



## A GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY

by Connie B. Fanselow, ASK Resource Center

### 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 com-

munication 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

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The Parent Training and Information Center of Iowa exists to serve families of children with disabilities. The PTI of Iowa is a statewide service of ASK (Access for Special Kids) Resource Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping families of children with disabilities.

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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 to 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 par-

ticular 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.



## COMMUNICATION MATTERS

by *Connie B. Fanselow,*  
*ASK Resource Center*

We do it every day, usually without giving it much thought simply because it works. But what do we do when communication isn't working the way we want it to? Or when disagreement or conflict make it particularly difficult? There are some simple strategies that we can all learn to use to improve communication when it really matters:

### WHAT WE SAY AND WHAT OTHERS HEAR IS OFTEN DIFFERENT

How you express yourself is a product of your own personal viewpoint, experiences, assumptions, and judgments. How other people hear you is a product of their own personal viewpoint, experiences, assumptions and judgments. It is a wonder that any of us communicate effectively at all. It is especially important that in situations where agreement is in question you take the time to restate what you thought you heard said so that the understanding is clear and no false assumptions are made. Saying something like, "Did I understand correctly that what you propose is . . . ?" also gives you an extra moment to process the information before responding.

### RESPOND, DON'T REACT

A reaction is an expression of feelings. A response is a more thoughtful expression of facts and feelings. For example, if you are an educator and a parent raises concerns about what is happening in the classroom, you may be inclined to react defensively, but a defensive reaction does not encourage communication. Instead of saying something like "well that's the way we always do it," try responding by say-

ing something like, "Can you tell me more about exactly what it is that concerns you?" You may find that the real concern is not what you immediately assumed it to be, and you will open the door to better communication.

### USE "I" STATEMENTS, NOT "YOU" STATEMENTS

Take ownership of your feelings and views. Instead of saying, "You don't seem to care about my child, only about how much it will cost," try saying something more like, "I'm hearing concerns about how to make this program work within your budget. Can you suggest a way to provide the services my child needs more affordably?"

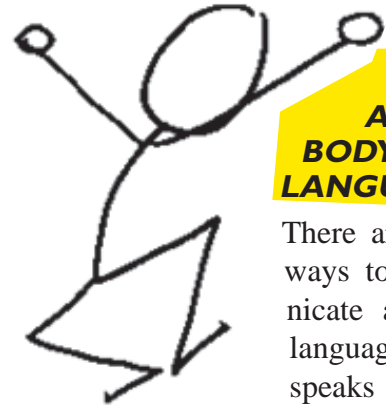
### WORK ON LISTENING

Most people think they are good listeners, but often they don't really listen because they are thinking about what they're going to say next. Part of good listening is asking questions that will bring out the information you need. Then it is vitally important that you focus on the answer, not on what you think will be said, or how you will respond to whatever it is they say. If you find this challenging, try the strategy of repeating what is said back to make sure you have understood the speaker's intent. For example, "I'm hearing that your biggest concern is . . . Is that right?"

### LOOK FOR COMMON GROUND

It is easy to let differences take over and forget what you have in common. It may be cliché, but in almost any parent-school disagreement, everyone has an interest in reaching a solution that is good for the student and in creating or maintaining a good working relationship. Remember to acknowledge the things that are going well or that you feel are being done right. Building on

areas of agreement can help to bridge gaps of disagreement and create a stronger working relationship that can better survive the bumps in the road.



### THINK ABOUT BODY LANGUAGE

There are lots of ways to communicate and body language often speaks louder than words. Be aware of your own body language.

Rolling eyes, loud sighing, or other signs of exasperation detract from good communication. If you've ever sat across the table from someone who does it, you know that very well. Do your best to behave respectfully even if you don't feel like it and expect others to be respectful of you. If you are reading body language that is counterproductive, try to turn it around by inviting input from that person and letting them know that they are being heard.

### ACKNOWLEDGE FRUSTRATION, ANGER, OR OTHER FEELINGS

If you don't acknowledge obvious feelings, they become the "elephant in the room" and everyone becomes invested in avoiding the "elephant" instead of concentrating on the issues that deserve attention. Express your own feelings in a non-confrontational way, such as, "I'm feeling that we are spinning our wheels right now. Could we take a short break and see if that helps us get back to the issues that need to be resolved?" You may also want to offer the opportunity for others to share their feelings. For example,

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“You seem very frustrated with what is happening. What do you think we can do to improve the situation?”

### GET TO KNOW YOUR “BUT- TONS” AND HOW TO PROTECT THEM



Everyone has certain things (or certain personal characteristics) that “get to you.” Prepare for emotional or stressful situations by thinking about what people, actions, or comments tend to “push your buttons” and try to come up with internal thought mechanisms that can help you protect yourself. For example, if you know you are meeting with someone who tends to make you angry by speaking to you in a condescending manner, you might

prepare by thinking of reasonably tactful ways to deflect those kinds of comments and maybe even make a list of things you might say to diffuse your stress without blowing up.

