



# Basics 101

## An Introductory Training for Paraprofessionals Supporting Students Who are Blind/Visually Impaired

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**NATIONAL BRAILLE ASSOCIATION**

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## Contents

<b>Welcome to Basics 101 .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Supporting Students Who Are Blind / Visually Impaired .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Workshop Take-aways.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>TYPICAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF VI PARAEDUCATORS .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Paraprofessional Educator / Paraeducator .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The Star Thrower .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Hand-under-Hand Guidance .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>19 Ways to Step Back (Poster) .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>19 Ways to Step Back.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Do's and Don'ts When Interacting with a Person who is Blind.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Thank You!.....</b>	<b>17</b>



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## Welcome to Basics 101

### Supporting Students Who Are Blind / Visually Impaired

When someone asks, “what do you do for work?” How do you explain your job?

Are you a paraprofessional? A paraeducator? A classroom aide? A special education assistant? You don’t really know or aren’t really sure of your role?

You are important! In fact, aside from the teacher, YOU are probably the most important part of any student’s scholastic career. If you are supporting a student who is visually impaired, or even blind, chances are you are supporting access to the curriculum. You are providing access for the student in his or her own environment. You are encouraging the student to learn how to do things for themselves, not doing the work of the student. You are facilitating independence! The students you serve can only reap the benefits of your efforts!

This workshop will briefly explore the role of the paraprofessional who supports students who are visually impaired. We will touch on the many aspects and considerations of what one should know when working with visually impaired students, however, it is merely an overview. We would need much more time than a workshop of a few hours can cover. If you can take away just a few morsels from this workshop, you will be better prepared to serve the students who so desperately depend on you to facilitate learning, understanding, and acceptance.

### Workshop Take-aways:

- ➔ Have background knowledge on visual impairments and the ECC for Blind and Visually Impaired students
- ➔ Understand your role as a paraprofessional
- ➔ Understand the role of other service providers
- ➔ Be knowledgeable in:
  - Courtesy Rules of Blindness – “Blind Etiquette” and supporting social interaction
  - Supporting O & M needs of student
  - Supporting access in the classroom
  - Assisting IEP teams with communication and progress monitoring

## TYPICAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF VI PARAEDUCATORS

### Paraprofessional Educator / Paraeducator

#### NOUN

1. a person trained to assist a doctor, lawyer, teacher, or other professional, but not licensed to practice in the profession.
2. a trained aide who assists a professional person (such as a teacher).

A **paraprofessional educator**, alternatively known as a **para**, **para-pro**, **paraprofessional**, **paraeducator**, **instructional assistant**, **educational assistant**, **teacher's aide** or **classroom assistant**, is a teaching-related position within a school generally responsible for specialized or concentrated assistance for students in elementary and secondary schools.

The paraprofessional is a vital component of the student's educational team, as this is the person who, under the direction of the credentialed visual impairment education specialist, supports and reinforces services and instruction to visually impaired students, while working to make that student independent. The support is generally centered on specific IEP goals and objectives for the student. The paraprofessional should not be teaching braille. They can reinforce braille skills taught by the teacher, but only a teacher for students with visual impairments can teach braille. Similarly, the paraprofessional does not teach orientation and mobility skills. They should only reinforce the skills the certified orientation & mobility specialist has taught. Unlike a paraprofessional supporting a general education teacher, the paraprofessional who supports visually impaired students must have basic background knowledge and understanding of the unique needs and characteristics of the blind student as well as specific skills to promote learning opportunities.

#### GOALS

- Assist students in becoming as independent as possible
- Prepare students for a successful future

#### UNIQUE NEEDS

- Experiential Learning – Sighted learn by incidence and imitation. Blind need to experience learning.
- Development of alternative skills
- Learning to access information – Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) – specially designed instruction to ensure access to the general curriculum

## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Sensitivity to light
- Poor depth perception
- Field deficits
- May tire easily
- Difficulty with mobility

