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Foreword to the Second Edition

The idea for *The Survival Guide* originated from talking to graduating students who were nervous about starting their first teaching jobs and to CEC members who were new teachers and who were feeling stressed about the decisions they were making in their own classrooms. We understood how they felt: You can complete the coursework, the in-class placements, and student teaching, but nothing truly prepares you for your own classroom except having your own classroom.

The Council for Exceptional Children responded to the need to support new special education teachers when it published the first edition of the *Guide* in 1994. We knew that our compilation of tips and strategies needed to be easy to read, and that we should include lists and helpful strategies that new teachers could modify to meet their classroom needs. We also wanted to remind these newest additions to our professional family that they had the tools they needed to be successful and that there were always others close by to whom they could turn for support and assistance.

At first, we were a little surprised at the response and the success of the book. That it has continued to be successful for so many years—that so many new teachers turned to our *Guide* to help them navigate their first years in the classroom—has been rewarding to us in many ways. We are grateful for the opportunity to have helped so many teachers and hope that the *Guide* was instrumental in their continuing in the profession.

This new edition of *The Survival Guide for New Special Education Teachers* retains the spirit and purpose of our first edition and reflects some of the changes in federal legislation and regulations that have occurred in the intervening decades. It also acknowledges the changing roles of the special education teacher and the challenges that these teachers face in the 21st-century classroom.

Teaching is a privilege, a challenge, and a joy. It can be one of the most difficult jobs there is—but is surely one of the most rewarding. We are sure that *The Survival Guide for New Special Education Teachers* will prove to be an essential support to new teachers for many years to come, giving teachers the information, resources, support, and confidence they need to thrive.

*Mary Kemper Cohen*
*Maureen Gale*
*Joyce M. Meyer*
Preface

This second edition of The Survival Guide for New Special Education Teachers is intended to be used as a guide, a resource, and a reference. We wrote it keeping in mind the challenges that new special educators face, and its content reflects what we believe to be the most essential information to support you, the new special education teacher, during your first few years of teaching—and beyond.

The Survival Guide provides practical advice and resources that are integrated with research and evidence-based practices to support the many responsibilities of special education teachers. The book discusses instruction and behavior management as well as tips for collaborating with families and resources to develop and track individualized IEP goals. We hope it will enrich your practice and support you in your journey.

The first few years of teaching can often be overwhelming, yet also incredibly fulfilling. Many teachers report that it is a blur; using the reflections and resources in the chapters will support your teaching and enhance your practice through the years to come. While writing the book, we were given the incredible gift of engagement with so many teachers, paraprofessionals, itinerant teachers, and administrators in the field. We were encouraged and graciously supported by our peers while compiling this edition of The Survival Guide. We know what the research says about attrition rates; our wish for new teachers is for you to know, even in your toughest moments, that you are supported by your peers and by everyone who is committed to making a difference in the lives of children with exceptionalities.

This book is the second edition of The Survival Guide. The first, published in 1994 and written by Mary Kemper Cohen, Maureen Gale, and Joyce Meyer, was for many years an inspiration to and lifesaver for new teachers. We are indebted to Mary, Maureen, and Joyce for their unique contribution to the field, and for their support of and encouragement to us in developing the second edition.

This book would not be possible without Lorraine Sobson, CEC’s Publications Manager, who provided guidance, encouragement, and a keen eye for structuring our story—and also assembled a top-notch production team to see it through. Thanks to our copy editor, Pamela Tatz; the book designer, Jim DeVall; and our proofreader, Deborah Whitley. We are also grateful to Lorraine’s predecessor, Kathleen McLane, who originally contacted us regarding developing a new edition of the Guide.

We are continually grateful to Margo Mastropieri and Tom Scruggs for their guidance and mentorship. For their inspiration we thank Amanda Hicks, Marymount graduate student extraordinaire; Peggy Richards and Patricia Gander, who truly exemplify ideal paraprofessionals; our colleagues in the research field Kelly Brady, Danette Allen Bronaugh, Yojanna Cuenca-Carlino, and Sara Mills; and all of the special education teachers who shared their stories with us, and whose quotes pepper the pages of this book. We would also like to extend our gratitude to our supportive and incredible families.
Welcome to Your Professional World!

