

What is Advocacy?

According to common dictionary definitions, advocacy 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”

Advocacy comes in many forms, ranging from friendly, gentle persuasion to aggressive, in your face confrontation. The form or style that is most effective often depends on the type of advocacy you are pursuing. When it comes to parent advocacy in education, there are extremely important considerations: the long-term working relationship between you, as a parent, and the educators who have a continuing role in your child's educational development, and how that relationship may affect your child's educational environment.

A constructive relationship between parents and educators and the ability to communicate effectively are important, and especially so for children who have Individualized Education Plans. It is a long-term working relationship and involves many issues and decisions, not just one.

A Guide to Effective Educational Advocacy

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.

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. Passion does not equate to volume or aggression. It can be expressed quietly and firmly without being offensive in any way. You want the

team to hear what you said, not how angry you are but if, despite your best efforts, you lose your temper, apologize.

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 also 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. It is also important to know what questions to ask. Negotiation is just another part of life where good preparation is half the battle.

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. It's about your child and what he/she needs to be successful at school.

Negotiation is not weakness, but refusing to negotiate can lead to loss. Reasonable people can have different views on just about anything. 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. Negotiation is the process that is used to work out differences about issues that are of mutual importance to the parties involved. It should result in the best possible outcome that meets everyone's basic needs and comes closest to achieving what everyone wants. Keep your mind open to solutions you may not have envisioned, or that may not be perfect, but will work.

Know your bottom line. Define what you want ahead of time, including the minimum result that is going to be acceptable to you. You have to allow some “wiggle room” for negotiation and compromise, but you also have to know when you are prepared to say an option is

too far away from your goal to be acceptable. It's your bottom line and you have to decide where to draw it.

Keep your eye on the goal. The goal is usually 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 the big picture: a program and a relationship that are moving in the right direction. Some individual issues may be so important that you are willing to risk some disruption to the parent-school relationship, but choose them wisely. If you go to battle over every minor point, don't expect to maintain a good working relationship.

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 come out 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 that leaves room for starting again next time without hard feelings.

Related Resources

Look for the following information sheets at www.askresource.org/resources:

- Communication Matters
- Conflict Resolution

ASK Essential Questions

- What are my triggers?
- What is my goal? What is my bottom line?
- What might be motivating others' decisions?
- What are my options if we don't come to an agreement?