

Parents as Advocates

Parents - Children's *Best* Advocates

Parents know their children in a more profound way than anybody else. They have had years living with, observing, reacting to, understanding, and responding to their children. They have learned under what conditions their children cooperate or resist, initiate or follow, interact or withdraw, and when they are most eager to communicate.

As a parent, you are the best person to advocate for your child in making these patterns of behaviour known to your child's teacher. It is especially important so that the teacher can work with your child's particular behaviour and learning pattern rather than against it.

An advocate is a person who effectively speaks up for, acts on behalf of, or supports someone else.

As a parent advocate, you will find others, such as teachers and physicians, who can support you in advocating for your child. Consider these professionals your allies. They can use their influence to assist you in receiving needed services and programs for your child. For example, a family doctor could write a letter to the school board describing the magnitude of your child's anxiety concerning his language immersion program to speed up a placement in a program where he will be taught in his first language.

Despite the professional help you will seek along your advocacy journey, you are your child's full-time advocate -- the one with the file, so to speak, on ways to help him succeed socially and at school.

Be aware that not all the professionals you consult will appreciate this closeness. Some professionals may take the view that parents are too emotionally involved to be objective. However, it may be your very connectedness that helps you understand that your child is different from his peers and that spurs you to take action to get him help.

As his trusted confidante, you know what really worries him and how complex his problems really are. Likely you are the person who knows how much school failure terrifies him. He has probably asked you, 'What's wrong with my brain?'

The classroom teacher is the single most important person affecting your child's education. The teacher has tremendous influence on your child's happiness at school and is the person that spends one-on-one time with your child on a daily basis. It is extremely important for parents and teachers to work together to provide a good school experience for each child.

Most teachers welcome the involvement of parents and want to hear your ideas. In fact, many teachers report that they are more motivated to teach a child whose parents are actively involved than one whose parents never seem to care. If the teacher resists involvement, you need to put into practice, constructive communication. Praise the

teacher for the good things going on and keep the lines of communication open by writing notes, making classroom visits, attending conferences, etc. Remember, you have the right to be involved, but exercise that right in a constructive way.

Communication needs to be on a regular, on-going basis, not once or twice a year. Some of the following pointers may help:

1. Write out a list of what you want to discuss with the teacher.
2. When appropriate, praise the teacher for specific things you feel good about. For example, "Mrs. Brown, thank you for spending extra time with Johnny and working on behaviour. We really see results."
3. If you have a problem, discuss the specific things that bother you as they relate to your child. Do not generalize. Do not say to the teacher "You are not teaching my child. This is going to be a wasted year." Instead, you say, "The math program does not seem to be working for Johnny. Is there a way we can change it to better meet his needs?"
4. Approach the teacher to discuss these concerns in a positive, non-threatening way.
5. Keep the focus on your child, not the teacher's shortcomings. For example, relate specifically how and why a particular behaviour modification practice will not work with your child, instead of complaining about the teacher's poor application of a behaviour modification program.
6. Offer assistance in the classroom when possible. Decide with the teacher if this involvement is appropriate for your child.
7. Offer your time and talents. For example, when possible volunteer to be a grade mother/father, help with a field trip, tape a textbook chapter for a student with learning disabilities, etc.
8. When you make a request or suggestions, illustrate very specifically to the teacher how your suggestions can be implemented. Follow up your requests with a letter of thanks.
9. Attend all meetings and conferences.

As a parent, you are the best person to advocate for your child because you know his strengths and needs, likes and dislikes. Unconditional love is a powerful motivator and it's been proven time and again that the squeaky wheel gets the grease. **But how you squeak will determine how much grease you get!**

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Despite the professional help you will seek along your advocacy journey, you are your child's full-time advocate -- the one with the file, so to speak, on ways to help him succeed socially and at school.

