

## *Good Qualities in a Sub*

There are some personality traits that all substitutes, as well as regular teachers, need to have if they want to maintain their sanity in the face of dozens of rambunctious children and enjoy their work as well.

Plenty of **patience** is indispensable when dealing with children of any age. Some of them will purposefully try to rile you in order to show off in front of their peers, some will just be annoying because they find it entertaining, and yet others do not even realize they are making your job difficult. Take a deep breath and count to five (at least) when a student or students is causing you to become agitated. Then try again to connect with them on their level – physically and intellectually – to make your wishes clear. It is imperative that you *never* “lose it” in front of the students or try to assert yourself by using sarcastic comebacks. If necessary excuse yourself from the room and step into the hallway for a moment to gather your wits. See Chapter Six: Discipline and Behavior Issues starting on p. 22 for more information on how to address student behavior problems.

Keeping your patience comes from having **respect** for all the students with whom you interact. They may not all talk, act, dress, or smell like you would prefer, but they are all human beings with lots of potential, given the right opportunities. They need to be treated with the same respect as any adult. This goes for what you say to them, how you say it, and what you communicate with your body language. Being a part of the school day gives you a chance to have an impact on the next generation as they develop. You can be an influential role model for a child even in one day just by showing an interest in them. It should also be obvious that if you are going to be spend considerable time in schools as a substitute that you need to have similar respect for your fellow teachers and the school administration. Remember that they have very demanding jobs and rarely get the recognition and positive feedback that they deserve.

A **sense of humor** is a requirement in my opinion, but unfortunately not a quality that I remember in very many substitutes (especially in the upper-level grades) when I was in school. Yes, the students need to respect and obey you, but being harsh and critical will only bring obedience out of fear. Be willing to laugh and joke with the students in an age-appropriate manner. They will find you easier to relate to if you adopt an approachable, yet authoritative, demeanor. This is especially important for younger students who may be anxious about having an unfamiliar person in charge of their class for the day.

Substitute teachers are, of course, prime targets for pranks and mild harassment by older students. This is their way of testing your limits – and theirs. As long as they do not take it too far for a school setting, try to roll with the joke and not overreact. If you do not take the bait and succeed in keeping your cool, the students will likely lose interest in their attempts to unnerve you.

Be able to **stand up to pressure** from the students no matter how cute they are or how earnestly they plead their case. Once you have established the rules for the class, do not change your mind unless there are extenuating circumstances that indicate otherwise. The students will invariably ask you to stray from the teacher's lesson plans because they want to get out of work, or they will ask for special favors such as extra recess or working with a partner on an assignment. They will pester and cajole and hound to no end unless you calmly and firmly "put your foot down."

A desire for **variety** in your work and for **flexibility** in your schedule is vital to your enjoyment as a career substitute. You will encounter many types of teaching assignments, lots of new faces, and plenty of challenges to keep you from ever being bored as a substitute teacher. On the other hand if you are not very good at "going with the flow," then you will have trouble adapting to life as a sub. There will be many times when you will not have more than 12 hours notice of an assignment, and sometimes it is as little as 30 minutes. Be ready for six a.m. wake-up calls because you will get them when a position needs to be filled at the last minute. Also realize there are no guarantees you will be called every day that you would like to work. Even after you arrive at the school there may be a change in your assignment. Last minute scheduling adjustments are not abnormal. The good news is that after you establish a relationship with one or two school districts, you will receive more advance notice of openings and fewer early morning wake-up calls. But the nature of the work means your days will be somewhat unpredictable. Teachers and their children get sick in the middle of the night, and accidents happen on the way to work. These are the situations when schools need their best subs the most.

At the risk of sounding repetitive – this type of work is not suited to those who require stability and routine in their daily work environment. It is very different from a standard office setting. Do not expect to read the paper and cruise the Internet for an hour in the morning. And, no, you will not get 15 minute breaks every two hours to drink the company coffee and share office gossip. There are, however, plenty of other perks that I will discuss shortly.

Mild chaos and a certain level of noise are often the norm in classrooms. Expecting complete silence for the entire class period is not realistic. While you need to **be able to accept the normal, energetic activity level** of 25-35 typical students, one of your jobs is to make sure the hubbub does not become a distraction for other classrooms. You also need to keep an eye (and ear) out for inappropriate physical contact (such as pushing, poking, and slapping) that can erupt when the general energy level elevates. When this happens you must be willing to intervene and take control of the situation. Most subbing days I was just thrilled when no one got hurt – fortunately that was 99% of the time.

Other desirable traits in a substitute apply to almost any job: be on time (early is best), recognize the importance of your work, do not cancel on an assignment except in absolute emergencies, dress professionally, and expect to enjoy your day.