### TRY NOT TO TAKE OTHER PEOPLE’S REACTIONS PERSONALLY

How other people react to you is often more about them and their feelings of fear, frustration, or insecurity than it is about you. You may need to let the other person vent, but even if it feels like a personal attack, try taking a deep breath and counting to 10 before responding. You may not even be the object of the person’s frustration or stress, you may just be there at the moment they can’t hold it together any longer. Do your best not to escalate the situation.

### IT IS NATURAL TO RESIST CHANGE

Remember that change is stressful for most people, particularly if it makes them feel like they are less in control. Routines and patterns that we are familiar with are comforting and even though we may know changes need to be made, we may have feelings of resistance. Be willing to discuss the “what ifs?” that come up with proposing a new situation and try to work out a plan for change that allows everyone to adjust comfortably. Talk about the positives you expect and what you will do if problems arise. Having a clear plan with some contingency choices can make change easier to accept.

### NO ONE HAS ALL THE ANSWERS

Don’t expect that you always will. It’s OK to say, “I don’t know” or “I will have to find that out for you.” If you are confronted by a person who does seem to think he or she knows

“it all,” try suggesting that every issue has more than one point of view and that a full discussion of any issue should welcome different viewpoints. If others are involved in the conversation, try to enlist their help in broadening the discussion by inviting their points of view.

### EVERYONE HAS AN AGENDA



It’s a fact, but it isn’t necessarily a negative. Our personal agendas help us put forward our goals and also serve to help us protect our own interests. As a parent, your agenda may be simply what you believe is best for your child. Keep in mind, however, that while educators share concern for your child’s best interests, they also have supervisors, policies, procedures, budgetary issues, and other students that they can’t help but consider as part of their professional responsibilities. If you don’t recognize that others have different agendas than your own, you will have a difficult time understanding their point of view and working to reach compromise positions that work for everyone.

### STAY POSITIVE

We can choose how we see the experiences in our lives. We all have moments when things that are happening feel overwhelming and out of our control, but if you make an effort to keep a positive focus, you may be able to turn those feelings around and take some control back. Ask yourself if what you are doing is constructive or can help to resolve problems you are facing. Ask yourself what you can learn from difficult or stressful situations, and, most of all, keep focused on the goals you are trying to reach.



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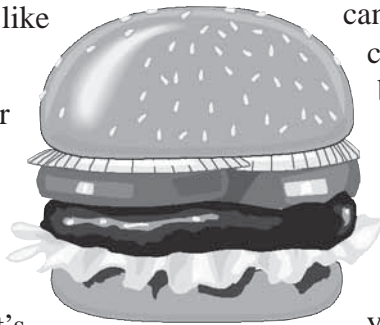
# IT'S NOT ABOUT THE PICKLE

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

by *Connie B. Fanselow*  
*ASK Family Resource Center*

**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.”



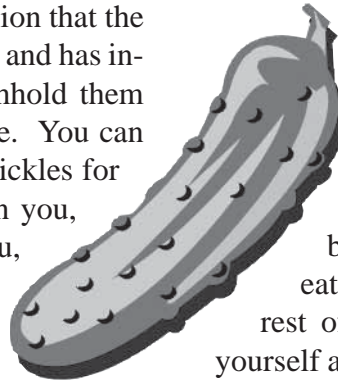
The hamburger vendor says, “I’m really sorry, it’s been a very busy day and I just ran out of pickles, but I’ll be glad to put everything else on for you.”

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 re-

ally 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 con-

## ADVOCACY JUMBLE

Unscramble these four jumbles, one letter to each square, to form four ordinary words:

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Now arrange the highlighted letters to form the surprise answer.

**Here's your clue:**

*"The most important element in good communication and effective advocacy is ..."*

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sider 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.

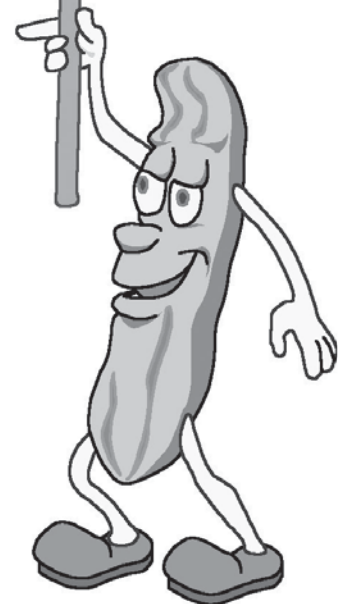


**Possible Response #8:** You can think for a moment, rationally consider the relative value of the pickle and the fact that you are extremely hungry. You determine that the vendor has made you the best offer he can at this particular time and has, in fact, come very close to completely fulfilling your "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?