## ROLE OF THE VISUAL IMPAIRMENT PARAPROFESSIONAL/PARAEDUCATOR

- Job functions are varied and differ according to the role
- Work as part of a professional team to support all students, with specific support to blind and/or low vision students
- Provide verbal descriptions to the student of visual presentations, classroom demonstrations or videos
- Reinforces the skills taught by the TVI/classroom teacher
  - No barriers between student and peer involvement allows for progress towards independence
- Reinforces O&M skills for movement between instructional locations and activities
- Monitor safety – moving across the campus, on the playground, participating in hands-on activities in the classroom
- Direct support instruction that focuses on learning outcomes
  - Curriculum
  - Daily living activities
  - Health & safety
  - Access to the environment
- May assist with self-care tasks: toileting, dressing, and eating
- May assist with the preparation of materials (photocopying, enlarging, highlighting, scanning)
- May provide adaptations to curriculum/materials where needed (tactile graphics, braille, magnification)
- Reinforces and builds competencies related to braille, assistive technologies, and tactile graphics
- Assists student in classroom organization skills
- Assists with behavior management
- Supports social interactions by practicing appropriate social skills such as facing the person you are talking to, using appropriate body language, joining a group, or asking for assistance when it is needed



## EXPECTATIONS

- Dependable – Punctual, regular attendance, follow through
- Motivated – takes initiative, leads with intuition
- Flexible – schedule, time
- Organization skills
- Advocate – for student needs; teaching student to advocate for self
- Patience
- Independence – does not need constant direction from a teacher
- Communication – from/with credentialed VI Education Specialist – clear and specific instructions
- What does the TVI expect you to do: braille, enlarging/modifying materials, technology, curriculum, social skills

## PROFESSIONALISM

- Be a positive role model for students
- Be punctual, attend work regularly
- Share relevant information such as program planning and changes, and student progress with supervising teacher
- Discuss student's progress or educational program only with the teachers who are responsible for that student's instruction
- Maintain confidentiality – discuss confidential school and student issues only with appropriate school personnel
- Refrain from discussing student information in front of other students
- Maintain a positive attitude
- Don't discuss any student outside of the educational setting with anyone
- Understand and follow all policies and procedures
- Dress for success and maintain proper attire for your role
- Refer parent inquiries to the student's teacher. It is the teacher's responsibility to communicate with parents
- Maintain a professional relationship with the student at all times
- Be flexible and willing to assist if needed
- Seek opportunities for professional growth
- Focus on student successes – what he/she CAN do, rather than what he/she CANNOT do



## TRAINING

Training opportunities should include the following:

- Overview of Visual Impairment – What Does It Mean?
- Basic eye medical information
- Sighted guide and travel concepts and techniques – How to stay safe
- Modification of print materials
- Teaching strategies specific to visual impairment
- Braille basics – alphabet, contractions, formatting, writing, interlining
- Technology – Blindness/Low vision specific – How to use it
- Challenging behaviors and blind behaviorisms
- Classroom accommodations – space, storage of materials, speaking in directional and specific language to provide guided support
- Development of Social Skills
- Daily living activities
- Expanded Core Curriculum
- Specialized Testing Situations - Training in how to proctor and scribe

After conducting a poll of paraprofessionals whose specific job is to serve visually impaired students, it was determined that a lack of blindness-specific training was one of the largest challenges these paraprofessionals faced. School districts often do not provide clear definitions of roles, responsibilities, and expectations regarding low incidence disabilities, and paraprofessionals are left to “figure it out” on their own. Specific teaching strategies (particularly braille) and the use of (ever-changing) technology to access the curriculum offer additional challenges.

**Training MUST be specific and ongoing!**

We are hopeful that you will find some morsels of wisdom and useful tools within this workshop to assist you. Please share your successes (and challenges) with this committee so we can better provide guidance and support to meet your needs.

## The Star Thrower

An old man was walking on the beach littered with thousands of starfish, beached and dying after a storm. He noticed a young boy reaching down, picking up starfish and flinging them back into the ocean. As he approached, he called out, “Hello! What are you doing?”

The boy looked up and said, “I’m throwing starfish into the ocean.”

“Why do you bother?” scoffed the old man.

“The tide stranded them. If I don’t throw them in the water before the sun comes up, they’ll die” came the young boy’s answer.

“Surely you realize that there are miles of beach, and thousands of starfish. You’ll never throw them all back, there are too many. You can’t possibly save enough to make a difference.”

The boy listened politely, then picked up another starfish and sent it spinning back to the water. “It made a difference for that one,” he quietly replied.



