I was surprised to find out that it doesn’t take much to support Steven. By allowing him to draw his answer instead of writing it, he was able to represent the big ideas from the science lesson. Modifying can be surprisingly simple. It just takes some creativity and guidance from the special education teacher.

—Meghan (paraprofessional)

I personally use many different kinds of modifications throughout my own day. For example, I set my alarm to wake up. I go on a brisk walk before the demands of my day begin; this improves my ability to sit for long periods of time at work. I always set my keys in the same place in the kitchen so that I will not lose them and blame my husband or children for misplacing them. I use my electronic planner to keep my daily schedule. I always write my daily “to do” list on a large sticky note. I prioritize each item by writing numbers in the left-hand margin of the list. When I clean my house, I set my alarm for 15 minutes, and I race around the house to see how much I can get done before setting the alarm again for the next room. In meetings, I chew gum to keep myself attentive, and I sit close to the front so that I can keep myself from mentally wandering or chatting with my colleagues. My point is this: All people need their environments, time schedules, and behavior modified or adapted to allow them to be successful members of society. This chapter discusses some accommodations, modifications, and adaptations that are made for students with disabilities. I describe general and content-specific strategies and discuss the topic of assistive technology.

As a paraprofessional, you will provide modifications or adaptations to students and help them navigate the academic terrain of schooling. This can be a formidable task. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (PL 107-110) also requires paraprofessionals to work with students “under the direct supervision of a certified staff member.” The law stipulates that it is not the responsibility of paraprofessionals to decide the best modifications or adaptations to use with students. Instead, you should simply carry out written plans. Specifically, the regulations for paraprofessionals state that

Paraprofessionals who provide instructional support must work under the direct supervision of a highly qualified teacher. (§§ 1119 [g][3][A]).

A paraprofessional works under the direct supervision of a teacher if (1) the teacher prepares the lessons and plans the instructional support activities the paraprofessional carries out, and evaluates the achievement of the students with whom the paraprofessional is working, and (2) the paraprofessional works in close and frequent proximity with the teacher. (§ 200.59 [c][2] of the Title I regulations).

As a result, programs staffed entirely by paraprofessionals are not permitted. A certified teacher should write the lessons, and you should help students or review material. You should not be responsible for teaching new content. This chapter will familiarize you with several different types of modifications and specific ways to modify and adapt teachers’ instructions to meet the needs of the students under your care. This chapter first describes general strategies that will enable you to support students, then discusses content-specific ideas, and, finally, suggests strategies that can help you work across all content areas. Consider reading this chapter with your teaching team.
Figure 7.1 shows a general cycle of support, which has been adapted from one developed by Mary Beth Doyle (2008).

ACCOMMODATIONS, MODIFICATIONS, AND ADAPTATIONS

The following information about the differences between modifications and adaptations comes from the PEAK Parent Center (n.d.) in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Accommodations and modifications are adaptations made to the environment, curriculum, instruction, or assessment practices that enable students with disabilities to be successful learners and to participate actively with other students in the general education classroom and in schoolwide activities.

Accommodations are changes in how a student accesses information and demonstrates learning. Accommodations do not substantially change the instructional level, content, or performance criteria. The changes are made to provide a student with equal access to learning and equal opportunity to show what he or she knows and can do. Accommodations can include changes in presentation, response format and procedures, instructional strategies, time and scheduling, environment, equipment, and architecture.

Modifications are changes in what a student is expected to learn. The changes are made to provide a student with opportunities to participate meaningfully and productively along with other students in classroom and school learning experiences. Modifications include changes in instructional level, content, and performance criteria.
The following lists contain examples of accommodations and modifications that can be provided in general education classrooms. Individualized education program teams determine accommodations and modifications that meet the unique and individual needs of their students.

**Accommodations**

- Test taken orally
- Large-print textbooks
- Additional time to take test
- A locker with an adapted lock
- Weekly home–school communication tool, such as a notebook or daily log book
- Peer support for note taking
- Lab sheets with highlighted instructions
- Graph paper to assist in organizing and lining up math problems
- Tape-recorded lectures
- Use of a computer for writing

**Modifications**

- An outline in place of an essay for a major project
- Picture Communication Symbol choices on tests
- Alternative books or materials on the same theme or topic
- Spelling support from a computerized spell-check program
- Word bank of choices for answers to test questions
- Use of a calculator on a math test
- Film or video supplements in place of text
- Questions reworded using simpler language
- Projects substituted for written reports
- Important words and phrases highlighted

Deciding which accommodations and/or modifications to use is a process that depends on the assignment and needs of each individual student. This process will be determined by a teacher, but a paraprofessional will have input on how these adaptations or modifications are carried out. When the appropriate adaptations are made, all students can have true access to the general education curriculum (PEAK Parent Center, n.d.).

**GENERAL STRATEGIES**

As soon as you assume they can’t do something—the student won’t be able to prove you wrong.

—Jay (paraprofessional)
Focus on Strengths

When providing support to students, it is easy to become overwhelmed by what they cannot do. For example, when I was providing support to Steven, a third grader with Down syndrome, it was easy to think, “Steven does not read; how am I to help him understand the science content in this chapter?” It helps to reframe your thinking and ask yourself what the student can do. Focus instead on the student’s strengths; with Steven, you might think, “Steven is a very social guy. He can easily comprehend big ideas. He is masterful at drawing what he knows and labeling parts. He also can answer questions.”

