

# **Advocacy Checklist for Parents and Other Community-based Advocates**

## **What Is an Advocate?**

An advocate is a person who argues for a cause, a supporter or defender. One that pleads on another's behalf.

## **The Advocate Performs Several Functions**

1. Supports, helps, assists and aids
2. Speaks and pleads on behalf of others
3. Defends and argues for people or causes
4. Problem solves and finds solutions agreeable to both sides

## **Roles and Responsibilities of an Advocate**

1. Be knowledgeable about your provincial/territorial special education criteria, policies, funding formula and local district/board regulations.
2. All information acquired by an advocate must be held in confidence and may be shared only as directed by the client.
3. The advocate is not a legal advisor and has no legal power.
4. As an advocate, you cannot make recommendations or act in someone's place. The person you are representing must decide what is best for the person's situation.

## **Types of Advocacy**

*Lay advocates* use their specialized knowledge to help parents resolve problems with schools and act on behalf of the parents and the child.

*Educational advocates* evaluate children with disabilities, make recommendations about educational services and act on the child's behalf.

*School personnel*, such as teachers, special education providers and administrators, often view themselves as advocates.

***Parents are natural advocates and have the power to make educational decisions for their child.***

## **What Do Advocates Do?**

- They gather information and facts.
- They plan and prepare for meetings by reading and researching special education laws and policies.
- They keep written records. "If a statement is not written down, it was not said."

- They ask questions and listen to answers. Advocates need to know how to use "Who, What, Why, When, Where, How" and then "Explain" questions to discover and understand true reasons for positions.
- They identify problems.
- They propose solutions. Advocates seek win-win solutions that will satisfy the interests of the parents, the child and the school.

### **Supplies to Get You Started as an Advocate**

- two three-ring binders (one for your child's disability and educational information - assessments, Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), family history; one for your child's file)
- three-hole punch
- highlighters
- sticky notes
- #10 envelopes
- stamps
- calendar
- contact log

### **Keeping Records**

Good records are essential to effective advocacy. Here is a list of the different documents that you'll see over the course of your child's special education. You should keep them all.

1. **Individualized Education Plan and other official services plan**  
These are service plans that outline early intervention programs for kids before they're old enough to receive special education services, or plans written by other agencies such as a department of speech and hearing at hospitals, rehabilitation centres.
2. **Evaluations by the school system and by independent evaluators**  
These could include educational, psychological and/or neuropsychological, speech and language, occupational therapy, and physical therapy evaluations.
3. **Medical Records**  
Keep only those that relate to the disability that affects the ability to learn or to access school programs and facilities.
4. **Progress reports and report cards**
5. **Standardized tests results**  
These are now required by many educational ministries and school district/boards. Such tests would include Grade 3 reading tests, Grade 10 literacy tests, etc.
6. **Notes on your child's behaviour or progress**  
These include notes from teachers to you, or journal entries between the parents and the child's service providers.
7. **Correspondence**  
Correspondence includes written messages between the parents and teachers,

- special education administrators, evaluator, school principal. Don't forget e-mails - print them out and include them. Also include letters from the school board/district describing new programs, changes in services, budget needs or school system policies.
8. **Notes from meetings, conversations with school personnel, evaluators, teachers.**  
Include dates, names of those present, what the issue was, what was said or what agreements were reached.
  9. **Documents relating to discipline or behaviour concerns**  
These include notice of detentions and suspension (both in and out of school), records of behaviour plans for addressing behaviour issues, and letters describing the concerns of service providers or school administrators about behaviour.
  10. **Formal notices of meetings scheduled to discuss the child**  
Jot down the date you received it. Sometimes the question of whether a school system has met the time requirements is important. Keep envelopes with the postmark date on them.
  11. **Samples of school work**  
It can be helpful to keep examples of each year's school work to show how much progress has been made (or lack of) by the child in different academic areas.
  12. **Calendar**  
Many parents like to record their appointments in a monthly calendar. Calendars can provide good evidence about meeting dates and times. These should be followed up with a description in your journal of what happened at the meeting. (see note taking)

### **Note Taking - Keep a Contact Log**

#### *Tools:*

1. Contact logs/Journals
2. Calendars

Some people call them journals, others call them contact logs. In this article, we will refer them as contact logs.

It can take years for parents to realize that they should have kept better notes of meetings, telephone calls and important events during in their child's education.

Your contact log and calendar that describes the problem or event should be written when the events or incidents occur. This puts you in a stronger position if and when you need an accurate description of what the school agreed to do or refused to do.

Train yourself to write things down. If you have a dispute with the school, your contact log is independent evidence that supports your memory. "If a statement is not written down, it was not said." Make your requests in writing. Write polite follow-up letters to document events, discussions and meetings.

Your contact log may be important evidence in your child's case. It is a diary. You may have to tell your child's story to another person in order to get help. Assume that school personnel and their attorney will read your contact log.

Why create a contact log?

1. Documenting events as they occur will help you tell the story accurately.
2. Documents can help clarify understandings you reach with people.
3. Documents that are written when something happens support you when you need to prove that the event happened the way you say it did.

Your log is a memory aid and will help you remember what happened and why. Again, your contact log should try to provide answers to "Who, What, Why, When, Where, How" and "Explain" notes.

**Your contact log should:**

1. Be clear and legible
2. Stick to facts
3. Not be used to report your feelings and frustrations

**Try to record these events:**

1. Dates of meetings with school personnel and outcome of meetings
2. Dates you received key documents (e.g. IEPs)
3. Dates you sent or delivered key documents
4. Dates you gave school personnel important information (e.g. "1/2/98: Told Tod's teacher that he'd been spending three hours every night trying to do 15-minute math assignments.)
5. Dates on which your child was suspended or disciplined
6. Telephone conversations, dates, with whom and short description of conversation