

# General Tips on Advocacy by Parents

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**When we use the term "advocacy," we are referring both to the ability to persuade other people to accept your point of view, and to the skills and approaches you need when you do research and preparation to support the argument you are presenting or "advocating."**

## Parents can and should:

- lobby for adequate resources and staff qualifications
- support sympathetic staff
- be a team leader
- notice what's being done right
- be firm but optimistic
- recognize professional knowledge
- maintain a provincial/territorial presence
- ask for recognition of, and information on, the big picture/context
- resist quick fixes
- do not overburden your child
- expect change, but not miracles
- demand a few focused goals rather than a dispersed "overhaul"
- don't wait, but don't panic
- ensure everyone's role is clear, and that someone acts as case manager/team leader
- ask for regular evaluation of growth in retrospect to the year's goal
- be realistic and reasonable in your quest for growth.



## Get to Know the Legal System in Your Area

Be knowledgeable about your local and state special education criteria, policies, funding formula and local district/board regulations.

## Keep Accurate Records

Maintain good records of relevant events, conversations, correspondence and other communications. Such documentation should include letters, faxes, memos, e-mail messages, any notes taken during or after phone calls, and any other related information you have acquired. It is essential that parents keep detailed and accurate records of everything relevant that is related to their child and to the efforts undertaken to overcome hurdles.

## Opening and Preserving a "Paper Trail"

Printed, faxed and electronic letters (e-mail messages and attachments) serve several purposes. They are useful to:

- contact people who are "not available" in person or by phone
- record and confirm important information received orally, in meetings or through phone calls
- record and confirm important "understandings" and promises
- record and confirm timelines and deadlines

## **Keep a Contact Log or Journal**

Get in the habit of developing a written record of relevant phone calls, meetings or other oral conversations. After any phone call, make a short note. In your more detailed notes written afterwards, be sure to include the time and date of the conversation, the names (and titles) of participating persons, and a short outline of the discussion. Your log is a memory aid and will help you remember what happened and why. Again, your contact log should try to provide answers to "Who, What, Why, When, Where, How" and "Explain" notes.

Taking notes at meetings gives an accurate account of the issues discussed. Take notes whenever there is a discussion of your child. This includes meetings with teachers, doctors and other professionals. The note should include the date and place of the meeting as well as the names of everyone present and the main issues discussed. When appropriate, use the written information as the basis for follow-up letters to confirm meetings, calls, decisions, key facts, promises made, and so on.

Always ask for and note the name and contact data of anyone you may need to communicate with later on. This advice applies especially to anyone who promises (or refuses) to take a step on your behalf or on behalf of someone you are helping.

If you have a dispute with the school, your contact log is independent evidence that supports your memory. It is a diary. You may have to tell your child's story to another person in order to get help. Assume that school personnel and their attorney will read your contact log.

## **Making Copies Is Simple and Essential**

Always make and keep copies of letters, other documents and electronic messages that you send, receive or share with others.

## **Keeping Records**

Here is a list of the different documents that you'll see over the course of your child's special education. You should keep them all.

1. Individualized Education Plan and other official services plan
2. Evaluations by the school system and by independent evaluators
3. Medical Records
4. Progress reports and report cards
5. Standardized tests results
6. Notes on your child's behaviour or progress
7. Correspondence
8. Notes from meetings, conversations with school personnel, evaluators, teachers

9. Documents relating to discipline or behaviour concerns
10. Formal notices of meetings scheduled to discuss the child
11. Samples of school work
12. Calendar

## **Pursuing Appropriate Paths of Communication for Advocacy**

Usually, the most diplomatic way to achieve results is to go through established lines of communication, up the ladder of an organizational hierarchy. In the school system, if you decide to step beyond the teacher toward the principal and the superintendent, it is important not to miss any level in the hierarchy, as people in higher positions expect that the established pecking order will be followed. They are likely to feel angry if they are not given the opportunity for input. It is also important to remember that those involved at each level have a stake in the matter. By acknowledging each person's genuine interest and concern, you can help prevent the possibility of hostility from someone feeling devalued or unappreciated.

## **Maintaining Communication**

Once you have mastered the form and direction of communications, concentrate on maintaining a favourable communication environment. When dealing with other people, it is important to keep an open mind and to listen to their comments and views.

The way any message is communicated can have a direct impact on the results achieved. Saying: "We seem to have a problem; what do you think we can do about it?" gets the other person involved by asking for his or her input and suggestions, and encourages that person to help find solutions to the problem.

All too often we let professionals give us their opinions without questioning them or asking for further evidence or alternative suggestions. Advocates should not be shy about posing specific initial questions and follow-up questions.

## **Some Questions That a Parent or Advocate Could Ask**

Although the questions will differ with each situation, the following are some common questions that parents should ask concerning their child.

- What is the nature of my child's difficulty and what evidence exists?
- What strengths were identified? What is being recommended and why?
- Has an Individual Education Plan been developed or will one be developed?
- Who will be involved as the helping team? What are their qualifications?
- Who will be in charge overall and will that person have the authority to see to it that the plan is carried out?
- What will be done to build on my child's strengths?
- What sort of help is available?
  - regular classroom teacher only
  - aide in regular class
  - part-time resource room
  - full-time resource room or other special class
- How will this help be integrated?

- What are the long-term plans or expectations?
- Will there be a process of regular evaluation? Who will see that it is done?
- To what extent will the independent diagnosis and prescription I have provided to you be implemented? If it isn't, or parts of it won't be, why not?

*Sources:*

*Learning Disabilities Association of Canada*

*Special Needs Project*, Sept. 10, 2013.