

# Fostering your child's self-advocacy skills



**Self-advocacy is the ability to understand and communicate one's own needs. Self-advocacy is grounded in knowledge and leads to empowerment and personal autonomy. Self-advocacy is a choice to take control.**

For many of us, our lives have been punctuated by moments of needing to advocate for our children. We have fought to have our children's needs acknowledged and accommodated. But how do we encourage our children to begin to accept the responsibility to self-advocate?

## Tips for Fostering Your Child's Self-Advocacy Skills

1. **Making functional choices about life is self-advocating.** Even the youngest children can be supported to make functional choices. Giving your child the opportunity to assert their preferences is a vital first step in self-advocacy.
2. **Practice problem-solving.** Advocating is often about problem-solving: often there is an environmental or contextual problem that impacts negatively on your child and needs solving. Using 'problem-solving language' and demonstrating how you problem-solve for and with your child, shows them the foundations of advocacy.
3. **Self-awareness.** To self-advocate your child needs to have self-awareness. That means you need to communicate accurate, quality information about your child's diagnosis to your child. Remember! Your child can't self-advocate if they don't understand their own needs. Your child needs as much information as possible about what their diagnosis is (using factual terminology and labels) and what it means for them. Your job is to provide your child with a thorough and careful understanding of their diagnosis and needs.
  - a. *Work from strengths.* If you're unsure of how to tell your child about their diagnosis/diagnoses, a good place to start is by examining their strengths. Which of these strengths can be linked to their disability? In addition, self-advocating is often about making sure strengths are acknowledged and foregrounded: your child needs to understand their strengths to utilise this aspect of self-advocacy.
  - b. *Use objective not subjective language.* Your child needs to be able to describe their needs objectively, so giving them the right language is crucial to self-advocacy.
  - c. *Examine needs and accommodations.* What needs does your child have? Are they aware that these needs are different than their peers' needs? What accommodations are possible in different environments, and which are easily achieved? Having these types of conversations with your child will bring their attention to what they, individually, need.
  - d. *Think about what works for your child.* Ask your child to reflect on times when accommodations have worked effectively, and times that have been less successful. The more you engage your child in reflecting on what they need and how their needs can be serviced, the more ready they will be to self-advocate.

4. **Start early.** Encourage your children to begin their self-advocacy journey by advocating their needs to you. Self-advocacy takes practice, and can be challenging, so it is important that your children have a safe space to exercise their self-advocacy skills.
5. **Allow your child to watch you advocate.** Often we want to protect our children from seeing us advocate on their behalf, but this desire to protect means our children never see us modelling advocacy. Encourage your children to watch you advocate on their behalf with objective, respectful language, stating needs and accommodations. If your child witnesses you advocating for them, they will be more likely to understand the need to advocate for themselves.
6. **Praise asking for help, and efforts to self-advocate.** Often your child will engage in spontaneous moments of self-advocacy. When your child has told you that a particular environment is too loud, or that they are tired and need to go home, or that they need a break, they are self-advocating by recognising and vocalising their needs. It is clearly not always possible to accommodate your child's request, but acknowledging and praising their efforts to ask for your help and self-advocating shows your child that you value and respect their self-advocacy. And remember: Self-advocacy might be as simple as asking for headphones, or as complex as being involved in an IEP meeting.
7. **Supported advocacy. Identify moments for your child to exercise their self-advocacy in advance.** Role play and practice what that self-advocacy conversation might look like. Building an advocacy partnership (asking them to consider what they will do, and what you can do) is also a good first step to self-advocacy. It also shows children that self-advocacy is a shared responsibility (it isn't just about what others can do to accommodate them, but what they will do to support themselves). E.g., Plan ahead with your school to involve your child in their IEP meeting. Brainstorm questions, priorities and goals to be included. Ask your child to record their priorities and contributions in case they can't speak them on the day. Identify one point in the meeting that they can be explicitly included.
8. **Educate others and bring them along on the journey.** Make sure that your child's professional team, including their educational team, understand your preference for your child to self-advocate. Be clear that self-advocacy attempts are to be praised.
9. **Give your child control in goal-setting.** We so often make priorities and priorities about our children without their input. Instead, involve your child intimately in all goal setting work (including IEPs, educational, and therapy goals). Find out what is relevant and meaningful for your them, and what will motivate them. The more your child has control over their goals, the better they will self-advocate to achieve those goals.
10. **Talk about legal rights.** Talk to your child about disability and the law. Make sure you are both conversant with the Disability Discrimination Act and its impact on your child. Knowing rights is powerful, it gives your child confidence in their expectation to advocate and be heard.

## **Nothing About Us, Without Us.**

*Remember! You amplify your child's voice: you aren't their voice. The sooner your child can use their own voice (whether they communicate traditionally or not), the sooner your child can speak for themselves.*