

A Handbook for Learning Support Assistants

Teachers and Assistants
Working Together

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CHAPTER 2

The role of the learning support assistant

What are my responsibilities?

In your work as an assistant you will be working as part of the learning support team in the school which is led by the special needs coordinator (SENCO). If you work in a large school then there may be several teachers employed to give learning support but in small schools there is usually only one teacher with such a role and that is the SENCO. When we talk of learning support this usually refers to additional help over and above what most children need. In its widest sense all teachers give learning support to all children and certainly all class teachers have the responsibility for the learning programmes of all children in their classes whatever their learning needs.

It is important for you to remember that LSAs are not teachers and should never be overburdened in terms of responsibilities. The class teacher has the responsibility for the education of all children in his or her class and the head teacher has the responsibility for all the children in the school.

If you are working with children who need different arrangements, the class teacher has the responsibility to ensure that appropriate programmes are planned, followed and monitored. These will usually be detailed on the child's IEP or in group work arrangements. As an assistant, you are expected to work under the guidance of the class teacher to meet the needs of the child. There may be occasions when you are expected to work on your own with one or more children. In this situation you need to work as a responsible adult in ensuring the well-being of each child.

In particular lessons there will be particular routines to follow, e.g. when supporting a pupil in food technology you may need to have an appropriate health and safety certificate. There will be a member of staff in your school who is responsible for health and safety and who can give you advice about this. There are guidelines for staff who accompany children off site and for staff who may be involved in administering drugs to children. Your SENCO should be able to direct you to any information needed.

What if something goes wrong?

Every employee of the local authority is covered by a general employment insurance policy held by that authority. By law, you are deemed 'a

responsible adult' and the duties performed by you are delegated to you by the head teacher. If something does go wrong, you should discuss the situation with the teacher who is responsible for your work and with the head teacher. In the case of any accident, it must be recorded in the schools' incident/accident book. In the case of injury to a child, your first priority is to see that the child is given first aid and that the class teacher is informed.

If, during the course of your work with a child, some disclosure of physical or sexual abuse is made, then you have a duty, under Child Protection law, to inform the head teacher who will take any action necessary. The 1989 Children Act states that the child's welfare is paramount and safeguarding it and promoting it is a priority.

Schools have clear routines to be followed in the case of injury or abuse and it is your responsibility to ensure that you know what these procedures are. If you are not sure, the class teacher you normally work with can direct you to the information.

You may consider that membership of a union will be useful in providing you with back-up support, should things go badly wrong.

The role of the learning support assistant will vary from school to school, depending on the organisation and on the individual child, or groups of children, concerned. It is important that you know what your duties are from the start in relation to different pupils. You need to know whether you are working mainly with one child or are expected to work with small groups, or sometimes with the whole class.

Some of the more usual tasks assistants are asked to do are as follows:

- explaining points and repeating instructions given by the teacher;
- producing worksheets and resources for the pupil, in consultation with the teacher;
- reading stories to children on an individual or small group basis or hearing them read;
- playing a game with a child or small group;
- making notes for the pupil as the teacher is speaking which can be used in the work which follows;
- checking the work pupils produce and helping them to correct their own mistakes;
- acting as a scribe;
- helping younger children change for PE (or older pupils who have physical disabilities);
- explaining words the child does not understand, encouraging use of dictionaries;
- guiding computer-assisted learning programmes;
- preparing audio-tapes and encouraging the use of a Dictaphone for recording information – you may need to transcribe what the pupil dictates;
- reading textbook sections or questions to the pupil;
- supervising practical work;
- helping the pupil catch up on missed work;
- observing a child's way of managing a task – only intervening if the child cannot do it independently;