**Power to the Pickle**



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## Improving Communication

## TIPS FOR EDUCATORS

by Connie B. Fanselow



## TIPS FOR PARENTS

**Listen.** Don't put up walls by assuming you won't like what you hear. Try to keep an open mind even if your views differ from those of the educators. The better you hear and understand their point of view, the better equipped you are to challenge it if you disagree.

**Boil it down to the essentials and build from there.** If you try to deal with too many issues, none get the attention they need, so prioritize. Focus on the most crucial points now and work your way down the list over time.

**Put the really important stuff in writing.** Taking the time to write a formal letter to make a request helps you organize your thoughts and evidence, creates a clear record, and lets educators know this is an issue you take very seriously.

**Ask for clarification** whenever you need it. Be persistent in asking questions and expecting good answers to them. It is very difficult to be comfortable in your own decisions or confident in the opinions of educators if you do not understand what they are proposing for your child and why.

**Expect and be open to full explanations** of the reasons educators have for recommending a particular course of action for the child. If they have a well-developed plan for how they believe your child should be taught, they will be able to explain the plan to you in a way that makes it understandable to you.

**Know your own emotional triggers.** Do your best to think through situations that you know are upsetting to you and plan for how you can respond or calm yourself in the moment. Write down key points ahead of time so that if your emotional buttons get pushed you have something in mind to fall back on and help keep you focused.

**Ask for time for careful consideration** of the options when you feel you need it. Educators often complain that parents agree with them at meetings and then go home and change their minds. If you feel you need more time to make a decision, don't allow yourself to be pressured into instant action.

**Give educators a chance.** You will probably never get what you consider to be the perfect plan for your child, but recognize when it's time to give a reasonable plan a try. Just because you accept an offer, it doesn't mean you can't ask to make changes or try something else if it proves less than successful. Acknowledge their efforts.

**Give things time to work.** If you are frustrated by a child's lack of progress or have reservations about a proposed program, it's hard to wait to see improvement, but few techniques or strategies show dramatic change overnight. Most programs need time to test their effectiveness for an individual child. If the approach to learning is changed too often, your child may just become confused and you may not be able to identify what works and what doesn't.

## TIPS FOR EDUCATORS

**Listen.** Don't put up walls by assuming that you always know better than the parent. Be willing to take into account what works for them at home. The better you hear and understand their point of view, the better the chance for finding solutions that work for everyone.

**Demonstrate to parents that you respect and value their unique expertise** and their fundamental understanding of their own child and their child's needs.

**Be prepared to fully explain your reasons** for recommending a particular course of action for the child in a way that makes sense to parents. A parent who doesn't fully understand what you are proposing is very unlikely to agree to it.

**Use language that is easily understood, but take care not to condescend** or "talk down" to parents. They may not be fully versed in the same jargon you use professionally, and may need to have information reframed in a way that makes sense to them, but most people will tend to withdraw from a conversation if they feel they are being "insulted" for their lack of understanding.

**Don't press for instant decisions** from the parent. Ever wonder why parents seem to agree to things at a meeting and then change their minds as soon as they leave? It's because they feel pressured to make a quick decision—sometimes even if they might have made the same decision after more thoughtful consideration. If they feel pressured into it, it doesn't feel like their decision. Give them time to come back with questions and gain more clarification if necessary.

**Take your own emotions into account.** You are the professionals, but that doesn't mean your emotional buttons aren't vulnerable too. Do your best to keep an objective viewpoint on comments you perceive as personal or professional criticism and not let the focus shift away from the child's needs because of the adults' feelings.

**Recognize the urgency and frustration** that parents feel about their child's educational progress. If you sense opposition from parents about continuing to pursue methods or strategies, or trying new ones because a student is struggling, it is probably because every day that things don't go well at school feels like precious time lost to a parent. Taking time to explore strategies may be necessary, but, in doing so, understand the parents' impatience and acknowledge their concerns about showing progress.

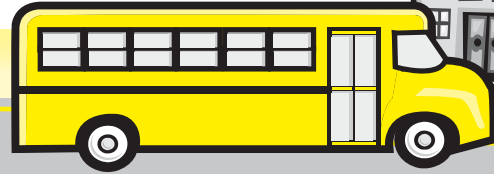
**Keep in mind and be willing to acknowledge** to parents that no matter how much you care about your students, the parents' investment in their child will always exceed yours. Sometimes it is important to say the things that seem obvious.

# Parent Training and Information Center of Iowa



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## 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 into your quest—even though it won't satisfy your hunger.

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

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## ADVOCACY JUMBLE

### ANSWERS:

JUMBLES: LISTEN

SPEAK

RELATE,

CONNECT

### SURPRISE ANSWER:

RESPECT

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