How to Survive Your First Year of Teaching

There's no getting around it. Your first year of teaching will be a series of ups and downs. That's because teaching is a complex job with huge responsibilities right from the very first day. The highs and lows are so distinct that the New Teacher Center in Santa Cruz, California, describes first-year teaching as a roller-coaster ride and has identified five distinct phases:

- Anticipation - July, August
- Survival - September
- Disillusionment - October, November, December
- Rejuvenation - January, February, March
- Reflection - April, May, June

Although the new teacher cycle has as many thrills and spills, it's important to know about and even anticipate the occasional spills because knowledge is power! I wish I had known that it was typical for new teachers to have feelings of fear, anxiety, and inadequacy when things wheeled out of control for me in October during my first year of teaching. If this knowledge had been shared with me, perhaps I would have been better prepared for the slump. Perhaps I would have remained more positive, knowing that there would be an upward trend if I could just hold on a little longer. More important, perhaps, I would have reached out to other professionals for support rather than "toughing it out" on my own. The following descriptions and strategies will help you maneuver through your roller coaster year as a new teacher!

1. **Anticipation** – Like other new teachers, you begin the school year full of excitement, certain that you are going to change the world. You have worked hard to earn your teaching credentials and are ready to make a difference. You are confident that you will love all of your students and that they will love you, too. You have a vision of the ideal teacher as the first day of school draws near. Here are some ways to make the most of the Anticipation Phase:

   - Hold on to your vision of what you expect teaching to be. The key is to learn how to teach without losing your excitement and idealism.

   - Begin **building connections** with positive teachers at your location, at other schools, or online — when things become overwhelming, you will already have supportive relationships in place.

   - **Keep a journal** so that you can get into the habit of looking for the best in each day right from the start. Record your daily and weekly successes as a
teacher, as well as any progress toward bigger goals.

- Start a notebook of "Ideas for Next Year." All year long, make note of things you'd like to try or change, then revisit the notebook as you begin planning for next year.

2. Survival – The first month of school can be overwhelming. No matter how well prepared you are, unexpected situations arise. It can be a struggle to deal with the daily management of your classroom and do all the prep work. The countless hours of work after school, in the evenings, and on the weekends can seem like a treadmill that never stops. Try these coping strategies:

- Maintain your momentum by reflecting on what is going well. Because you're so busy now, you may be tempted to set your journal aside until you can get your head above water. Don't! If you lose this good habit now, it will be very difficult to resume it.

- Talk to other teachers about specific ideas for lessons — why reinvent the wheel this year when others are willing to share the wisdom of their experience? Use what others share this year, and perfect it for yourself next year.

- Forge a solid connection with at least one teaching peer if you haven't already done so. Establish a sharing relationship and spend time together doing "teacher things."

3. Disillusionment - A combination of stress, exhaustion, illness, and overwhelming responsibilities can throw a new teacher into a "pit of despair." Your tendency may be to focus on what hasn't been accomplished and what has gone wrong over the past several months. Report cards, parent-teacher conferences, and your first teacher evaluation are looming. Classroom management issues can be discouraging. Self-esteem may be at an all-time low. Many new teachers consider leaving the profession during this stage. Use these ideas to ward off the disillusionment.

- Take heart! Getting through this phase will be one of the greatest challenges you face as a new teacher. Be persistent during this difficult time, which may last three months.

- Reach out to friends and family who may be feeling neglected. Let them know that while things are difficult right now, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Ask for their continued support and patience.

- Reach out to your peers. All that relationship-building with peers at the beginning of the year will now result in support when you need it the most.

- Ask for help or even just a shoulder to lean on. Other teachers have been through it, so they'll understand.

- Visit other classrooms and watch how other teachers work with their
students to gain new ideas on managing your classroom. Another teacher may even be willing to come to your classroom and demonstrate a lesson or two. No matter how you go about connecting, just do it! New teachers who have a solid support network make it.

- Keep journaling! It is now more important than ever for you to find at least one good thing from every day and to celebrate achievements, no matter how small. Remember that success is a journey and you need to give yourself time to achieve all your goals and become the teacher you want to be.

4. **Rejuvenation** – You’ve survived the craziness of the holidays and have had some time to relax with family and friends. You have made progress with classroom management and finally have time to do some planning and organizing for the rest of the school year. Spring is right around the corner, and students are beginning to show how much they’ve grown and learned. It’s apparent that hard work is beginning to pay off! To keep the momentum going:

- Focus on curriculum development and teaching strategies using your newfound confidence and energy.

- Try something new with your students and talk about the results with other teachers, even if it didn't work out the way you had expected it to. Now that you have made it through the most difficult times, you have valuable experience to share.

- Expand your professional circle of peers to include new and experienced teachers from other schools. Pooling ideas from multiple schools gives you many more resources.

- Go back and examine your vision of successful teaching. Bump up your action plan a notch.

5. **Reflection** – there’s a rhythm to the class now and student learning is evident. It isn’t as exhausting to plan, prepare, or teach, so creativity is starting to flow. You have more time to spend talking to veteran teachers. You have the opportunity to refine your teaching, keeping what works, changing what doesn’t, and looking toward next year. Reflection leads to Anticipation for the new year, a new opportunity to grow.

- Refer to your vision of the successful new teacher as you begin to think ahead. Determine what you accomplished and where you need to continue refining your skills. Revise your vision if necessary.

- Actively seek out partnerships with other teachers as you begin to envision the possibilities that the next year holds. Select a teaching buddy who will plan with you and even observe and coach you during your quest for success.

- Go through your "Ideas for Next Year" notebook and pull out the best ideas.
Set goals for next year and determine steps that will allow you to reach those goals.

- Have a special celebration with your students — you will never forget your first class.

This article was adapted from *The New Teacher's Complete Sourcebook: Grades K–4* by Bonnie P. Murray, © 2002, published by Scholastic.

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