We focused on Steven’s strengths of listening, social interaction, and understanding main ideas. When other students were required to quietly read the chapter from the science book, Steven’s partner read the chapter aloud. At the end of each section in the text, Steven and his partner were required to say something about the section, and Steven, as he listened, worked on a drawing depicting the big ideas from that section. Steven and his partner then asked each other questions about the section and the drawing. This worked so well for Steven and his partner that the teacher decided to have the entire class read the science text that way for the rest of the year.

Ask the Student

If you are unsure about how to provide support, when to provide support, or how much support to provide, you do not need to make that decision alone. After discussing the student’s support requirements with the general education and special education teachers, you should consult the student.

Keep Expectations High

Having a disability does not mean that a student cannot complete assignments and projects in the same way as anyone else. Before attempting to modify or alter a student’s assignment, ask yourself whether the assignment actually needs any changes. Too often, education professionals overmodify for students or decide to make the same modification for every student with the same disability. Sometimes, the best thing to do for a student is not to change your expectations for him or her but, instead, to change the type or level of support.

Break Tasks into Smaller Steps

For some students, it might be useful to break tasks into smaller parts. For example, one student, Chelsea, preferred having a “to do” list posted on her desk for any independent work time. The paraprofessional would write down the big tasks that needed...
to be completed, and Chelsea would complete them independently and cross out each
task. If you have a student who does not read, you could draw a picture list and have
the student cross out each picture as he or she completes each task.

**Extend Time on Tasks**

Many students can complete the same work as anyone else if they have extra time. In
these cases, it may be helpful to slowly decrease the time allotted for certain tasks. Or,
if the other students have an hour to complete a test, allow the student to take the test
in parts—one part on the first day, the second part on the next.

**Present Limited Amount of Information on a Page**

Some students prefer to see less information at once. The layout of information
should be clean and free of distraction. Adequate white space, for example, can make
an assignment appear less confusing. This modification can be made easily by copy-
ing different segments of an assignment onto different pages. In addition, white-out
tape helps limit certain distracting information or pictures. Then, when you photo-
copy the item, the student has less information to wade through. An index card or a
*word window*, a piece of cardboard with a small rectangular window with cellophane
that allows students to see one line of text or one word at a time, can also help stu-
dents eliminate information as they read by themselves.

**Offer Support, Do Not Just Give It**

Do not assume that a student needs help. If a student is struggling, encourage him or
her to ask a peer first. If the student is still struggling, ask, “Can I help you get started?”
If the student says, “No,” respect his or her wishes.

**Use a Soft Voice**

Receiving support is not always a comfortable thing. It also can be distracting to class-
mates. Therefore, when students are working, use a soft voice.

**Make Things Concrete**

Many students need concrete examples, such as pictures or videos that support the con-
cepts taught in class. Jill, a paraprofessional with whom I worked, would use down time
to search the school library and Internet for pictures and videos to support learning.
The teacher would then incorporate these teaching aides into her mini-lectures and teaching centers. This not only helped the students with disabilities; everyone in the class benefited from these visual supports.

**Teach Organizational Skills to Everyone**

It is common for students with and without disabilities to struggle with organization. In one seventh-grade classroom, the paraprofessional helped everyone by doing binder checks at the end of each class. She made sure the notes were in the correct color-coded spot as students left the room. This helped not only Adam, who chronically struggled with keeping things organized, but countless others who needed similar support. Another paraprofessional made a checklist of all the items students needed to take home each day. These lists were made available for any student to use.

**Change the Materials**

Sometimes, all a student needs for success is a different type of material. A change in type, writing utensil, or size or type of paper can make a substantial difference for a student. For example, I used to work with a student named Brett. Every time Brett was expected to write, he would put his head down on the desk or angrily break pencils. The team of teachers and paraprofessionals who supported the classroom met and discussed the potential reasons for Brett’s behavior and how they might make writing more pleasant for him. As a result of this conversation, the team decided to let all students choose their writing instruments and paper size. When this choice was offered, Brett chose a black, felt-tip marker and a half-sheet of paper. For some reason, the change of materials proved much better for him, and he wrote for longer periods of time. He later explained that he would get nervous if he saw “a whole blank piece of paper” and that he hated “the feel of the pencil on the paper.”

**Use a Timer**

Izzy is a kindergarten student. Whenever transitions in the classroom occur, he has loud tantrums. Because of Izzy’s difficulty with transitions, his team decides to use a timer to alert him when the transitions are coming. Izzy’s teacher hands him an old track timer and tells him that he is in charge of letting the other students know when it is cleanup time. After first practicing with the timer, Izzy takes his responsibility very seriously. He walks around from group to group, reminding the kindergartners that there are only “5 minutes until cleanup time... 4 minutes... 3...” He continues to remind his friends until the timer goes off. He then shouts, “Clean up everyone!” For Izzy, the timer helps him know when the transition is occurring and also gives him an important responsibility. Timers can be useful for students who like...