

Five Steps to Becoming Your Child's Best Advocate

WHAT IS AN ADVOCATE?

An advocate is not an adversary. According to Webster's Dictionary, an advocate *is* "someone who speaks for another person or cause." We hope you will use this article as a guide for "speaking on behalf of your child".

1. Start with the assumption that you are an equal partner in your child's education.

Parents of children with special needs should be involved as equal partners in their child's educational planning. Unfortunately, many parents say, "How can I be an equal partner? I am just a mother or father. I don't know enough to work with all those professionals!" And a parent who feels this way will not "speak up" and be the best advocate for their child.

But what is a partner? It is hard to feel a part of something you cannot understand or define. The dictionary says that a partner is a member of a "relationship between people in which each person has equal status." This definition doesn't say "has an equal knowledge in all areas"; it doesn't say "has an equal amount of education." It says "each has equal status." You might not have a background in education but you do know your child. You are the expert and should be an important part of the school's efforts to provide you child with an educational program to meet his or her individual needs.

2. Deal with your perceptions or feelings about yourself as a parent of a child with special needs.

Understand the grief process and don't let feelings of anger or denial get in the way of your ability to negotiate.

3. Acquire knowledge.

You don't have to memorize everything about your child's disability, laws, etc. You just need to be aware and know enough to ask questions. You also need to know the resources available that can answer your questions.

YOU SHOULD:

- *know about special education laws including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act;*
- *know that special education programs must follow state regulations and that not all issues are controlled by the local school system;*
- *know how your school system operates, how decisions are made, the people, etc.: and*
- *know the sources of information and support in your state including your parent training and information center*

4. Improve your skills.

You need skills to become a better advocate for your child. You need to know how to communicate with others and be “assertive.” And you definitely need to know how to ask questions. To become more effective you may also need to write letters and document issues. These skills are important and you can learn them - they just take practice.

5. Participate.

Finally, the most important thing you can do for your child is to participate. Attend teacher conferences, parent group meetings, school functions. And always go to PPT meetings, give your ideas and suggestions, and negotiate and Individualized Education Program (IEP) that is truly individualized for your child.

REMEMBER YOU ARE AND ALWAYS WILL BE YOUR CHILD'S BEST ADVOCATE.

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