

How You Can Help Your Child Learn to Be a Good Self Advocate

It is never too early to start teaching your child how he or she can advocate for himself or herself. Like many other important life skills, self-advocacy is a critical tool your child needs in order to achieve goals, increase self-sufficiency, and become a successful young adult. It is a life long process that begins with your child learning by watching you, as a parent, be a good advocate.

What exactly does self-advocacy mean? It means taking the responsibility for communicating one's needs and desires in a straightforward manner to others. It is a set of skills that includes:

- Speaking up for yourself
- Communicating your strengths, needs and wishes
- Being able to listen to the opinions of others, even when their opinions differ from yours
- Having a sense of self-respect
- Taking responsibility for yourself
- Knowing your rights
- Knowing where to get help or who to go to with a question

One of the best places to start teaching your child about self-advocacy is in his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Including your son or daughter in the IEP meeting provides him or her with an opportunity to learn and practice important life skills. Some advantages your child may gain by being involved in the IEP process include:

- learning about the impact of his or her disability
- practicing goal setting
- building teamwork skills
- developing an ability to speak up for himself or herself
- participating in a process of resolving differences
- gaining an understanding of his or her strengths and needs
- learning how to ask for and accept help from others.

Even very young children can contribute to their IEP meetings. If you feel your child is too young to participate in the entire meeting, you may choose to include him or her just in the opening of the meeting. This helps your child to know the IEP team members better and to start to be more comfortable in a meeting setting. It also ensures that everyone at the meeting starts out with your child as the focus. If your child does not attend the IEP meeting, you can bring a picture of your child to display at the meeting. You can also receive your child's input before you attend the IEP meeting. Ask your child if there is anything he or she would like to share at the meeting or to have you share. It can also be very beneficial to ask each team member to state one positive trait or skill your child has as you begin the meeting. Be sure to include your child in this sharing of positives. After the IEP meeting, sit down with your child and explain the goals and services or answer any questions your child may have.

As your child becomes older, the ways in which he or she can participate in his or her IEP meetings greatly increases. It is important to discuss the meeting process with your child beforehand. Role-playing being in an IEP meeting with your child can be a great teaching tool and may help your child to feel less anxious about participating. **Ways for you child to be involved are not limited to, but include:**

- Writing down ideas, questions, and concerns before the IEP meeting
- Rehearsing what he or she wants to say in the IEP meeting
- Introducing him or herself
- Talking about his or her interests, strengths, and desires for the future
- Explaining his or her disability to the team
- Leading all or part of the IEP meeting
- Helping the team develop IEP goal areas
- Asking for explanations if he or she doesn't understand something
- Reviewing what the team has agreed to at the end of the meeting

Some questions you may want to discuss with your son or daughter prior to the IEP meeting are:

- What do you want to learn or work on this year?
- What are your special concerns for the school year?
- How do you learn the best?
- What do you need to be successful?
- What would make learning easier for you?
- What do you wish your teacher and other school staff would understand about you?

Discuss with your child how to handle the situation if something negative or difficult to hear is said about him or her in the meeting. Determine at what point, if any, you would stop the meeting and have your child leave. If the meeting is likely to be too stressful or negative, have your child only attend part of it and determine the agenda ahead of time with the team. Be sure to include your child's input on the agenda. If your child chooses not to attend a meeting, ask if he or she would be willing to share ideas or opinions in writing or on tape to provide to the team.

Federal special education law (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) requires your child to be invited to the IEP meetings anytime transition services or needs are to be discussed. Transition is about planning for your child's future and taking a look at his or her skills in the five areas of employment, postsecondary education, home living, community participation, and recreation/leisure. In Minnesota, transition must be addressed by age 14 or ninth grade. Also, when your child reaches the age of majority (18 in Minnesota), all parental rights will transfer and he or she will be signing his or her own IEP. Therefore, your child needs as much practice in self-advocacy as possible before turning 18.

Teaching your child self-advocacy skills will benefit him or her throughout the school years and far beyond into adulthood. Knowing and exercising your rights as a parent are the first steps in teaching your child to become a strong self-advocate. For more information on special education rights, please contact PACER at 952-838-9000 or 1-800-537-2237.