Ten Basic Principles for a Successful Subbing Experience

Effectiveness Essentials

- Preparation and motivation will make your day go smoothly.
- Maintain the teacher’s routines, procedures, and discipline policy.
- Flexibility, professionalism, and self-confidence are key.
- Promote a successful and positive experience for the students.
Ten basic principles can guide you to a successful subbing experience. Incorporating and following these principles will give you a sense of control over your first day of subbing and beyond. Each principle conveys an important message to students that will help set the tone for the day or for your long-term subbing experience.

### Be Overprepared
Arrive very early. As soon as you know your assigned school and grade level, head out the door. You will feel more confident if you can spend time before class checking out the room and feeling comfortable in it. Make sure your name is on the board along with the daily schedule or the schedule for the period. The one certainty for the first day is that you will forget to do something! Writing the outline of activities or schedule on the board will serve as a cueing device for you and a reminder to your students that you are well organized and have given a great deal of thought to this day. After consulting the plans, have all your instructional materials at the ready.

*Message Sent to Students:* This substitute teacher has put effort into this day or period and really is businesslike. She knows what she is about and has thought this through. This substitute teacher doesn’t “wing it.” So I better not fool around.

### Motivate
When students realize that their teacher is absent, they may think that the sub is just there to fill time. You want to dispel that notion very quickly. Prepare a simple activity to let them know that this day might even be fun!
One activity that requires no work or advance preparation beyond knowing the grade level is a “Magic” box guessing game. The box will contain something related to the schoolwork. You can pick up any object around the room and put it in your “Magic” box. The students have to guess what you have hidden following these simple rules:

1. Ask only questions that I can answer with yes or no.
2. Listen and do not repeat questions already asked.
3. Everyone gets a turn.
4. If you think you know, do not call out but write it on a sticky note.
5. Reveal the object when everyone has had a chance.

*Message Sent to Students:* This class will be exciting. The substitute teacher has made an effort to convey that he will do the utmost to keep things moving along so we won’t be bored.

*Apply It!*

In all grades, including high school, let the students know that you have something in your Supplement Materials Bag or Tote that you think they will enjoy when all the work is finished. What will yours be?

*Maintain Routines/Schedules*

You may have to establish your own routines if the teacher has not provided detailed information regarding lining up, procedures for collecting papers, bathroom procedures, and so on. You will need to read Chapters 9 and 10 carefully, both of which discuss possible routines at length. You have to be prepared for “Mr. _______________ doesn’t do it that way” with the response, “Yes, I know, but we are trying this new way that always works just as well.” Routines are the tools for saving time and ensuring smooth functioning, structure, and security.

*Message Sent to Students:* This sub is organized and knows how we do things in this class. The sub may even have a more organized approach than our teacher.
CHAPTER 5 • Ten Basic Principles for a Successful Subbing Experience

**Teacher Talks…**

The role of the sub is to keep the class on track/on the same schedule as if the teacher was there. One has to be adaptable and willing to work with children to be a sub. Thick skin is a must. Be ready for “Mr. Peterson doesn’t do that.”

Michael Peterson  
First grade

**Maintain Classroom Rules**

No matter what grade level or subject matter you sub in, you will need to reinforce the classroom rules or, in the absence of any on the board or poster around the room, make up your own. You will have an opportunity to learn about rule making in Chapter 11. Choose a few key rules and stick to them. They should convey a positive discipline system based on mutual respect, responsibility, and dignity. Don’t let infractions slide! Thirty pairs of eyes (or more!) will be watching!

*Message Sent to Students:* I will be safe and I will be responsible for my actions. This is not party time, and the sub is not a pushover.

**Be Flexible**

Recognize that students will be apprehensive about having a sub and about your expectations for them. They may be concerned about their teacher’s absence and whether this is a long-term situation or just a day. You need to provide the structure and reassurance that will allay their fears. Recognize that they may show their discomfort and anxiety by acting out. The way to counter this is by showing them that you know what you are doing and that the day will be a fun and productive one.

*Message Sent to Students:* No need to worry. The sub knows her way around the school and the classroom.

**Be Confident**

If you have ever been in an unfamiliar situation, you know how important it is to assess the situation quickly by looking around the environment and making some key observations about what is going on. That is exactly what you need
to do when you first enter the classroom. Check out the room, including any posted rules, the seating arrangement, the posters around the room, the bulletin boards, the shelves and books they hold. “What goes on here normally?” is the question you should first ask yourself. Then look for the instructions, if any, the teacher has left you to confirm your impressions. Finally, look over the plans that will help you figure out what should happen during the day or period. Once you make your on-the-spot assessment, adopt an attitude of, “This is a snap.” The students will sense your confident attitude and will be less likely to take advantage of you.

