

A Few Thoughts on Classroom Placements

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Many of the children with whom our Learning Community works have experienced some form of trauma and/or live in a constant state of change (people, meals, bedtime, rules, attention, affection, etc.) The stressors in their lives make it difficult to develop cognitive, emotional, and social skills, let alone forge strong attachments with others. It is imperative that their experience in the Head Start, Healthy Start, Relief Nursery, or other setting provide a stable, supportive environment in which they can feel safe and begin to thrive.

Volunteer placements in the classroom setting demand extra care and attention. The stability afforded by consistent relationships with staff and volunteers helps children feel secure and learn to trust. Healthy adult-child interactions develop skills and patterns of behavior that promote success in school and in life.

What can we do to improve the odds that classroom placements (i.e., working directly with children) will be successful?

Talk with the volunteer about the different types of classes, the developmental issues for that age group and specific collective of students, and the intervention strategies employed. This discussion can determine the volunteer's interests and prepare him/her for behaviors that might emerge. Where possible, encourage the volunteer to observe the slate of activities in one or more classrooms.

Then encourage the volunteer and a classroom teacher to have a dialog in which they share:

- The teacher's expectations of the volunteer
- The names and special needs of the children
- Information about the structure, "rules," and timing of classroom activities
- The teacher's approach to address selected behaviors (e.g., extra attention with a child who is quietly dissociating)
- The volunteer's prior experience, transferable skills, interests, and motivations
- A day-in-the-life of the typical classroom volunteer



Ideally, classroom volunteers commit to at least one full class period (3 hours) per week. Our Learning Community has experimented with shorter time commitments – e.g., to support corporate volunteer programs that allow one hour of paid community service per week. When there is an outside coordinator who ensures that volunteers keep their commitments, the arrangement has worked well. It has also worked well for baby boomers who may be reluctant to spend an entire morning or afternoon at a Center. *[Boomers have proven to be highly reliable when making these commitments!]*

Teachers may be reluctant to having volunteers “swoop in for an hour per week.” They may be concerned that it would make for tough transitions for the children while adding too little value. But what we’ve learned is: Positive, consistent interaction doesn’t have to be lengthy... it just has to be positive and consistent! As one volunteer remarked: *“In the beginning, I wasn’t even sure if an hour a week would make a difference. But I soon realized that the children just wanted me to be there. To them that was what mattered. Just being there.”* As a function of this realization, she decided to volunteer two hours per week because “the classroom needed her.”



Direct service with children does not have to be a one-size-fits-all proposition. There are several variations on the classroom volunteer opportunity, including:

- Working one-on-one with students – e.g., serving as a “Reading Pal”
- Working with a small group in an activities area – e.g., a “Learning Zone” focused on art, drama, science, etc.
- Leading the whole class in an activity for 15-minutes – e.g., nature-based curriculum in an outdoor garden
- Participating in less structured time – e.g., Family Nights, short-term respite care, special events

After considering the available options, a prospective volunteer may say: *“I don’t think I could work with children in such a structured way”,* or *“I would take a long time to get up off the floor because of my knees.”* That individual may still have a strong desire to work with children. Don’t let the opportunity to connect them with a meaningful volunteer experience pass you by! Help him or her find another position within your organization (if available), or provide a referral to a partner. Possibilities include:

- Public libraries – e.g., “story time”
- Public schools with pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and/or first grade programs
- SMART (“Start Making A Reader Today”)
- Children’s Museum