

All about...

# teaching assistants

New research shows that when used in the best way, teaching assistants can have a positive impact on children's learning and their transition to school, as *Marion Dowling* explains

**W**hile the guideline ratio of adults to children in Reception remains at 1:30, most classes now employ two staff, with a teaching assistant (TA) supporting the teacher. As their numbers have grown, so too has the nature of their job, and with the right training and support there is now the evidence that they can play an increasingly positive role in supporting the learning and development of young children.

Research into the efficacy of TAs has been limited. A major piece of research called The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS), carried out by the UCL's Institute of Education between 2003 and 2009, found that teaching assistants actually had a negative impact on children's outcomes<sup>(1)</sup>.

A recent and rigorous study, however, has looked specifically at the TAs' support in nursery and Reception age groups, and has come up with more positive findings. The study (one of six successful interventions) was funded, carried out and published by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).

## POSITIVE OUTCOMES

The EEF study showed how schools could deploy TAs to best effect in order to have a positive impact on young children's learning. These findings were based on an evaluation of a trial using the Nuffield Early Language Intervention. The language materials were developed by academics from the University of York, with some funding from the Nuffield Foundation; the evaluation



of the trial was carried out by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and Nat-Cen Social Research<sup>(2)</sup>.

This study was of a sample of 350 children from 34 schools, all identified as having poor language skills. The children started the programme either in their final term at nursery or when moving to a Reception class. They attended three sessions a week led by TAs in groups of two to four. Children were randomly selected to attend a 30-week programme that started in the final term at nursery

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and continued in the Reception class, or to participate in a shorter 20-week course that ran during the first two terms in Reception.

Importantly, TAs were trained over three days to deliver detailed lesson plans, which enabled them to lead short, structured sessions on simple, practical topics, such as 'going on a train journey' and 'what we wear'. The lesson plans provided them with a structure and purpose to their interventions with children.

The results found that with ➤

## EYFS BEST PRACTICE

intensive support from TAs, Reception and nursery children increased their vocabulary, listening, narrative and conversational skills. Children who attended the shorter, 20-week programme made around two months' extra progress; those who were on the longer, 30-week programme boosted their language and communication skills by up to four months. Moreover, there were early indications that these learning gains were maintained and there were also broader outcomes: those participating were perceived to be more confident, outgoing and conversational after taking part.

However, there were some concerns; TAs reported that they found it difficult to give enough time to the programme and stressed that support from senior staff is needed to protect the sessions. This reasonable request becomes a challenge in schools where key staff are expected to take on more and more responsibilities.

So, what are TAs' main responsibilities and how can they best be deployed in Reception classes?

### Reflective points

- Use and deepen your knowledge of child development in order to understand the personal and learning needs of children.
- Know each of your key children intimately and be responsible for the well-being and achievement of each individual.
- Hone your observation skills and record individual progress accurately and succinctly.
- Liaise with and support parents and close family members, ensuring that they are kept closely informed about their child.
- Help to provide an enriched environment that meets the needs

of all children from whatever culture and religious background.

- Be flexible in your working practices and help with domestic and cleaning jobs as and when required.

### BEING A KEY PERSON

When moving from the familiarity of a nursery setting to Reception, young children face developing contact with people they don't know, and who don't know them. There is specific evidence that moving into Reception at four years is stressful.

Gill Barratt's classic study of children starting school in a Reception class highlighted some of the feelings experienced by these new entrants<sup>(3)</sup>. Through looking at photographs and in discussions, children described feeling scared, fearful of getting things 'wrong' and not knowing what to do.

The chemical cortisol, present in all of us, surges in conditions of stress and can close down functions. Although in many respects children are now better supported in their transition to school, a study from Bath University suggests that they still find the experience stressful and exhibit high levels of cortisol. Most of the children in the Barratt study showed less anxiety and appeared to have adapted to school a few months later, but for some, their cortisol levels remained high<sup>(4)</sup>.

It is now generally accepted that when young children make this early transition, they need easy access to a known adult. Working in a Reception class, a teaching assistant is the second adult in the classroom and is likely to be given responsibility for a group of children, forming a close relationship with them and their parents as a key person.



