

1 Learning About Advocacy

"If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." – Benjamin Franklin, inventor

In this chapter, you will meet children with disabilities. You will learn that there are different kinds of advocates for children with disabilities and why parents are natural advocates for their children. We provide a quick overview of advocacy skills. Finally, you will discover how advocacy helps parents use their emotions to become empowered.

Marie, a ten-year-old child from Maryland, had several strokes. She uses an electric wheelchair to get around and assistive technology to communicate. When Marie's parents asked their school district for support and services, the district refused, saying, "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act doesn't apply to your child."

In Indiana, a blind child wanted to attend his neighborhood school. The school district refused and sent Joshua to a residential school for the blind, 25 miles away from home. Josh's parents objected, initiated a special education due process hearing, and prevailed.

Nancy is a bright child with dyslexia. Her New Jersey school district placed her in a special education resource room. Two years passed, but Nancy did not learn to read. Her parents wanted the district to train teachers in effective educational practices so children with dyslexia could be taught to read. The district refused. Nancy's parents advocated for her and prevailed.

In California, the parents of a seven-year-old child with mental retardation wanted their daughter to be educated in a regular classroom. When the school district refused, Rachel's parents spent five years fighting for her right to attend regular classes. After the court ordered the district to support Rachel, so she could attend school with her peers, the school district appealed – all the way to the U. S. Supreme Court. Rachel's parents were her advocates. Today, Rachel Holland is a high school student in regular education classes.

As a first grader in Washington, D.C. public schools, Sandra was misdiagnosed with mental retardation. After 12 years of special education, Sandra was functionally illiterate. Sandra did not have an advocate. "The school system has not given me what I needed," she says. "I feel as though no one really cares."

Why Advocate?

Good special education services are intensive and expensive. Resources are limited. If you have a child with special needs, you may wind up battling the school district for the services your child needs. To prevail, you need information, skills, and tools.

Who can be an advocate? Anyone can advocate for another person. Here is how the dictionary defines the term “advocate”:

ad-vo-cate – Verb, transitive. To speak, plead or argue in favor of.

Synonym is support.

1. One that argues for a cause; a supporter or defender; an advocate of civil rights.
2. One that pleads in another’s behalf; an intercessor; advocates for abused children and spouses.
3. A lawyer. (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition*)

Special education advocates speak for children with disabilities and special needs who are unable to protect themselves. The advocate performs several functions:

- Supports, helps, assists, and aids
- Speaks and pleads on behalf of others
- Defends and argues for people or causes

Different Types of Advocates

Special education advocates work to improve the lives of children with disabilities and their families. You are likely to meet different types of advocates.

Lay Advocates

Lay advocates use their specialized knowledge and expertise to help parents resolve problems with schools. When lay advocates attend meetings, write letters, and negotiate for services, they are acting on the child’s behalf. Most lay advocates are knowledgeable about legal rights and responsibilities. In some jurisdictions, lay advocates represent parents in special education due process hearings.

Educational Advocates

Educational advocates evaluate children with disabilities and make recommendations about educational services. When educational advocates go to eligibility and IEP meetings, they are acting on the child’s behalf. Some educational advocates are skilled negotiators. Others are not knowledgeable about special education law or how to use tactics and strategies.

School Personnel

Teachers and special education providers often view themselves as advocates. Teachers, administrators, and school staff may provide support to children and their families. Because they are employed by school districts, it is unlikely that school personnel can advocate for children with disabilities without endangering their jobs.

Parents

Parents are natural advocates for their children.

Who is your child's first teacher? You are. Who is your child's most important role model? You are. Who is responsible for your child's welfare? You are. Who has your child's best interests at heart? You do.

You know your child better than anyone else. The school is involved with your child for a few years. You are involved with your child for life. You should play an active role in planning your child's education.

The law gives you the power to make educational decisions for your child. Do not be afraid to use your power. Use it wisely. A good education is the most important gift you can give to your child.

As the parent of a child with a disability, you have two goals:

- To ensure that the school provides your child with a “free appropriate public education” that includes “specially designed instruction . . . to meet the [child's] unique needs . . .” (20 U.S.C. §1401)
- To build a healthy working relationship with the school.

What Advocates Do

Advocacy is not a mysterious process. Here is a quick overview of advocacy skills.

Gather Information

Advocates gather facts and information. As they gather information and organize documents, they learn about the child's disability and educational history. Advocates use facts and independent documentation to resolve disagreements and disputes with the school.

Learn the Rules of the Game

Advocates take time to educate themselves about their local school district. They know how decisions are made and by whom.

Advocates know about legal rights. They know that a child with a disability is entitled to an “appropriate” education, not the “best” education, nor an education that “maximizes the child's potential.” They understand that “best” is a four-letter word that cannot be used by parents or advocates. Advocates know the procedures that parents must follow to protect their rights and the child's rights.

Plan and Prepare

Advocates know that planning prevents problems. Advocates do not expect school personnel to tell them about rights and responsibilities. Advocates read special education laws, regulations, and cases to get answers to their questions.

Advocates learn how to use test scores to monitor a child's progress in special education. They prepare for meetings, create agendas, write objectives, and use meeting worksheets and follow-up letters to clarify problems and nail down agreements.

Keep Written Records

Because documents are often the keys to success, advocates keep written records. They know that if a statement is not written down, it was not said. They make requests in writing and write polite follow-up letters to document events, discussions, and meetings.

Ask Questions, Listen to Answers

Advocates are not afraid to ask questions. When they ask questions, they listen carefully to answers. Advocates know how to use "Who, What, Why, Where, When, How, and Explain Questions" (5 Ws + H + E) to discover the true reasons for positions.

Identify Problems

Advocates learn to define and describe problems from all angles. They use their knowledge of interests, fears, and positions to develop strategies. Advocates are problem solvers. They do not waste valuable time and energy looking for people to blame.

Propose Solutions

Advocates know that parents negotiate with schools for special education services. As negotiators, advocates discuss issues and make offers or proposals. They seek "win-win" solutions that will satisfy the interests of parents and schools.

The Parent's Journey From Emotions to Advocacy _____

On your journey from emotions to advocacy, you will learn about your child's disability, educational and remedial techniques, educational progress, Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs), and how to artfully advocate.

You will learn how to present your concerns and problems in writing, prepare for meetings, and search for win-win solutions. You will learn how to use your emotions as a source of energy and power, and how to focus on getting an appropriate education for your child.

Supplies

Are you ready to advocate? Here is a list of supplies that will help you get started:

- Two 3-ring notebooks (one for your child's file; one for information about your child's disability and educational information.)
- 3-hole punch
- Highlighters
- Package of sticky notes
- #10 Envelopes
- Stamps
- Calendar
- Journal
- Contact log
- Small tape recorder

In Summation

In this chapter, you learned how parent advocates changed the lives of their children with disabilities. You learned about lay advocates and educational advocates, and that teachers and special education staff are limited in their ability to advocate. You learned that parents are natural advocates for their children.

You have an overview of advocacy skills and a list of supplies that will help you advocate. Now you will go one step further and learn about master plans.