Volunteers in the Classroom: 
Guidelines for Orientation

by Jan Allen and Kathy Carlson

Fortunate child care directors have many volunteers in their centers. Parents, grandparents, student interns, and other community volunteers may work occasionally or regularly in the child care center. Directors should be prepared to host these volunteers by planning in advance for their orientation. This will make the director’s task easier and the volunteers’ work more meaningful to them and more useful to the children and staff. At the University of Tennessee’s Child Development Laboratories we regularly host volunteers with little or no prior experience in child care. Volunteers from the Foster Grandparents Program, from other departments in the university, parents of the children enrolled in the program, as well as our own majors in the beginning stages of their field work, are frequent participants who require orientation and guidelines for working with young children in group care. Because it is not unusual for some volunteers to leave after a semester, training and orientation for new volunteers occurs regularly throughout the year. The information below is offered to directors to promote meaningful involvement of volunteers in their center.

When volunteers first visit your center, provide them with a tour and an opportunity to observe your program and children in action. Encourage them to ask questions about what they observe. Clarify your program’s philosophy, your curriculum, and your goals for the children. Provide volunteers with a copy of your parent and staff handbooks. Encourage them to return and observe as often as they would like to before beginning work in the center.

Prepare a set of guidelines for the volunteers that can be read quickly and understood easily. Use simple, direct language, and include examples to illustrate and clarify your guidelines. The set of guidelines below, which can be used or adapted as needed, lists information for basic orientation of volunteers. The selected bibliography listed for each topic is for volunteers who want to learn more about the suggested practices and behaviors that comprise effective teaching and meaningful caregiving.

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Interaction and Communication with Children

1. On your first few visits to the classroom, tell children your name. Explain, “I will be coming to your classroom every Monday morning until Thanksgiving.” Such an explanation lessens confusion for children in classrooms that have many volunteers.

2. Quickly learn and use children's names. Say their names often when talking to them, asking questions, or singing songs and reciting rhymes into which children's names are inserted.

3. Position yourself in the classroom so that your back is to the wall and not to the children. Maintain visual observation of as many children as possible. All children must be supervised at all times by the one or more teachers with the group.


Say: “Try turning all the colored sides of the puzzle up before you start. Now, does that help you decide where the pieces fit?”

5. Get a child’s attention before beginning to talk, ask questions, or give instructions. Position yourself — in a small chair, on your knees, or sitting on the floor — at the child’s eye level. Use a gentle touch on the child’s shoulder or arm to gain the child’s attention.

6. Communicate with children in a positive way. Children who are told what not to do may not understand what they should do.

Say: “We walk inside.”
“Our feet stay on the floor.”
“Touch him gently.”

Not: “Don’t run.”
“Don’t put your feet on the chair.”
“Don’t be so rough.”

7. Children often misbehave and ignore instructions, rules, or requests when the messages are unclear or not specific.

Say: “It’s time to clean up.”
“Put on your mittens before you go outside.”
“Tell him ‘I want the trike next.’”

Not: “It’s too messy in here.”
“It’s cold outside today.”
“Be nice to him.”

8. Children should be reinforced, praised, and encouraged for their effort rather than for their products or possessions.

Say: “You worked hard on that picture.”
Not: “I like the pretty dress you are wearing today.”

9. When appropriate, use encouragement rather than praise.

Say: “This puzzle has a lot of pieces, but I think you will be able to work it.”
“This puzzle is hard, but I think you can learn to do hard things.”

10. When you do praise, make it sound sincere, not phony or superficial.

Say: “I like the big arm strokes you are using to put the paint on the paper.”
Not: “Yours is the most beautiful painting I have ever seen.”

11. Use positive guidance with children. These include ignoring, redirecting, using natural and logical consequences, teaching conflict resolution, and using Sit and Watch.

Some minor misbehaviors, such as whining and tantruming, can be ignored. Don’t talk, look at, or react to children whose behavior you choose to ignore.

Using natural consequences means pointing out to children the physical results or emotional response to their misbehavior. For example, “When you ride too fast on the tricycle, it tips over and you might be hurt,” or “When you scream at other children, they don’t want to play with you.”

Logical consequences are responses to children’s misbehavior that are structured and arranged by the teacher. For example, after a child spills another child’s glue during an art activity, the teacher says, “You can share your glue with Rachael because she doesn’t have any now,” or “If you are not wearing a coat, you may not go outside.”

Modeling and teaching conflict resolution helps children to discuss their points of view, evaluate disagreements, and decide on alternative behavior to use the next time a similar situation occurs. Help children to use conflict resolution by saying, “What do you think happened?” “How did you feel?” “How did Mary Katherine feel?” “How can you use your words to solve this if it happens again?” “How can you decide together on a way to use the toy?”

Sit and Watch involves removing an aggressive or disruptive child from the activity and telling the child to sit and watch the other children who are behaving appropriately until the child can return to the activity and display appropriate behavior. Sit and Watch is used to respond to behaviors that cannot be addressed by the other methods; behaviors include aggression (e.g., biting, kicking, hitting, pinching), disruption (yelling, screaming, throwing objects when these behaviors interfere with ongoing activities), and noncompliance with a teacher’s instructions when the child does not have a choice. After the child has watched other children interacting appropriately and receiving praise for their behavior, explain and discuss with the child why sit and watch was used. Be sure to give praise after the child returns to the activity and behaves appropriately.

Professional Behavior

12. Use physical touch with children in appropriate ways for routine caregiving (such as diapering and changing clothes), for providing comfort to a child in distress, for providing physical guidance (such as redirecting a child), and for promoting self-esteem and positive social interactions among children and adults. Touch and