Message Sent to Students: We can’t put anything over on this sub. He seems to know what he is doing.

Adopt a Professional Demeanor

No matter what your age and experience in teaching, you need to adopt a businesslike demeanor when you enter the classroom. That means being

Teacher Talks...

Don’t come into a classroom that you are unfamiliar with being too hard or strict. Kids don’t like change so you need to feel out how the class is normally run and then figure out what works best for you. Don’t be too easy either or they will walk all over you. Try to become a regular sub for teachers that you like or a regular at a specific school.

Barbara Arient
High school special educator

Student Says...

When we have an inexperienced substitute teacher, the class goes nuts. The students know they can get away with it because the subs act like big kids. When we have a sub who knows the ropes, students try to get away with it but they don’t succeed. The students can tell who is strict and who isn’t in five minutes. Experienced subs act like professionals.

Natalie, age 18
High school senior
Be Clear and Review

Students should go home after having you as a sub feeling that they have accomplished something. Step in when you see that a given task is too difficult or frustrating. Although you have lesson plans to follow, make sure firm, yet friendly, but not too chummy. You need to strike a balance between being firm, yet fair.

*Message Sent to Students:* This sub is not trying too hard to be liked.

Be Aware and Alert

If you learn one skill prior to subbing, it should be how to have eyes in the back of your head and how to be consistent in enforcing rules and procedures. Your students will be waiting for you to make a mistake, any mistake, and to pull the wool over your eyes. You need to show at the outset that you can anticipate trouble. You will want to use the techniques suggested in Chapter 12, especially the nonverbal techniques of proximity control, to make sure that you nip any misbehaviors in the bud.

*Message Sent to Students:* This sub can spot trouble.

Acknowledge Students

Let each student know with a verbal or nonverbal response from you that she or he is valued and special. It can start with individual greetings to students on their way into the room. A greeting in the primary language of second-language learners will make them feel welcome. Ask students to make nameplates out of folded index cards that you provide or use the seating chart to call on students by name. Use the blank commendations to give out throughout the day. They can lead to a trip to the trinket box or just serve as positive reinforcers. As you walk around the room, liberally compliment the students on their efforts.

*Message Sent to Students:* This sub likes her job and has respect for students.

Student Says...

What should a sub know about kids? That they are nice kids. She or he should know our names.

*Drew, age 8
Third grade*

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Student Says...

When my normal teacher is teaching math she doesn’t use the problems out of the book, she gives us easier problems so we learn better. She explains the problems so we learn to do them faster and easier. The substitute teacher just makes us copy and do the work out of the book. It’s harder, it can be frustrating, and sometimes we don’t get it.

Walker, age 11
Sixth grade

Retired Teacher/Substitute’s Additional Four Principles

1. Humor
Go into the classroom assuming you will have a good time. Kids can spot someone who genuinely wants to be there and someone who is just in it for the money. A sense of humor always helped me during the bad times of teaching and it has served me well in substituting. Kids of all ages love a teacher who is comfortable with them and sees humor even during the bad times.

2. Patience
Maintain a patient attitude, especially with younger ones and those who are “behaviorally challenged.” Don’t lose your cool. Be in control.

3. Be Prepared
Even though there are lesson plans, they don’t always work out. You may have time on your hands. Be prepared to fill in those “holes” with some educational/fun games you can play with them, either orally or on the whiteboard. I have a few that I have accumulated that work with different grade levels and don’t require any materials. For upper-grade classes, for example, I like to play a digit-place game on the whiteboard. For lower-grade classes, I like to play simple games such as “I Spy.”

4. Motivate Them
Have a “carrot” you can dangle that they can look forward to—if they behave. I like to play Bingo with them at the end of the day with simple prizes for winners. Even promising to read a favorite book at the end of the day can be motivation for younger children. Older kids always want P.E. so you can promise to extend P.E. time.

Sally Steinbrunn
that you adapt the work when you sense that it is too hard for the students. You can even ask them to turn to the last chapter in their text and play some sort of review game with them. See Chapter 13 for some easy-to-use strategies to review work.

**Message Sent to Students:** This sub makes the work easy to understand.

When you keep all these principles in mind, they will serve as a framework for the material that follows in this book. They provide a big picture of your role as a substitute teacher, and you can review them again and again before any new assignment.