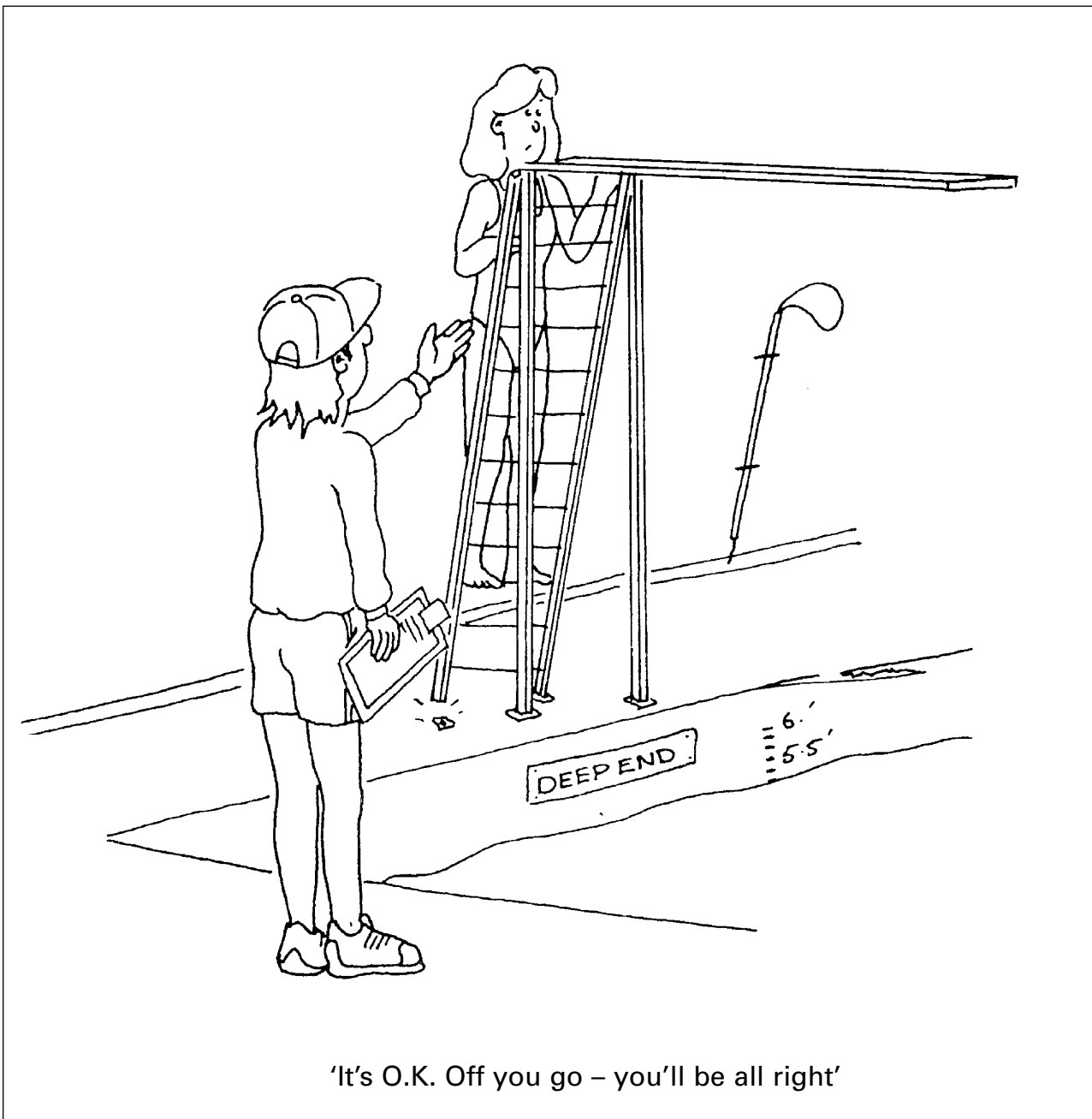
What might I be asked to do?

- keeping the pupil and others 'on task';
- reporting back to the teacher, especially problems or successes;
- contributing to planning and review meetings about the pupil;
- helping children learn spellings;
- sharing books with children.

It is sometimes the case that LSAs are 'thrown in at the deep end' with no clear idea of what is expected of them.

If you are not clear about what you are expected to do then you do need to ask. Confusion can be prevented by:

- a clear job description (see Appendix A);



'It's O.K. Off you go – you'll be all right'

- communication between the class teacher and the assistant so that the assistant is clear about:
 - the ground rules for working with the teacher;
 - the individual plan for the pupil (IEP).

