



# **A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY**

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## **What is Advocacy?**

According to common dictionary definitions, ad-vo-ca-cy is a noun, meaning:

- “giving aid to a cause”
- “active verbal support for a cause or position”
- “the act of pleading or arguing in favor of something, such as a cause, idea, or policy”
- “active support”

Advocacy comes in many forms, from gentle persuasion to all-out-in-your-face confrontation. The form or style that is most effective often depends on the type of advocacy you are pursuing. In parent advocacy, one extremely important consideration is the long-term working relationship between you, as a parent, and the educators who have a continuing role in your child’s educational development.

If you are advocating against a new shopping mall development that would over-take a neighborhood park and playground, an all-out-in-your-face confrontational style may be necessary to gain attention and make your voice heard, and if it is necessary, it may be appropriate. After all, you probably don’t need to have a constructive long-term working relationship with the real estate developers. You don’t have that luxury in educational advocacy. Because a parent’s relationship and communication with their child’s school is so important, we have developed a Philosophy of Effective Educational Advocacy that we believe serves families well over the long-term.

## **Our Philosophy of Effective Educational Advocacy**

1. **Observe the Golden Rule.** First and foremost, treat others with the respect and courtesy that you expect to receive from them. Tensions and emotions may run high, but behavior can be moderated. If that is particularly difficult for you, practice. Recruit a friend or relative (or

several) and ask them to take the other side of your argument—practice stating your position, making your case, and responding to a different point of view before you go into the more stressful real-life setting. The more confident you feel about what you have to say, the more effective you will be as an advocate, and the more likely that you will be able to keep your emotions under control.

Respect and courtesy are not just about what you say—if you roll your eyes, sigh loudly, make faces, or sit throughout a meeting with your arms crossed and a scowl on your face, you are demonstrating your disrespect for the process and the others participating in the meeting. Everyone on the education team—that includes the parents, parent advocates, and educators—are professionals in terms of the knowledge and expertise they bring to the table and everyone should behave in a way that demonstrates a constructive attitude.

2. **An effective advocate prepares.** It is not enough to know what you want. You need to know your rights—and their limitations, as well as your responsibilities. Knowing your rights gives you power. Knowing their limits gives you credibility. You need to know *why* you want what you want for your child and be able to explain that to others who have a different point of view. That gives you bargaining power. Negotiation is just another part of life where good preparation is half the battle.
3. **Advocacy is not about the advocate.** An effective advocate speaks in support of “a position, cause, policy, or idea” – not in defense of him or herself. If you find yourself slipping into a posture of trying to prove you are right and everyone else is wrong, you need to take a step back and remember *it’s all about the issue*—not about “them” and not about you.
4. **Name-calling, profanity, and shouting are never acceptable behavior.** Wouldn’t you find it outrageous if school or AEA personnel called you names, used profanity, and shouted at you during meetings? It is just as inappropriate and unproductive if such behavior comes from parents or parent advocates. If you are advocating for your child, and the emotions of the moment become too much for you to handle, do your best to calmly ask for a short break and take a few minutes to cool down. If you are acting as an advocate on behalf of someone else’s child, you have a particular duty to moderate your behavior and serve as a calming presence for the parents.