**Paraprofessionals ... Making a Difference One Student at a Time**

## Hand-under-Hand Guidance



Use hand-under-hand guidance to show a child an action or object. Invite the child to examine what you are doing by:

- Asking him to put his hands on top of your hands to feel what you are doing, or
- Cueing her to reach out and see that you are doing something by touching her shoulder or elbow, or
- Bringing your activity and/or object up and under the hands of the child
- If a child pulls away, continue to do what you are doing and reinvite
- If you have a child who throws an object you are trying to show him, you may control the object by holding on to it tightly or by moving it. If throwing things is one of a very small repertoire of actions the child initiates, you might want to find things to throw and imitate the child, throwing after he throws items. You might let the child see with his hands that you are doing a little something with the object before you throw it, and gradually elongate that pre-throwing time. Remember that throwing is probably this child's way to cope with the expectation of someone's hands controlling his hands.
- If a child does not reach out to feel what you are doing because their hands are shy or because of motor limitations, bring the activity very near to the child and perform it while in light physical contact.

"While the child is young, or developmentally young, the connection between her and the world needs to be almost always hands-on, involving close physical, auditory, or visual involvement with whatever she is experiencing. Often she will need help to reach out and explore her environment. Helping her will entail using skillful touch in order to invite her hands outward. Gentle touch, the teacher's hands under the child's, never controlling, always coaxing, is the best kind. Even though we may be tempted to put our hands on top of the child's hands in order to guide them, we need to remember that the more freedom we give her hands, the more she will be encouraged to exercise that freedom."

p. 74, *Remarkable Conversations*, Miles and Reggio, © 1999, Perkins School for the Blind, Watertown, MA

Information on this hand-out available from the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired at:  
<http://www.tsbvi.edu/distance/communication/interaction-and-bonding/introduction/hand-under-hand/index.html>

## 19 Ways to Step Back (Poster)

It often feels right to give help to students with visual impairments, but this may not be in their best interest. Use this list to help yourself to step back.

# 19 Ways to Step Back

- 1 You're stepping back so your students can step forward and become independent. Keep this in mind.
- 2 Clock how long it actually takes for students to start zippers, pick up dropped papers, or find page numbers. What's a few more seconds in the grander scheme?
- 3 Sit on your hands for a whole task while you practice giving verbal instead of touch cues. Hands off the hands!
- 4 If you need touch cues, try hand-under-hand instead of hand-over-hand. This gives students much more choice.
- 5 Let your students make mistakes and get into trouble. It's part of the human experience!
- 6 Acknowledge your own needs. There's a reason you chose the helping profession.
- 7 Sit farther away. If you've been within arm's reach, sit just within earshot. If you've been sitting just within earshot, sit across the room.
- 8 Pat yourself on the back every time you help with seeing, not thinking. Your job is to give information.
- 9 Catch yourself before you correct your students' work. Don't cover for them. This is about their skills ... not yours.
- 10 Even though helping can feel right, be aware that too much assistance is short-sighted. Sometimes less is more, less is better.
- 11 Commit to no intervention for a whole activity. Take data instead. Things might not fall apart as much as you expected.
- 12 "What page are we on?" "What's for lunch?" Have students ask their classmates instead of you, both during school and on the telephone.
- 13 Assign student learning partners and sighted guides.
- 14 Teach students to decline assistance: "Thanks, but please let me try it by myself"
- 15 Whenever you add prompts, include a plan to phase them out.
- 16 Let the boss know that you need to step back so that your students can be more independent. You're not shirking your responsibilities.
- 17 Collaborate with other adults to break your habits of helping too much. Agree to remind each other to step back.
- 18 Try helping only when classroom teachers give you a signal. They may prefer to respond directly, or to give students longer to work it out alone.
- 19 Post a sign, "Are there any other ways I could step back?"

Adapted from Classroom Collaboration by Laurel L. Hatcher, PhD, Perkins School for the Blind

Poster by © Sigo © 2014 American Foundation for the Blind

## 19 Ways to Step Back

Adapted from *Classroom Collaboration* by Laurel J. Hudson, PhD., Perkins School for the Blind

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It often feels right to give help to students with visual impairments, but this may not be in their best interest. Use this list to help yourself to step back.