These are guidelines for you to use in working with a particular teacher. They should be discussed with teachers before you start work as an assistant or, for experienced assistants, when working with a new teaching colleague.

What are the ground rules?

Teachers will have their own ideas and you need to ask about these before you start, so that you can reduce confusion and provide a consistent approach. Also, you need to know what authority you have when working in the classroom. The more you understand the workings of the class and the way the teacher operates, the easier it will be for you to work within the class and to support the children who need help.

Here are some suggestions of questions to ask in order to determine 'ground rules':

1. How shall I be introduced to the class?

It is important that you are, in fact, introduced to the class at the beginning of the school year rather than being treated as a piece of furniture. It is also important that you are introduced in the right way so that pupils' perception of your role is clear. Discuss this with the class teacher.

An introduction such as: 'This is Mrs Smith and she is Andrew's special helper' is probably not helpful, both in terms of Andrew being pointed out as 'special' and of raising the idea of Mrs Smith as some kind of 'minder'. A more useful introduction might be: 'This is Mrs Smith who will be working with me to help you all to do your best. Sometimes, she will work with one or two of you and sometimes with small groups.'

2. How do I work with other pupils?

Even though you may be only responsible for one pupil, the others will note your presence and will be curious. You should be prepared to tell them something about yourself and, as far as possible, treat all pupils in the class in, generally, the same way, giving help to them as well as to your pupil, if they ask for it. You should encourage them to accept your pupil as a full member of the class.

3. Can I give pupils 'permission'?

e.g. When a child asks to go to the toilet, can I give permission? It is likely that children will ask your permission on frequent occasions about how to act in certain situations. Discuss any such scenarios with the class teacher so that you know what to do.

4. Can I 'mark' books?

e.g. When a child comes to show me some written work, when is it appropriate for me to put a mark on their work? It is likely that this will be acceptable for you to do when working individually or in small groups with children but, generally, the class teacher will need to do this.

5. Where shall I sit in the classroom?

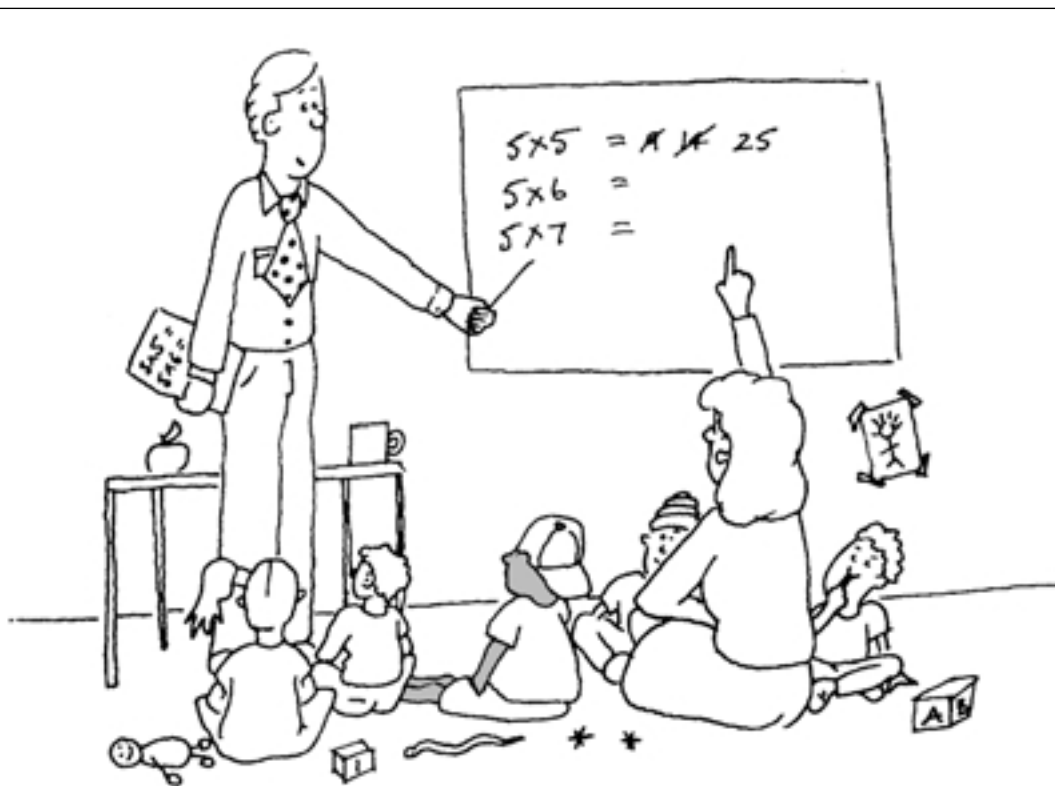
e.g. When is it appropriate for me to sit right by the pupil and when should I stay at a distance? This will depend on the particular activity and you will learn, with practice, when it is necessary to give individual support and when to withdraw and allow the pupil some independence.