5. **If, despite your best efforts, you lose your temper, apologize.** It's not an easy thing to do, but we are all adults and we all need to take responsibility for our actions—even the ones we would rather forget. I can't count the number of times I've heard a parent say, "If the school people would just apologize, I'd be satisfied." Parents rarely get such apologies for all kinds of reasons, but that doesn't mean that you have an excuse for failing to acknowledge when your own behavior has been inappropriate—and sometimes the best way to get an apology is to give one.
6. **Negotiation is not weakness.** Reasonable people can have different views on just about anything. That's why we have horse races, elections, and both Coke and Pepsi. Negotiation is the process that is used to work out differences about issues that are of mutual importance to the parties involved. You negotiate with your kids about how many of their peas they are going to eat before they get dessert, how much TV they are going to watch, and what time they are going to go to bed. You negotiate with your spouse about whether spend your tax refund on a new washer and dryer or a speed boat. If it weren't for negotiation, governments would come to a grinding halt because lawmakers would never all agree on anything. Negotiation is an everyday part of life—not something that only takes place around conference tables—and successful negotiation does not result in winners or losers. It should result in the best possible outcome that meets everyone's needs.
7. **Compromising is not losing, but refusing to compromise can lead to a loss.** It is not reasonable to expect that all differences of opinion will be resolved in your favor. At times, you will need to accept compromise to get MOST of what you want. This happens every day in your life, but you may not recognize it. . . You go shopping for blue jeans - you know exactly what you want - the cut, the length, the fit, the perfect amount of fade. After a long afternoon of trying on every pair in the county, you decide that you are going to be happy with a pair that have the right cut, the right fit, the right fade, and are just a bit too long - after all, you can take them home and hem them to the right length. . . . You go to the grocery store and they are out of your favorite cut of meat, so you choose another cut - not the one you intended to buy, but one you know is comparable in quality, price, and value. You found a practical, acceptable compromise. You do it every day. If you didn't, you would frequently be naked and hungry because the exact thing you want is not always readily available to you.

8. **Know your bottom line.** Define what you want ahead of time, including the minimum result that is acceptable to you. Let's stick with the blue jean example – would you take a pair a shade lighter or darker? Would you take a pair a size bigger or a size smaller? Would you take a different style altogether? If you can't find the right blue jeans, would you settle for khakis instead? What if they were on sale? It's your bottom line and you have to decide where to draw it.
9. **Keep your eye on the goal.** The goal is not the outcome of this particular IEP meeting or programming decision. The goal is your child's total educational program and long-term progress. Your ongoing working relationship with the school district and AEA personnel is a very important component of your child's successful education. Unless you plan to pack up and move to a different school district every time you have a disagreement with educators, you may need to recognize that some things you would like to have for your child in the short term are less important than a program and a relationship that are moving in the right direction. Some issues may be so important that you are willing to risk some disruption to the parent-school relationship, but you can't make a choice to go to battle on every minor point and expect to maintain a good working relationship.
10. **Regardless of the outcome, be as gracious as you can be.** Some negotiations may end with you getting exactly what you wanted. Some may end with you feeling like no one even heard what you said, and most will probably be somewhere in between. Regardless of the outcome, thank everyone for their time, and if the meeting has been emotional or confrontational, it can be very productive if you are able to say something like, "We've covered some difficult ground today, and even though we are not yet in agreement, I hope we can continue to work together for (Susie's) sake." If that's more than you can offer, try to at least leave with a nod, a smile, or a pleasant look.



## IT'S NOT ABOUT THE PICKLE

*A modern parable about how to be an effective advocate and keep your focus on the issue.*

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**Here are the facts:** You are at an outdoor public event and you are very hungry. You have only three choices of food vendors: Vendor #1 sells nothing but hot dogs and you are allergic to hot dogs. Vendor #2 sells a wide variety of dinners, but the least expensive item is \$4.50 and you only have \$4.00 cash left to spend. Vendor #3 is selling hamburgers for \$3.50 each, and as it happens, you like hamburgers.

You go to the hamburger vendor and ask for a hamburger “with everything.”

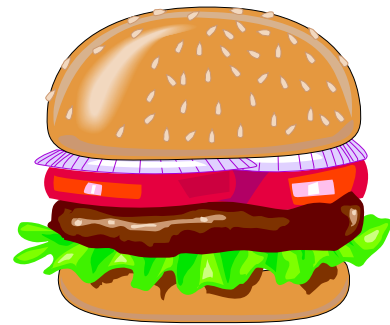
The hamburger vendor says, “I’m really sorry, it’s been a very busy day and I just ran out of pickles, but I’ll be glad to put everything *else* on for you.”

How do you respond?

Consider the range of responses available to you:

**Possible Response #1:** You can immediately become angry and hostile—call the vendor a “burger-flipping-moron” (or something even more colorful) and berate him at the top of your lungs for his failure to adequately plan for the maximum number of pickles that he might need that day. You can say, “how dare you try to sell me a less than PERFECT hamburger” and walk away in a huff—still hungry and out of options.