Parents make such good advocates because of their close, personal involvement with their children. Be aware that not all the professionals you consult will appreciate this closeness. Some professionals may take the view that you are too emotionally involved to be objective, implying that it is impossible for you make rational decisions where your child is concerned. However, it may be your very connectedness that helps you understand that your child is different from his peers and that spurs you to take action to get him help.

As his trusted confidante, you know what really worries him and how complex his problems really are. You are the person who has drilled him on the multiplication tables night after night. You were certain he knew them at bedtime on Monday night - how could he possibly have forgotten them by Tuesday morning? Likely you are the person who knows how much school failure terrifies him. He has probably asked you, "What's wrong with my brain?"

Parents often report a gut feeling that their child learns differently than other children. Many parents say they are relieved to discover that their child has a learning disability because they knew something wasn't quite right. Parents who bring these feelings to their family doctor, to their child's teacher and to school administrators may not be treated receptively. Try not to be discouraged. You know in your heart that you must speak up for your child. If you don't, who will?

Becoming an Effective Advocate

Parents need to know how and where to get appropriate information; then they need to communicate this information convincingly to the appropriate helping source. For example, a parent who is told that her child is behaving immaturely in his grade three class needs to visit the class on a couple of occasions for first-hand knowledge of the problem and its seriousness. Maybe a trip to the family doctor is in order or a conversation with another adult who works with the child in the community (e.g., the cub leader). If the parent knows that the immature behaviour stems from the fact that a sibling has been in hospital for tests, it's best to let the teacher know so the child can get the support he needs during this stressful period. If a child is avoiding specific tasks at school (e.g., reading aloud in front of a group), the parent should understand that there must be a good reason.

To be an effective advocate, you should:

- develop the confidence to do your own advocating
- develop problem solving techniques to overcome obstacles
- find the information to make appropriate decisions
- take appropriate actions
- support your child's efforts towards independence
- learn what your rights are and what your child's rights are
- use effective communication in advocating for your rights
- analyse problems and pinpoint areas of responsibility

- learn about community resources and agencies
- network with other parents and groups for mutual support and
- connect with provincial/territorial Learning Disability Association (LDA) or your local chapter.

Self-advocacy

Self-advocacy means speaking out and acting for yourself. Children whose parents have been active advocates for them know that they have supportive cheerleaders at home. They experience advocacy as part of everyday life.

Children who hear their parents speaking positively about them feel valued (e.g., John has a real bent for electrical engineering not John never reads a book he just wastes his time repairing old radios). Feeling valued gives the child the confidence to speak up for himself so that he can get the help he needs (e.g., I'm finding it really hard to learn the order of the provinces). Sometimes a child will come up with his own coping strategies because he's so aware of his own difficulties (e.g., I made up a game to remember the names of the provinces by calling each one the name of a famous baseball player).

Research has shown that as children enter high school they are often unprepared to communicate their learning needs to others. Teenagers want to fit in with their peers. However, the adolescent who has been involved in his parents' advocacy efforts in elementary school or junior high will quite likely see it as normal behaviour to ask for help with a problem subject or express his fear of exams. A child who knows he has short-term auditory memory problems can explain to the soccer coach that it's best to write the plays down on paper so that he can see them more clearly.

Parents can enhance their own advocacy skills by working with the child on ways to communicate best with the teacher (e.g., Do you feel comfortable telling Mrs. Smith the book report was too difficult or would she appreciate a note from me?). It can be a relief to know that there are accommodations available at school, such as calculators, computers, spell checkers and extra time on tests. Parents may advocate for the use of these tools, but it is the child who will use them and determine what works best in a variety of situations. Teachers, students and parents must work together and agree on appropriate accommodations.

Guidelines for Parent Advocates

- Understand the extraordinary time commitment involved in advocacy efforts.
- Recognize that if you don't advocate for your child, no one else will.
- Recognize your limits and capacity to advocate; seek out advocacy allies.
- Model advocacy skills for your child.
- Use information as a powerful tool for understanding the puzzle of your child's learning disability.