



ESA/O
The EDUCATION
SAFETY ASSOCIATION
of ONTARIO

EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS

HEALTH AND SAFETY INFORMATION FOR SUPERVISORS

Educational Assistants (EAs) perform an important role in schools today. Without their contributions, students who have “special needs” would be unable to participate in many school activities. Many of the tasks performed by Educational Assistants place them at an increased risk for injuries or illnesses compared to other school staff.

Insurance information regarding injuries to Educational Assistants demonstrate that they have higher injury and illness rates than other categories of school staff. One school board reported that the Educational Assistants made up 4% of their staff population, yet, were involved in 35% of the reported hazardous incidents. Another board reported that Educational Assistants reported the EAs made up approximately 17% of the staff population but 57% of the accidents. In terms of absenteeism EAs lose an average of 11.66 days per year per employee.

The most common types of incidents or accidents reported by Educational Assistants result from the lifting and transferring of students or aggressive student actions. Another common area of concern for Educational Assistants is in the area of infection control while providing personal care to students. While statistics are not readily available, Educational Assistants report that stress is a major contributing factor to the high absenteeism rate among this group of staff.

For Supervisors of Educational Assistants, this represents an opportunity to lower costs associated with workplace injuries and accidents and to improve working conditions for their employees, while at the same time improving the efficiency of the classroom operation. In the long run, these also benefit the “special needs” students.

Manager’s Responsibilities:

The *Occupational Health and Safety Act* outlines the general duties of a supervisor in terms of workplace health and safety. These duties include:

- ensuring that a worker works in a safe manner
- ensuring that a staff member uses equipment or protective devices or clothing that is required by the employer
- advising the staff of potential or actual hazards in the workplace
- provide written instructions of the procedures to be followed for the protection of the worker’s health and safety, and
- take every reasonable precaution for the protection of a worker.

The Supervisor of an Educational Assistant is responsible to ensure that tasks are performed in a safe manner and that appropriate equipment is utilized. Included in these responsibilities is ensuring staff receive information and training regarding workplace hazards and their rights as workers in relation to health and safety.

Education and Training for Educational Assistants:

When hiring new Educational Assistants, it is important that during their orientation they receive information concerning hazards and understand their rights and duties relating to health and safety in the workplace. Reviews and updates of the information should occur on a regular basis. All workers have the *right to know* about hazards in the workplace, including any hazardous materials to which they may be exposed. They should be provided with information regarding precautions to protect their health and safety.

All employees also have the *right to participate* in identifying and resolving workplace health and safety concerns. Since the health and safety concerns confronting Educational Assistants may be unique, this group should be consulted when identifying and attempting to find solutions to their health and safety issues.

All workers have the *right to refuse work* that they believe to be dangerous to either their own health and safety or that of another worker.

Training regarding workplace hazards specific to Educational Assistants should, at a minimum, address those areas where there are an increased number of incidents or injuries being reported. Although training should be modified to meet the needs of the individual workplace, this training would generally include specific instruction relating to the prevention of lifting related injuries, the prevention and handling of aggressive behaviours, and infection control precautions.

Health and Safety Programs:

'Reasonable' precautions include ensuring that appropriate programs are implemented and maintained to ensure that the health and safety of staff is protected. A health and safety program should include the following components:

- policy statements – including a commitment to health and safety
- identification of roles and responsibilities in relation to the development, implementation and ongoing evaluation of the program
- written procedures or specific instructions that staff are to follow in performing their tasks to ensure the protection of their safety, and
- the provision of training (initial and ongoing) for all staff to ensure they are fully aware of the hazards, and the proper procedures to follow to protect their health and safety.

In addressing the hazards and risks involved in the role of the Educational Assistant, the following programs should be considered for implementation:

- back injury prevention program
- prevention and handling of aggressive behaviour, and
- an infection control program.

Specific hazards and characteristics related to each workplace must be assessed, physical limitations of employees considered and incident and accident data reviewed to determine what other programs should be implemented to ensure a safe and healthy workplace.

Workplace parties must work collaboratively to ensure issues of health and safety for both the Educational Assistant and the "special needs" students are addressed. The Educational Assistant is an important part of the educational team and it is a supervisor's responsibility to ensure that they are involved in occupational health and safety programs and that precautions are taken to promote their health and safety.