**Possible Response #2:** You think the vendor reminds you of someone who slighted you once, so you immediately jump to the conclusion that the vendor actually has pickles and has intentionally decided to withhold them from you out of sheer spite. You can accuse him of saving the pickles for people who are richer than you, more influential than you, and better-looking than you, and walk away without the burger, shouting that pickles or no pickles you wouldn’t stoop to buying a burger from him if it was the last burger on earth. You are still hungry and out of options.



**Possible Response #3:** You can immediately begin to criticize the vendor's burger-making ability and tell him that if he can't offer you a burger with "everything," you expect him to give you a discount. How could you be expected to pay full price when there are no pickles? The vendor politely responds that all condiments are included in the price, and pickles do not cost extra, but he is willing to take 50 cents off the price to keep a happy customer. You rather ungraciously mumble that it should be at least a dollar discount, and take the burger. You can only eat a few bites because the whole exchange left a big knot in your stomach. The vendor doesn't feel very good about the whole thing either.

**Possible Response #4:** You can become sullen and sarcastic and declare at length how much you like pickles, how much you have always liked pickles, and how pathetic a hamburger is without pickles. You can reminisce about how all the really great hamburgers you have ever eaten had pickles, and grudgingly accept the pickle-less hamburger, but make it clear to the vendor and everyone else in hearing distance that you will not be able to enjoy it and you have somehow been cheated by the transaction. You eat the burger, but make the rest of the day unpleasant for yourself and everyone else because you continue to complain about the lack of pickles.

**Possible Response #5:** You can immediately begin to feel sorry for yourself because you believe you never get the "perfect" hamburger—you are always the one who has to take less than you wanted—and even though you decide to accept the hamburger (although less than graciously) you continue to dwell on all the condiment mistakes that have ever happened to you or anyone you know, and become so wrapped up in remembering every time your bun was improperly toasted, that you forget to eat the hamburger until it's cold. Then you begin to complain that it must not have been cooked correctly because it didn't stay hot long enough—"things like this always happen to me."

**Possible Response #6:** You can think for a moment, rationally consider the relative contribution that the pickle makes to the whole hamburger experience and politely ask the vendor if he could substitute a leaf of lettuce or, perhaps, a jalapeño pepper instead. You accept the hamburger with a pickle substitution graciously, it satisfies your hunger, and you can enjoy the rest of the day.

**Possible Response #7:** You can think for a moment, rationally consider the relative contribution that the pickle makes to the whole hamburger experience and decide that its absence does not significantly diminish your potential enjoyment of the hamburger. You can accept the pickle-less hamburger graciously, it satisfies your hunger, and you can enjoy the rest of the day.

**Possible Response #8:** You can think for a moment, rationally consider the relative value of the pickle and the fact that you are extremely hungry. You determine that the vendor has made you the best offer he can at this particular time and has, in fact, come very close to completely fulfilling your “with everything” request. He is willing and able to fully address the issue of your hunger. You decide to graciously accept the burger with a smile and a “Thank You.” The hamburger not only satisfies your hunger, but you enjoy it immensely, and realize that it might be fun to try different condiment combinations in the future.

- ❖ Which response would you choose?
- ❖ Do any of the responses remind you of people or situations you have encountered?
- ❖ Do you see how your advocacy style can impact the outcome—for you and for others?
- ❖ And the big question: Do you remember the issue?

### **IT’S REALLY NOT ABOUT THE PICKLE.**

The issue was simply to get something to eat—something that was appropriate to satisfy your hunger, available to you now, and within your current financial means. When you make it about the pickle, you may miss your chance to resolve the real issue and get your hamburger. You may, in fact, end up getting so hungry that you turn down the hamburger that was *almost all* of what you wanted and end up in a never-ending pursuit of some mythical pickle that you have made—even though that won’t satisfy your hunger.

***Don’t give your power to the pickle . . .***

