of prompting.

**Step Four:** Outline the plan to reduce the types and levels of adult support and assistance provided.

- Specify the criteria for fading measures to be used in a written plan for fading.
- Include information about who will review progress on this fading plan and how often to review.

**Step Five:** Incorporate the plan to reduce adult into the IEP.

- Develop goals and objectives that contain reduced levels of support and prompting to be used as measures of need for close adult support.
- Determine if a specific plan for motivating the student to work as independently as possible needs to be developed and added to the IEP as accommodations or listed as behavioral interventions or a behavior intervention plan (BIP).
- Specify accommodations/modifications to be provided as needed or as requested by student (in place of the direct adult support).
- Indicate the specific activities and times in the day when the student may still require close adult support in the IEP (as a service or elsewhere).

**Step Three Worksheet: Brainstorming Alternatives to Assistance Currently Provided**

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Respondent: \_\_\_\_\_

1. During what routines, activities, time periods, or tasks is it *truly* necessary to be physically next to this student?

- During hallway transitions
- In social situations
- Beginning a task (getting started)
- Completing a new/unfamiliar task
- Helping student organize materials
- If assisting with a specific kind of task (such as writing, reading, etc.); please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- To prevent aggressive behavior
- To address the student if upset or anxious
- Providing cue to refocus the student
- During school arrival or dismissal routine
- While riding to/from school on the bus

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

2. For the skills, activities or time period(s) during which you believe close adult support is necessary, is the goal for this student independence (i.e., done by the student) or *interdependence* (i.e., done with the support of a peer)?

3. What types of cues or prompts do educators typically use with the student and how often?

- Modeling—*frequency*: \_\_\_\_\_
- Indirect or natural cues—*frequency*: \_\_\_\_\_
- Visual cues/supports—*frequency*: \_\_\_\_\_
- Gestures/signals—*frequency*: \_\_\_\_\_
- Verbal prompts—*frequency*: \_\_\_\_\_
- Physical prompts—*frequency*: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Can anyone else provide more natural supports for the student?

5. What next step(s) might reduce the type and level of support given to the student (i.e., move from more intrusive to less intrusive cues; teach the student to use natural cues in the environment; ask questions of the student rather than directly giving the student prompts, etc.)?

6. What material, content, or classroom structures/schedules might need to be developed to allow the student to experience more independence?

**Step Four Worksheet: Outlining a Plan to Reduce the Types and Levels of Support/Assistance Provided**

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Use the data and information gathered with the forms on the previous pages to develop a plan for reducing the types and levels of assistance provided to the student in order to increase independence.

Routine/ Activity	Needs Assistance With	Type of Assistance Currently Provided	Steps to Reduce Level of Assistance	Commitments

**Reflection Activity:** Read the following excerpt and answer the questions that follow with a partner.

### **Perspectives of Students with Disabilities about Paraprofessional Support**

Researchers Stephen Broer, Mary Beth Doyle and Michael F. Giangreco interviewed sixteen young adults who were all supported by paraprofessionals in general education classrooms for some period of time while they were in public school. This study is interesting because, as the authors note, there are no other studies that have sought the perspectives of students with significant disabilities themselves. All of the young adults who participated in the study were verbal and were able to recall and describe events that had happened in the past and what their feelings had been. All but one of the participants had completed school within the five years of the study; the other participant was in the last 2 months of school. The majority of the sixteen participants had attended different high schools; the three who attended the same high school were enrolled in overlapping years.

Researchers report that four themes emerged from the work of the study. Each is interrelated with the others, but all suggest that the relationships between the students and the paraprofessionals assigned to support them were one of their prime and sometimes exclusive relationships while they were in school.

#### **FINDINGS**

##### **1. “It felt a little weird. It felt like having, like a mother”**

Nearly all the paraprofessionals described by the study were women and many were, in fact, old enough to be the parent of the student in question. Feeling like the paraprofessional was acting as a mother was comforting for some, “she was like a mother to me,” but discomforting as well. To have a mother figure is to invite what the authors conclude will be negative perceptions and treatment of students with disabilities. “Mother supports” reinforce stereotypes that individuals with disabilities are child-like and that they need mothering rather than high expectations, effective instruction and supports. Beyond the stereotypes are the equally troubling concerns about fairness and equal treatment of students who may be perceived *and may come to perceive themselves* as somehow less worthy of instructional time and effort as demonstrated in this small, but well-designed study. Study participants also reported believing that having a mother was not appropriate in school and that this dynamic did interfere with developing friendships.

