

A Parent's Guide to Educational Advocacy

What is Advocacy? According to common dictionary definitions, advocacy is a noun, meaning:

- “giving aid to a cause”
- “active verbal support for a cause or position”
- “the act of pleading or arguing in favor of something, such as a cause, idea, or policy”
- “active support”

Advocacy comes in many forms, ranging from friendly, gentle persuasion to aggressive in-your-face confrontation. The form or style that is most effective often depends on the type of advocacy you are pursuing. When it comes to parent advocacy in education, there are extremely important considerations: the long-term working relationship between you, as a parent, and the educators who have a continuing role in your child's educational development, and how that relationship may affect your child's educational environment.

If you set out to advocate against a new shopping mall development that would crowd out a neighborhood park and playground, an all-out-in-your-face confrontational style may be necessary to gain attention and make your voice heard. If that is necessary, it may be appropriate. After all, you probably do not need to have a constructive long-term working relationship with the real estate developers, and the outcome for the park is probably all or nothing.

There are some big drawbacks to adopting a “scorched earth” policy in educational advocacy. A constructive relationship between parents and educators and the ability to communicate effectively are important, and especially so for children who have Individualized Education Plans. It is a long-term working relationship and involves many issues and decisions, not just one.

A Ten-Point Guide to Effective Educational Advocacy

(1) Observe the Golden Rule. First and foremost, treat others with the respect and courtesy that you expect to receive from them. Tensions and emotions may run high, but behavior can be moderated. If that is particularly difficult for you, practice. Recruit a friend or relative (or several) and ask them to take the other side of your argument—practice stating your position, making your case, and responding to a different point of view before you go into the more stressful real-life setting. The more confident you feel about what you have to say, and the more clearly you can express it, the more effective you will be as an advocate, and the more likely that you will be able to keep your emotions under control.

Respect and courtesy are not just about what you say—if you roll your eyes, sigh loudly, make faces, or sit throughout a meeting with your arms crossed and a scowl on your face,

you are demonstrating your disrespect for the process and the others participating in the meeting. Everyone on the education team—that includes parents, parent advocates, and educators—are professionals in terms of the knowledge and expertise they bring to the table and everyone should behave accordingly and demonstrate a constructive attitude.

(2) An effective advocate prepares. It is not enough to know what you want. You need to know your rights—and their limitations, as well as your responsibilities. Knowing your rights gives you power. Knowing their limits gives you credibility. You also need to know *why* you want what you want for your child and be able to explain that to others who have a different point of view. That gives you bargaining power. Negotiation is just another part of life where good preparation is half the battle.

(3) Advocacy is not about the advocate. An effective advocate speaks in support of “a position, cause, policy, or idea” – not in defense of him or herself. If you find yourself slipping into a posture of trying to prove you are right and everyone else is wrong, you need to take a step back and remember it’s all about the issue—not about “them” and not about you.

(4) Name-calling, profanity, and shouting are never acceptable behavior. Wouldn’t you find it outrageous if school or AEA personnel called you names, used profanity, or shouted at you during meetings? It is just as inappropriate and unproductive if such behavior comes from parents or parent advocates. If you are advocating for your child, and the emotions of the moment become too much for you to handle, do your best to calmly ask for a short break and take a few minutes to cool down. If you are acting as an advocate on behalf of someone else’s child, you have a particular duty to moderate your behavior and serve as a calming presence for the

parents. Passion does not equate to volume or aggression – it can be expressed quietly and firmly without being offensive in any way.

(5) If, despite your best efforts, you lose your temper, apologize. It is not an easy thing to do, but we are all adults and we all need to take responsibility for our actions—even the ones we would rather forget. We can’t count the number of times we’ve heard a parent say, “If the school people would just apologize, I’d be satisfied.” Parents rarely get such apologies for all kinds of reasons, but that doesn’t mean that you have an excuse for failing to acknowledge when your own behavior has been inappropriate—and sometimes the best way to get an apology is to give one.

(6) Negotiation is not weakness. Reasonable people can have different views on just about anything. That’s why we have horse races, elections, and both Coke and Pepsi. Negotiation is the process that is used to work out differences about issues that are of mutual importance to the parties involved. You negotiate with your kids about how many of their peas they are going to eat before they get dessert, how much TV they are going to watch, and what time they are going to go to bed.

You negotiate with your spouse about whether to spend your tax refund on a new washer and dryer or a speedboat. If it weren’t for negotiation, governments would come to a grinding halt because lawmakers would never all agree on anything. Negotiation is an everyday part of life—not something that only takes place around conference tables—and successful negotiation does not result in winners or losers. It should result in the best possible outcome that meets everyone’s basic needs and comes closest to achieving what everyone wants.

(7) Compromising is not losing, but refusing to compromise can lead to loss. It is not reasonable to expect that all differences of opinion will be resolved in your favor. At times, you will need to accept compromise to get MOST of what you want. This happens every day in your life, even though you may not think about it. You go shopping for blue jeans – you know exactly what you want – the cut, the length, the fit, the perfect amount of fade. After a long afternoon of trying on every pair you can find, you decide that you are going to be happy with a pair that has the right cut, the right fit, the right fade, but are just a bit too long – after all, you can take them home and hem them to the right length.

You go to the grocery store and they are out of your favorite cut of meat, so you choose another cut – not the one you intended to buy, but one you know is comparable in quality and price. In each case you found a practical, acceptable compromise. You do it every day. If you didn't, you would frequently be naked and hungry because the exact thing you want is not always readily available to you. Your child's education may be more important than what you wear today or what you have for dinner, but the principle is the same – keep your mind open to solutions you may not have envisioned, or that may not be "perfect," but will work.

(8) Know your bottom line. Define what you want ahead of time, including the minimum result that is going to be acceptable to you. Let's stick with the blue jean example – would you take a pair a shade lighter or darker? Would you take a pair a size bigger or a size smaller? Would you take a different style altogether? If you can't find the right blue jeans, would you settle for khakis instead? What if they were on sale? You have to allow some "wiggle room" for negotiation and compromise, but you also have to know when you are prepared to say an option is too far away from your goal to be acceptable.

It's your bottom line and you have to decide where to draw it.

(9) Keep your eye on the goal. The goal is usually not the outcome of this particular IEP meeting or programming decision. The goal is your child's total educational program and long-term progress. Your ongoing working relationship with the school district and AEA personnel is a very important component of your child's successful education. Unless you plan to pack up and move to a different school district every time you have a disagreement with educators, you may need to recognize that some things you would like to have for your child in the short term are less important than the big picture: a program and a relationship that are moving in the right direction. Some individual issues may be so important that you are willing to risk some disruption to the parent-school relationship, but choose them wisely. If you go to battle over every minor point, don't expect to maintain a good working relationship.

(10) Regardless of the outcome, be as gracious as you can be. Some negotiations may end with you getting exactly what you wanted. Some may end with you feeling like no one even heard what you said, and most will probably come out somewhere in between. Regardless of the outcome, thank everyone for their time, and if the meeting has been emotional or confrontational, it can be very productive if you are able to say something like, "We've covered some difficult ground today, and even though we are not yet in agreement, I hope we can continue to work together for (Susie's) sake." If that's more than you can offer, try to at least leave with a nod, a smile, or a pleasant look that leaves room for starting again next time without hard feelings.