

F: School Years

Self-Advocacy - A skill that needs to be developed

As our children grow and mature it is natural that they will want to be more independent. As parents we will continue to advocate for their needs, but it is also **important that the child becomes comfortable and effective as a self-advocate**. Parents will not be available in every situation, and our children should have the opportunity to develop the skills they will need to speak up for themselves.

For many students with language disorders, reading and writing are likely to present lifelong challenges. **Students who learn to advocate for themselves are more likely to receive assistance for developing literacy skills, achieving academically**, and achieving in life in the broader sense, despite their reading and writing problems. Family and professionals working with the students should work collaboratively in teaching self-advocacy strategies. Although advocacy activities need to be geared to appropriate developmental levels, **self-advocacy instruction should be part of all intervention programs for students with special needs**, and should be intensified for adolescents.

The transition from Elementary to Secondary school is an important step when the thoughts and opinions of the student should be considered. It is, therefore, important to include the student in the planning and preparation for high school. **Students at secondary schools are expected to be more independent**, and it is important that the student is able to express their needs and ask for help.

At high school peer relationships become more important and many students want to avoid receiving special attention or being treated differently. It is, therefore, important that the **student is comfortable being a self-advocate and that they understand the importance of getting the help they need**.

In order to develop self-advocacy skills, the student will need **to learn specific skills** and have opportunities to practice. Younger students may need to learn **how to get an adult's attention**, how to hold a conversation and **how to explain their needs**. For a student with speech problems or a language impairment this may be very difficult. Parents should work with the school staff to identify quick and simple ways for your child to ask for help, and to provide positive reinforcement when the child uses the technique.

As your teen matures, different strategies may be needed to reflect the greater number of adults involved as well as the changing expectations of behaviour and communication. Not all teachers will be sympathetic or helpful and it will be important for the student to understand this, and to know who they should contact if they encounter problems. **Ideally each student should have a school staff person they can contact** and who will help them deal with other staff. This may be a home room teacher, a special education teacher or a guidance teacher.

Effective advocacy requires **a good knowledge of the problem**, a **willingness to problem solve** and an **open mind about solutions**. One way to teach these skills is to provide a positive role model. Take the time to talk about problems, show how you negotiate with other adults and discuss how to evaluate different solutions.

Another way that the **student can develop self-advocacy skills is through involvement in the Identification and Placement Review Committee (IPRC) and Individual Education Plan (IEP) process**. Each year the identification and placement of an exceptional student must be reviewed and for many students it is appropriate to involve them in the preparation and planning. High school students can attend the IPRC and IEP meetings, but the school and family will need to work together to make sure the student is comfortable and able to contribute.

Students who are considering further education **at College or University will need both self-advocacy skills and an understanding of their rights and responsibilities** in the education system. Participation in the IPRC and IEP at high school will help them develop the skills and knowledge they will need.

Advocacy skills do not come easily and must be taught and nurtured. However, providing individuals who have ongoing challenges with these skills will make a big difference in their future prospects.

<p>NOTE: Ask about including self-advocacy skills in your child's IEP. You can identify it as a need and the school can work with you to identify strategies to help the student develop the necessary skills.</p>