Get ready to dive in! You have been training for your first teaching job for years. Most likely, something in your life inspired you to work with exceptional students, and you want to help others (Fish & Stephens, 2010). You will encounter many different types of students. Some will challenge your patience. Others will inspire you. Inside every child is a gift, waiting to be acknowledged and nurtured. As a teacher, you will learn your students’ gifts and can help them find their “genius” within.

“Every child deserves a champion … an adult who will never give up with them, who understands the power of connection and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.”

– Rita Pierson

**Education Settings**

Special education teachers instruct students in a variety of environments. Some teachers have their own classrooms. Other teachers are itinerant, moving from classroom to classroom with a cart. Still others have varying responsibilities in a variety of classrooms, or work among schools as itinerant specialists or consultants. Regardless of where you teach, being able to organize your work and materials is critical. As a new special educator, you may feel overwhelmed by the variety of potential teaching environments and settings. Remember to breathe, and know that you can design each space to meet your students’ needs (and take a look at Chapter 3, which discusses ways to organize your materials and environment in ways that facilitate student learning).

With the increased inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings, many special educators co-teach in inclusive classrooms with general education teachers. Some special education teachers “pull out” students for specialized instruction in resource rooms or “push in” services at different times of the day. Still others instruct students in self-contained

**REFLECTION**

Why did you make special education your career? What prompted you to begin this journey? Your passion is an important driving force that will help you get through your first year and empower you in the future. What are your inspirations and aspirations? Reflect on the work that brought you to this point.
Getting to Know Your Work Environment

This chapter helps you engage with your school and supports your role as a special educator as you become acquainted with your school’s culture and climate. Topics include learning your way around the physical plant, understanding how the various structures of the school work, and finding out whom to ask for support. In addition, this chapter supports you in building professional relationships with administrators, collaborating and co-teaching with general education teachers, managing paraprofessionals in a self-contained class setting, and participating on school grade and subject matter teams.

As a first-year special educator, you are starting a new life. In addition to a new career, you may also be entering an unfamiliar building or campus. You may have a general idea of the school and surroundings from your first visits and interviews, but now school is opening and you will need to get your bearings—not only for yourself but also to best support your students as they navigate the building and a new school year. Knowing your way around your school building is an important first step toward becoming acquainted with your school environment.

One of the best ways to get to know your building is to ask someone in the building for a tour, during which you can meet other staff members. The odds are high that you are not the only new teacher and an orientation will be available to you; however, even if there is a formal tour, you will want to have a handy checklist (see Figure 2.1; also included in Appendix A) to complement or supplement your journey as you navigate the building and surrounding campus. As you are touring the campus, don’t forget to smile, introduce yourself, and record notes about the people you meet and the places you visit. You may want to use this same format to teach your students about different areas of the building, as well.

“Nervous doesn’t even begin to describe how I felt walking through those front doors for the first time. I wanted to feel confident so I dressed for success, but inside I was Jell-O. The most wonderful thing happened: the lead counselor took us on a thorough walking tour!”

—First-year special education teacher, elementary school, Grades K–2
This chapter focuses on getting ready for your students by creating a positive classroom environment. It includes physical layout of your teaching space, case management, behavior management, and communicating effectively with families and colleagues. You will create your own style and find what works best for you and your students!

The beginning of the school year can be both an exciting and stressful time for all teachers. One of your more critical tasks is setting up your teaching environment—whether it’s a classroom, multiple classrooms, or a cart—to meet the needs of your diverse learners. It can be challenging, but you are ready to tackle the organization and planning to meet the needs of your student population.

**Teaching Schedules**

Your first job is to take a close look at your teaching schedule and access the practical items needed to create a positive and productive learning environment. A major concern for new special educators is how to create such a space for their students and for themselves as they navigate the educational landscape (Wolfe, 2006).

Figures 3.1 and 3.2 provide examples of high school and elementary school schedules. The sample high school schedule illustrates a block schedule where students meet every other day. Your school will provide you with a schedule at the beginning of every school year. It is important to post this schedule in every room. It is also essential to review the schedule with your students repeatedly during the first couple weeks of school and after holidays or snow days, particularly if your school does block scheduling.

