What is Advocacy?

Advocacy: the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal; the act or process of advocating something...

Merriam Webster Dictionary

Parent Advocacy

As a parent of a child with learning disabilities it is ultimately your responsibility to assure your child is receiving the appropriate services. First it is important to educate yourself on learning disabilities and in particular your child's learning disability. Second, collaborate with your child's teachers and school forming a good working partnership*. Third, understand your rights under the law, which will be a key to your success.

You can educate yourself by going to your local library and finding books such as Larry Silver's book The Misunderstood Child; , Rick Lavoie's Fat city DVD, From Emotions to Advocacy and All About IEP's and other books by Wrights Law. The internet is also a wealth of information but may not always be accurate so it is important to check the source.

LDA can also not only provide resources but also an opportunity to learn from others, and a chance to make friends with others who have children with learning disabilities. There is strength in numbers and it can facilitate change when change is needed. By joining an organization like LDA that advocates for individuals with learning disabilities you can make a difference.

When talking to your teacher ask about their preferred method of communication - email, phone, or in person. If sending an email, be concise and direct, and always respectful. If communicating in person or by phone, prepare by listing issues you wish to discuss. It is a good rule to follow up after the meeting with a note recapping the meeting. At times you may become frustrated- do not take it out on the teachers- always be respectful.

It can, for many, be intimidating to go to a school meeting and sit at a table surrounded by school personnel. Ask a friend to go with you and take notes. It will be comforting and you will have an extra set of eyes and ears at the table. If you decide to do this, inform the school staff before the meeting.

See General Tips for Advocating as a Parent for even more helpful information.

Self Advocacy

It is never too early to learn to self advocate. Teaching your child advocacy skills starting in middle school will make it easier for their child as they grow older and become more independent. It is also important for the child to understand their learning disabilities and the methods that can help them at school (books on tape, typing notes, etc.)

Middle and High School

Middle school is an ideal time to start self advocacy techniques. By starting in middle school the student will have an
easier time in high school when the workload gets more intense.

One of the first ways to teach advocacy is to have your student write a letter to each teacher informing them of their learning disabilities and their strength and weaknesses. This is also a good time to include your student in teacher conferences. Some schools have student-led conferences that help the students define their strengths and weaknesses in each subject and also provide their own suggestions for improvement. It starts the process of ownership because eventually they will have to own their learning disabilities and advocate for themselves. It allows them the confidence to approach teachers in high school for tutoring opportunities and accommodations.

**College**

Once a student goes to college, they will need to not only understand their learning disability but also understand their rights under the law, ADA. The disability needs to be documented so they can seek the appropriate accommodations. All learning disabilities will need to be documented by an educational psychologist before a college and college testing (SAT/ACT) will accept them and provide the appropriate accommodations.

**Adult**

As an adult, you may be concerned about disclosing your disability within the workplace.

**Professional Advocacy**

**Educational advocates**

Educational advocates are fee paid professionals who are usually called in when the child is not receiving services/not making educational progress/IEP is not being followed.

Services an Educational Advocate can provide:

- Direct Advocacy and Representation in IEP Meetings
- IEP Reviews
- IEP Development
- 504 Plan Development
- Educational Planning
- School Observations
- Monitoring of Progress and Provision of Services
- Referral to Community Resources including: camps, private schools, residential placements, college programs for LD students, family support groups, and recreational activities for children with special needs.

The best way to find an Educational Advocate is by word of mouth referrals by parents who have used their services.

**Special Education Attorney**

A Special Educational Attorney can provide some of the same services as an Educational Advocate but at about twice the professional fee.

A Special Education attorney may be called in as a last resort and the Attorney often works with the Educational Advocate. Some issues that may require an attorney's services are: school not following the student's IEP, fighting
for a specialized school placement, mediation and dispute resolution.

**Legislative Advocacy**

Elected officials control legislation and regulations and as citizens, we have the power to elect people and keep them in office. Many of the rights of individuals with learning disabilities are protected under the law. However, they can be changed with little notice if we are not proactive to protect those rights.