### MORE INFORMATION

'Side by side' looks at the successful deployment of TAs, and 'Teaching assistants are winning praise but losing pay' assesses the changing pay, conditions and roles of the TA workforce. Both articles are at: [www.nurseryworld.co.uk](http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk)



The quality of the key person relationship has a direct bearing on a young child. When a child is cared for sensitively, they are more relaxed and in the right state of mind to learn. Despite support to help children settle well into a Reception class, though, by the end of the year some children may have made little progress and are not ready to move into Year 1.

### Case study

Rose, a TA working in Reception, had a group of key children, with whom she had formed a strong attachment. Most of the children were becoming increasingly independent and played creatively together. However, three

## SUPPORTING NQTs

Throughout their training, student teachers are crammed with information on curriculum content, pedagogy and practice, but managing and working with a teaching assistant rarely features. And yet the most successful lessons and outstanding teaching usually involve effective use of support staff.

When working with an inexperienced newly qualified teacher in Reception, an experienced TA faces the challenge of working closely with the teacher who may not fully recognise the significance

of attachments or key-person work, both fundamental in ensuring that children make a sound transition to school

In order to achieve a successful partnership, it's helpful if new teachers and their assistants:

- communicate. Ensure that the assistant knows about teacher expectations and plans for the focus children for whom the assistant will be responsible in lessons
- interact in class. Teachers should respect the professional experience of assistants.



of the group were still finding the transition to school difficult. They clung to Rose and remained confused about the sequence of the daily classroom activities.

In the summer term, Rose accompanied her key children to pay several visits to the Year 1 classroom. With the three more dependent children in mind, in the autumn term she moved with the Reception children into Year 1 for the first half of the term.

She worked particularly closely with the three children who she had rightly suspected would find this new transition daunting. Rose helped them to make sense of daily routines and encouraged them to do

more for themselves. She gradually withdrew her presence, but kept a close watch on their progress.

Rose met with the Year 1 teacher daily to report on the children and to share the teacher's plans for the week ahead. By October the three children had in most respects adjusted to being in Year 1 and were more self-reliant, particularly when playing outside.

The adults were satisfied that the arrangement had proved beneficial. The Reception teacher had been challenged in managing her new class initially without an assistant, but had gained support from two experienced parents. The Year 1 teacher admitted that the three chil-

dren would not have progressed so well in a short period of time without continuity of support from the known TA.

Rose stressed that she had learned a great deal about the demands for children in their new class and, when returning to Reception, she could use this knowledge to help equip children for the next transition.

**SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

With the best of intentions, schools' arrangements to support children with SEN have been heavily reliant on the use of TAs. This support has in the best instances enabled children to be included in mainstream classrooms and access the curriculum.

Many schools recruit TAs to work with children who have specific learning difficulties such as autism or challenging behaviour. Candidates for these TA posts are expected to have a proven track record as a teaching assistant and some experience of working with children with special educational needs. Although they may have some support from a teacher, the assumption is that they can work unaided, often planning their own programmes and recording individual progress.

However, the DISS project found that the majority of TAs spent their time working with small groups or individuals who were not making the expected levels of progress or who had special education needs. Where this occurred, it commonly caused a separation effect for these children, resulting in them spending less time in whole-class activity, less time working with the teacher and fewer opportunities for them to interact with non-SEN children.

A further study has also found that children with learning difficulties or specific special needs in a class with a TA support often do not benefit more in their learning than in classes with only a teacher, and in some respects are held back<sup>(5)</sup>. The assistant may have had a good relationship with these children but had no training in ways to maximise their learning. Sometimes they offered too much support in their attempt to ensure that pupils 'come up with the right answers' rather than grapple independently with problems. This happened when assistants valued achievements more than the processes of learning.

A follow-up project in 2012 in ➤

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response to the findings of the DISS project likewise offered a bleak picture, suggesting that, although all pupils seemed to benefit in some respect from the presence of support staff, at that time teaching assistants were underused, inconsistently managed and not always well trained and supported<sup>(6)</sup>.