The sample elementary school schedule illustrates a co-teaching and resource teaching schedule. As with the high school schedule, you should review daily
Teaching and Testing

So, your classroom is set up and your basic organizational tasks are underway; now get ready to put on your exceptional planning skills hat. Your goal is to deliver high-quality instruction and be able to accurately assess your students’ progress in learning and behaviors. You will have the chance to incorporate your teaching style as you prepare for your exceptional learners. This chapter is intended to support your instructional style by providing resources for instructional strategies, selecting evidence-based practices, planning lessons, using technology, and assessment and grading. Bookmark the pages in this chapter and use the web links to inform your practice!

Some teachers, when they first start out, use classroom accommodations like Band-Aids; because they are not 100% sure about what is most needed, they just keep adding items to the IEP. Consider what follows a mini lesson on accommodations, modifications, and instructional strategies. The bottom line is: accommodations equate to access, modifications equate to changes in the curriculum, and strategies are the “how to reach and teach” manuals.

Accommodations and Modifications

Accommodations refer to supports that allow students to access the curriculum most effectively as per their learning needs. These accommodations can be visual, auditory, varied-response, organization, behavior, or scheduling items that support individual learners as they navigate the curriculum. Examples include seating, Braille, visual cues, a pass for behavior supports, word processing, assistive technology, audio devices, extended time, a reduction in the number of items (not the content) in classwork, homework or tests, opportunities to respond orally, working in small groups, graphic organizers, and clarification of directions. The Testing and Classroom Accommodations worksheet in Chapter 1 provides some of the accommodations that you might find in (or add to) a student’s IEP. Accommodations are always based on the individual student,

REFLECTION

The Testing and Classroom Accommodations worksheet in Appendix A lists some examples of commonly offered accommodations. If you haven’t had the chance to organize these accommodations for individual students, you need do so before beginning instruction. Also, copy the accommodations page for each of your classrooms for your co-teachers and paraprofessionals. Remember that these are part of a legal and confidential document, so they should be kept in a location that allows you to access them quickly without compromising the confidentiality of the document.
You are now aware of various strategies and evidence-based practices for students with disabilities, but how do you know which strategies to implement? A student’s needs, which are outlined in the IEP, provides a blueprint for the delivery of these strategies and evidence-based practices. This chapter supports you in developing IEPs and collaborating with families and staff to support your students’ individual needs for success in the classroom and as they transition each year. It addresses how to create standards-based IEP goals aligned with your students’ learning and functional needs. We also discuss data collection, which is essential to supporting standards-based IEP goals, progress monitoring, and transition goals. The bottom line is that this is a collaborative process.

Special education teachers have many responsibilities and sometimes these responsibilities can be tedious. However, the IEP process is extremely important. This process was established for a reason: to educate students with disabilities in order to help them learn skills that allow them to live meaningful lives and achieve their goals.

On those days when you feel overwhelmed with responsibilities (there will be many), remember the journey of individuals with disabilities and their families. Parents of children with disabilities advocated for their children to receive special education for many years. Prior to 1975 and the enactment of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142), over eight million children with disabilities were excluded from public education (Gordon, 2006); there was no law that required states to educate students with disabilities and the federal government did not provide funds to states to educate them (Abeson, 1981).
Welcome to the world of special education! Your students are incredibly fortunate to have such a dedicated, compassionate, and knowledgeable teacher. This chapter discusses your growth as a professional—with information about teacher evaluations, professional development opportunities, and reflective practices, and provides a review of the critical times when you need to stay energized and engaged in the profession. Review the resources provided, keep your files current with your accomplishments, and take advantage of professional opportunities. Don’t forget to keep, reflect on, and share your kudos, too, because these are motivating and will remind you why you chose this field … and we can’t build a strong presence in the field of special education without you!

For many special educators, the first year of teaching is truly a blur. You may feel like you never stop moving. This career can be wonderful and terrifying at the same time. As a teacher, you want to do well, teach students, and learn everything you can from your peers … but sometimes it may seem that there are not enough hours in the day. You will be faced with challenges in the classroom and with your case management. Sleep will become optional, as you spend time outside the classroom pursuing information and resources to help to do your best inside the classroom. Your personal and professional growth may be dependent upon the support you receive from your school and your professional peers and mentors. And then you will also face teacher evaluations. You will second guess your performance. What practices will you want to continue? What did you need to do differently? How will you know that you were successful?

**Teacher Evaluations**

As educators, we know how important it is to assess the growth and learning of our students. Grading and evaluation of student work are critical parts of our job. However, when we hear the words “teacher evaluation,” we often forget that this is a necessary part of our review as professionals in the field. As teachers, we