##### **2. “She’s my friend now. She has been for a long time”**

Study participants perceived themselves as very isolated from the regular activities and relationships in their schools. They shared a keen recognition that they were different and often commented that when they were in school they felt like they “didn’t belong”. They remembered desiring to belong and “fit in” but recalled instances of peer rejection and resignation that other students with disabilities were “my kind of people”. These feelings and experiences contributed to the notion that paraprofessionals were *friends* as participants explained the ways in which paraprofessionals filled the companionship void they often felt at school. Most noted that they typically interacted with their paraprofessional more often than with peers. This was especially true of the times when students without disabilities would be interacting primarily with each other. The young adults in the study were able to recognize that their relationships with paraprofessionals did interfere with making conversation and casual opportunities for developing friendships.

##### **3. Protection from Bullying**

Eleven of the young adults in the study reported significant levels of bullying while they were in school. Several of the participants wept while recounting their experiences – still feeling very keenly the hurt experienced as a result of the words and actions of their peers. There was consensus among the study participants that the adults were not only unaware of the amount of bullying experienced by students with disabilities, but that they were also not effective in dealing with bullying. In those instances, participants remembered feeling that in some instances they were teased

because of having a paraprofessional, but also that the paraprofessional would often act as a protector and as an advocate on behalf of the students when they were bullied in school.

#### **4. “The classroom teacher, she didn’t know me very well”**

The young adults who participated in the study reported that most often it was the paraprofessional who interacted with them and was their primary teacher. Participants also related in many instances that they were not important enough to receive the teacher’s attention. Some were told that there were too many other kids in the classroom, or that the teacher was busy with other tasks, or that the teacher couldn’t spend much time with them because “they have a class to teach”. This reinforced both their feelings of isolation as well as their reliance on the paraprofessional for instruction. In many instances the students were grateful for the help they received from the paraprofessional--“She taught me a lot” and “helped me understand what they’re trying to say”.

There were few instances of participants describing the curriculum modified to meet their individual needs. Several participants indicated that often the paraprofessional intervened while the student was still working on the tasks. One of the most common recollections among all of the young adults in the study was that they felt the paraprofessional actually did the work for them, “I didn’t have to do anything. She pretty much did it for me.”

Despite the often positive characterizations the former students recalled in describing the experiences where the paraprofessional was remembered as a parent, a friend, a protector and a primary instructor, the negative implications included:

- The reinforcement of stereotypes about students with disabilities as child-like and not capable.
- A support situation that invites bullying despite the ability of the paraprofessional to intervene.
- Students are isolated from the instructional content and interactions among the students and with the teacher in the classroom.
- Concerns about students receiving adequate instruction from the classroom teacher and possibly a lack of individualized instructional supports from the special education teacher as well.

#### **IMPLICATIONS**

Paraprofessionals can provide invaluable support services to students such as helping a student learn new skills using lessons the teacher has prepared or practice these previously-learned skills. Paraprofessionals also can assist students with a wide variety of tasks, from organization to physical mobility, translation, even job coaching. Exactly how this support is being delivered is something to constantly consider and analyze in order to avoid negative outcomes. As important as educational progress is the opportunity to mature socially and emotionally. This study reaffirms previous observations from the field that the ineffective use of paraprofessional support can increase isolation from peers and decrease the opportunity to experience and learn from the natural “flow” of everyday events and socialization, which is part of the public school experience for all students.

Research referenced: *Perspectives of Students with Intellectual Disabilities About Experiences with Paraprofessional Support*. Stephen M. Broer, University of Vermont, Mary Beth Doyle, St. Michael's College, Michael F. Giangreco, University of Vermont. Published in *Exceptional Children*, Vol.71, No. 4, pp. 415-430.

#### **REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What have you done when working with students to avoid becoming a “barrier” to social interactions with peers?
2. Have you found any strategies effective for facilitating the “ownership” of all students by the classroom teacher in order to avoid inadvertently encouraging an overdependence on adult supports?
3. What might you recommend doing to foster a sense of confidence in your student’s own abilities and avoid creating a “learned helplessness”?