In 2015, teachers at an Association of Teachers and Lecturers conference expressed concern about the impact that unqualified TAs were having on children's education when used to cover for teacher absences. While delegates recognised that short-term cover by a TA was acceptable to provide some continuity until the teacher returned to work, they argued that the role required some form of formal training to equip TAs for these posts. However, teachers were unanimous that long-term absences by teachers should be covered by qualified supply staff<sup>(7)</sup>.

We now recognise the importance of helping children to help themselves in all areas of their lives, and this is crucial for them to develop their learning. Without training for their role, in the spirit of offering sup-

port, TAs may 'spoon-feed' individual children by offering clues and answers to help the child to complete tasks rather than encourage them to think for themselves.

### SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH 'EAL'

Working with increasingly diverse groups of children, nurseries and schools face the challenge of those children who do not speak English as their first language. TAs may work with small groups of these children, but it has to be accepted that appropriate first language support may not be available for all children in all settings. Sometimes, however, solutions can be found within the setting.

#### Case study

Antoni, aged three, had recently arrived in England and started at a nursery class attached to a primary school. He appeared very confused and his key person, Marie, despite trying different approaches, found it very difficult to communicate with him. Marie, the nursery teaching assistant, discussed the matter with her teacher. Although there were



### REFERENCES

- 1 DfES (2003-9) *The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS): a research project funded by the Department of Children, Schools and Families*
- 2 <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/compelling-evidence-to-make-sure-4bn-spent-annually-on-tas>
- 3 Barrett G (1986) *Starting School: An evaluation of the experience*. University of East Anglia
- 4 Turner-Cobb J, Rixon L and Jessop DS (2008) 'A prospective study of diurnal and cortisol responses to the social experience of school transition in four-year-old children: anticipation, exposure and adaptation.' *Developmental Psychology*, 50 (4), 377-89
- 5 Bosanquet P, Radford J and Webster R (2015) *The Teaching Assistant's Guide to Effective Interaction: How to Maximise Your Practice*. Routledge
- 6 Oxford School Improvement (2012) *Impact of Support Staff in Primary Schools*. Oxford University Press
- 7 [www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/11506438/Unqualified-teaching-assistants-harming-pupils-education-teachers-say.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/11506438/Unqualified-teaching-assistants-harming-pupils-education-teachers-say.html)

no adults in the school who spoke Polish, there was one Polish boy, Brunon, in Year 1 who had adapted very well to communicating in English and integrating into school life.

Marie introduced Brunon to Antoni and asked him if he would be a buddy to the younger boy. Brunon was delighted to be asked and to have the chance of conversing with another in his mother tongue. Brunon initially visited Antoni in the nursery daily for half an hour. He read stories with him and played with construction, which was proving to be Antoni's favourite activity. Brunon also stayed near Antoni at lunch times, often eating with him and encouraging him to play outside.

During these times, Antoni proved to be a different child, one who was vivacious, chatty and interested. By the end of half-term the little boy was mixing with others, understood most of the daily routines and used a few words of English. At that point, Brunon reduced his visits to only once a week.

#### Comment

Brunon played a crucial role in helping Antoni settle into nursery life. Although he did not usurp Marie's role as key person, initially Antoni trusted Brunon to interpret the nursery conventions for him and to represent his thoughts and views. Antoni's parents spoke very little English and it was Brunon who told Marie how Antoni loved animals and dearly wanted a dog of his own. Marie built on this by showing Antoni photographs of her dog, and later bringing the dog to the nursery. Brunon also taught Marie several Polish words, which were a great help in establishing early conversations with Antoni.

#### Reflective questions

- As a teaching assistant, how far do you have a common understanding with your teacher about EAL development?
- How well do you communicate with EAL parents creatively to make them feel welcome and to participate in their child's language development?
- What support do you receive to encourage you to develop/extend your knowledge and expertise in EAL issues?
- What contribution do you make to displaying and developing a supportive environment for EAL children? ■

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- How knowledgeable is your TA about the developmental needs of young children?
- How do you ensure that time is protected to discuss plans for children who will be working with the TA, and to share feedback on outcomes and observations?
- How far are TAs encouraged to evaluate their practice and develop it through performance management?