6. What shall I do if I see some misbehaviour?

e.g. When two children are getting at each other, shall I intervene and, if so, what sort of approach should I use? There are bound to be occasions when you see things going on of which the teacher is unaware. You need to negotiate with the class teacher how you should react to such situations, and know when it is appropriate to refer the situation to the class teacher rather than deal with it yourself.

7. Can I contribute or ask questions during the lesson?

There may be times when you feel you can add particular bits of information which will add to a class discussion. You may also feel the need to ask for clarification – possibly for yourself or, more often, if you can see that the pupil is not clear. However, do avoid becoming ‘the overgrown pupil’ in the classroom (described by M. Balshaw in her book *Help in the Classroom*).



Avoid becoming the ‘overgrown pupil’

8. What is the best use of my time?

e.g. Should I sit in on school assemblies when I am not really needed? You need to negotiate a timetable which is able to use your support to best effect and to agree with the teacher when your presence is needed and when it might be of more use for you to be preparing materials for the pupil or pupils you support, e.g. in assembly time.

3. To establish a supportive relationship with the child/ren concerned.
4. To encourage acceptance and inclusion of the child with special needs.
5. To develop methods of promoting/reinforcing the child's self-esteem.

B. Supporting the teacher

1. To assist, with class teacher (and other professionals as appropriate), in the development of a suitable programme of support (IEPs) for child/ren who need learning support.
2. In conjunction with the class teacher and/or other professionals to develop a system of recording the child's progress.
3. To contribute to the maintenance of child/ren's progress records.
4. To participate in the evaluation of the support programme.
5. To provide regular feedback about the child/ren to the teacher.

C. Supporting the school

1. Where appropriate, to develop a relationship to foster links between home and school.
2. To liaise, advise and consult with other members of the team supporting the child/ren when asked to do so.
3. To contribute to reviews of children's progress, as appropriate.
4. To attend relevant in-service training.
5. To be aware of school procedures.
6. To be aware of confidential issues linked to home/pupil/teacher/school work and to keep confidences appropriately.

Any other tasks as directed by head teacher which fall within the purview of the post.

APPENDIX B

The roles of supporting professionals

During the course of your work in school, it is likely that you will come across one or more of the following professionals:

Physiotherapists

The physiotherapist identifies a child's main physical problems and devises a programme of treatment to overcome them. This may include: exercises, the use of splints or other aids, and advice on seating and general classroom handling.

Occupational therapists

The occupational therapist (OT) works with children who have difficulties with gross and fine motor coordination and/or perceptual problems. The OT is concerned with a child's functional independence in all daily activities from dressing to handwriting and special equipment is recommended where appropriate. OTs also work in child guidance services and can help with complex emotional and psychological needs.

Speech and language therapists

Speech and language therapists work with children who may have a wide range of disorders affecting their understanding and use of speech and/or language. They will assess the child's progress and provide a programme of activities aimed at developing listening skills, use of speech sounds, development of sentence structure etc.

Educational psychologists

Educational psychologists visit all schools on a regular basis in order to support children and the adults who work with them. They are called on to help and advise on a variety of educational problems. They may also devise programmes and carry out individual assessments. In addition, they are involved in assessment carried out under the 1981 Education Act, which may lead to a statement of special educational needs. They