1. You're stepping back so your students can step forward and become independent. Keep this in mind.
2. Clock how long it actually takes students to start zippers, pick up dropped papers, or find page numbers. What's a few more seconds in the grander scheme?
3. Sit on your hands for a while task while you practice giving verbal instead of touch cues. Hands off the hands!
4. If you need cues, try hand-under-hand instead of hand-over-hand. This gives students much more choice.
5. Let your students make mistakes and get into trouble. It's part of the human experience!
6. Acknowledge your own needs. There's a reason you chose the helping profession.
7. Sit farther away. If you've been within arm's reach, sit just within earshot. If you've been sitting just within earshot, sit across the room.
8. Pat yourself on the back every time you help with seeing, not thinking. Your job is to give information.
9. Even though helping can feel right, be aware that too much assistance is short-sighted. Sometimes less is more, less is better.
10. Catch yourself before you correct your students' work. Don't cover for them. This is about their skills ... not yours.
11. Commit to no intervention for a whole activity. Take data instead. Things might not fall apart as much as you expected.
12. "What page are we on?" "What's for lunch?" Have students ask their classmates instead of you, both during school and on the telephone.
13. Assign student learning partners and sighted guides.
14. Teach students to decline assistance: "Thanks, but please let me try it by myself."
15. Whenever you add prompts, include a plan to phase them out.
16. Let the boss know what you need to step back so that your students can be more independent. You're not shirking your responsibilities.



17. Collaborate with other adults to break your habits of helping too much. Agree to remind each other to step back.
18. Try helping only when classroom teachers give you a signal. They may prefer to respond directly, or to give students longer to work it out alone.
19. Post a sign, “Are there any other ways I could step back?”

Schools cannot adequately function without paraprofessionals, and paraprofessionals cannot adequately function in schools that lack an infrastructure that supports and respects them as viable and contributing members of instructional teams. They need to be treated and respected as the professionals they are:

“Paraeducators”

## Do's and Don'ts When Interacting with a Person who is Blind

### When speaking with a person who is Blind:

- DO identify yourself, especially when entering a room. Don't say, "Do you know who this is?"
- DO speak directly to the individual. Do not speak through a companion. Unless they are hard of hearing, they can speak for themselves.
- DO give specific directions like, "The desk is five feet to your right," as opposed to saying, "The desk is over there."
- DO give a clear word picture when describing things to an individual with vision loss. Include details such as color, texture, shape and landmarks.
- DO touch them on the arm or use their name when addressing them. This lets them know you are speaking to them and not someone else in the room.
- DON'T shout when you speak. They can't see but often have fine hearing.
- DON'T be afraid to use words like "blind" or "see." Their eyes may not work, but it is still, "Nice to see you."

### If you see a Blind person who seems to be in need of assistance:

- DO introduce yourself and ask the person if he needs assistance.
- DO provide assistance if it is requested.
- DO respect the wishes of the person who is blind.
- DON'T insist upon trying to help if your offer of assistance is declined.

### If a Blind person asks you for directions:

- DO use words such as "straight ahead," "turn left," "on your right."
- DON'T point and say, "Go that way," or, "It's over there."



### If you are asked to guide a Blind person:

- DO allow the person you are guiding to hold your arm and follow as you walk.
- DO move your guiding arm behind your back when approaching a narrow space so the person you are guiding can step behind you and follow single-file.
- DO hesitate briefly at a curb or at the beginning of a flight of stairs.
- DO tell the person you are guiding whether the steps go up or down.
- DO allow the person you are guiding to find the handrail and locate the edge of the first step before proceeding.
- DON'T grab the person you are guiding by the hand, arm, or shoulder and try to steer him.
- DON'T grab the person's cane or the handle of a dog guide's harness.

### General guidelines:

- DON'T pet, feed, or distract a guide dog. They are not pets; they are working companions on whom a Blind person depends.
- DO treat Blind people as individuals. People with visual disabilities come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. They each have their own strengths and weaknesses, just like everyone else.



**Know the difference (please).**



## Thank You!

On behalf of the Transcriber and Educator Services Committee, we “Thank You” for attending.

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Please feel free to contact us! We look forward to future opportunities to provide more in-depth training!

