

Tips for a Successful Volunteer Experience

Classroom Environments

- Every school will be different. Schools have unique set-ups and schedules to meet the needs of their students. Some elementary schools departmentalize so that a single teacher at a grade level teaches all of the science, others do not. Some middle schools are on block schedules, some are not.
- Every teacher has his or her own style. This style is reflected in the organization of the room, the interactions between students, the resources included in lessons and the types of assignments.
- A key goal of science education is to nurture student inquiry. Even though there will be school and classroom differences, all students should be encouraged and challenged to be inquisitive and seek answers.

Suggestions for getting more information about the classroom environment you will support

- Meet with the teacher prior to your first day of volunteering.
- Schedule a short meeting with the teacher to discuss schedule, current projects, classroom management and safety procedures. Be aware of school procedures for fire drills and other emergency situations like “Code Blue” and “Code Red.” It is a good idea to take a list of your questions to the meeting.
- Observe a science lesson to get a better understanding of the class norms, the teacher’s style, and general operation of the classroom.
- Meet with the teacher after the lesson to clarify anything that is unclear to you in terms of classroom rules or norms.
- Establish a line of communication between you and the teacher so that ongoing coordination is part of your relationship. While teachers appreciate your efforts, they are extremely busy and do not always have a chance to discuss activities immediately after a class or at the end of a day. Communication can occur via phone, regular in-person meetings, or via email. Regular communication will help support a positive contribution to the classroom environment.

General Expectations for Volunteers

- Be on-time – better yet, be a little early. If a teacher expects you, it is important that you arrive on time to support the lesson or the activity. If you cannot be available, provide advance notice. If that’s not possible, call the school and have the secretary get a message to the teacher.
- Sign-in at the office and get a visitor/volunteer badge.
- Sign out at the office when you leave the building.
- Make sure the teacher is always present when you are working with students.
- Be prepared for what you are working on. Make sure you have communicated with the teacher prior to the task and have had your questions answered.
- When working with students, give thorough explanations using age-appropriate language.
- If you are working with small groups, keep noise levels down so that the other groups can continue to work and hear the teacher.
- Know the classroom rules. This includes rules for using the restroom, getting drinks, getting out of seat to sharpen pencils, and so on. There will need to be consistency between you and the teacher.
- Keep all information confidential. What you hear in the classroom should stay there. If you are concerned about something, bring it to the teacher’s attention in a follow up meeting.
- Have fun! This should be an enjoyable experience for all involved.

General Guidelines for Working with Students

- Learn the names of the students. This shows you care, and you will be able to communicate with

them more easily.

- Communicate your objectives clearly. Tell students what they will learn by the end of the work period.
- Communicate your expectations for the task at hand. Outline what is and is not acceptable for each task. These guidelines should match the norms or rules of the class.
- Show excitement about the work you are doing with the students. It will be contagious.
- Do not “lecture”. Encourage students to ask questions and make discoveries. Support student inquiry.
- Provide positive reinforcement for jobs done well and effectively.
- Smile and be friendly.
- Ask questions to determine what students know and think.
- Provide time for student movement. They cannot sit for long periods of time. Build movement into transition from one activity to another.
- Coordinate with the teacher so you are prepared. Not being prepared can lead to student down time which can lead to behavior issues.

General Guidelines for Difficult Situations

- Proximity usually takes care of low-level behaviors.
- Do not engage in a stand-off with a difficult student. Power struggles turn out poorly for all involved.
- If a child is being oppositional, just stop talking. He/she is probably not listening to what you are saying, and a difficult situation will escalate quickly.
- Create opportunities to include the child in helping in general or with a specific job. This could include helping to set up for the activity, modeling for others, or helping with clean up.
- Provide choices so that child will feel he/she has some control. Make sure the choices are clear.
- Provide an opportunity for a leadership role in the group. Make expectations clear.
- Remember, it is okay to walk away to disengage. Sometimes people just need time and space to work through a situation.
- If the difficulties continue beyond an occasional occurrence, discuss with the teacher to explore other strategies to use with the specific child.

Feel free to discuss questions/issues with your volunteer coordinator.