

JO BRIGHOUSE



## Bringing your TA game

WHEN I was at primary school, there was one teaching assistant. Mrs Moore's job consisted entirely of giving out milk, washing paint pots and fastening coats at breaktime.

Since then, the role has changed out of all recognition. From milk distributors to educational polymaths, hopes for what a TA can deliver have soared sky high. Luckily there are many TAs out there who more than live up to these expectations.

Sue was a TA who was new to our school. Jacob was nearly 6 but was new to school in general and came complete with social workers, reams of paperwork and a backstory that broke your heart. It was no surprise that adjusting to school life was hard for him. He hid under tables, kicked, bit, overturned furniture and screamed. He frequently had to be retrieved from far-flung parts of the school.

Children in this state can leave the class teacher feeling pretty powerless. Supporting a pupil with such complex needs while meeting the needs of the rest of the class is impossible.

Therefore, Jacob had Sue to provide him with full-time, one-to-one support. As a class teacher, you sometimes wish you could work with just one child, but there are times when 30 seems eminently more preferable. Sue's job was intense: assisting a child whose emotional state balanced, even on the best of days, on a knife's edge. One ill-timed suggestion, one false move or lapse of concentration and Jacob's fragile calm would shatter.

It was an incredibly draining job, requiring an almost Herculean level of patience, but Sue never complained. Along the way she was hit, bitten,

screamed at and pelted by flailing limbs as Jacob struggled to adapt. Despite this, Sue was implacable, and, slowly but surely, things started to move forwards. Jacob stayed in the classroom more. He consented to sit down and hold a pencil. His education could finally get underway.

Sue got the best out of Jacob. She developed an almost telepathic sense of what he needed. She knew when he felt threatened, when he was tired

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or hungry, when it was OK to push him out of his comfort zone and when to play it safe. Here was an adult Jacob who could cautiously learn to trust.

When panic set in, he no longer dived under the table – he ran to Sue. She'd tell him "no" and he'd respond; she'd praise him and he'd glow with pride. At story time, he would snuggle into her side, perfectly calm and content.

Without her, there would have been exclusions, endless costly visits from professionals and a constantly disrupted class. Thanks to her unrelenting support, Jacob not only survived the year but flourished. She was delivering education, safety, consistency and love – and all on not much above the minimum wage.

When Jacob stood up in assembly to read out his first ever piece of independent writing, Sue burst into tears. TAs can be amazing.

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