

## Features

### Assistants needed

Written by Danny Smith, February 2009

**Working in education doesn't have to be all mortar boards and chalk; you can find rewarding work in the sector in a supporting role. The pay may not be amazing but the rewards are many and it can be a good starting point for other careers. Teaching assistant Danny Smith explains.**

My hands are a network of scars; some have interesting and elaborate stories attached to them. When asked about the others I just shrug and explain that I was a teaching assistant at a special school.

Many see teaching assistants as trainee teachers for mainstream schools but it's worth bearing in mind the varied range of support roles in the educational system - from centres like mine in the Behavioural Support Services (BSS) to schools for kids with learning difficulties, and even those that specialise further to cater for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

One of the BSS' roles is to provide the minimum educational requirements for permanently excluded pupils, and my centre provides this support to one of the poorest areas of Birmingham. My role here has many different aspects. The centre is very small so it's very much a case of finding where you fit in. At the moment I support teachers in the classrooms, help with any IT problems, and supervise and document any trips or workshops. Every aspect of my background has a use. My own delinquent youth means I can relate to the pupils and my art degree is utilised for displays and posters.

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While almost any experience or skill will come in useful whilst being a teaching assistant, the one definite thing employers look for is experience of working with children. Jenny Stephens currently works in a special school and explains how she had a head start in this respect.

'My mum was a childminder since I was very young, so I had plenty of experience of being around and being responsible for kids.' Jenny also participated in the Camp America programme. 'Camp is tough but ultimately rewarding and helped me make the decision that I wanted to work with children'.

Permanent positions are sometimes hard to come by and one of the most common routes into the job is through agency work as a cover supply teacher. 'Agency work can be tough; you have to strike up a rapport with both the kids and staff very quickly,' says Natalie Cox.

Though the higher wages of agency work are attractive, the holidays are unpaid which can soon wipe out any savings. But the rewards of the job make it worthwhile. Natalie agrees, 'There are play schemes, but they're not regular and hard to come by, so budgeting is essential. It's not all bad though. The best bit is variation; I hate routine and love meeting new people.'

So where can you go from being a teaching assistant? Personally, I use the frequent and paid holidays to volunteer and freelance while trying get into the media. But the day job hasn't been a waste of time. All the interpersonal, time management and decision making skills are transferable to any job. Jenny started with the same idea, 'I was earning money to travel during the holidays but now am considering using my position to do my teacher training.' Natalie plans to take her role even further. 'I'm happy where I am. I was offered a permanent position at the end of last term and plan to work my way up to Learning Mentor.'

'Without sounding too soppy, my job is to help children learn, seeing them grow and reach their potential. Nothing is more satisfying than that,' insists Jenny, and while I'm not much of a sucker for sentiment, it's certainly worth the scars.

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