

# Five Essential Skills for Becoming Your Child's Advocate

Learning the essential skills to become your child's advocate and ensure your child receives an appropriate education does not require lots of money or even years of schooling. All it requires is learning five basic skills and consistently implementing them within the school community.

## **SKILL 1: BECOME INFORMED ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S DISABILITY**

Understand your child's strengths and weaknesses, as well as the strategies that enable your child to compensate for weaknesses or deal with challenging activities.

**Example:** My child has a great deal of difficulty organizing his materials. We have found that color-coding all of his school materials, as well as keeping everything in a single zippered binder, allows him to keep track of his work. When he is rushing between classes, he can simply throw papers into his binder and zip it up. We can help organize the papers at home, keeping papers from getting lost in the bottom of the backpack or -- worse still -- in the black hole!

## **SKILL 2: LEARN ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS**

Three federal statutes guarantee your child's access to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) as well as accommodations as a person with a disability. The three federal laws are:

- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004)
- Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act
- Title II of the American Disabilities Act

By becoming knowledgeable about your parental rights, as well as those of your child, you become an informed consumer. Remember: knowledge is power! Parents who understand how schools are run, what schools are required to provide, and how services should be provided find much less resistance in securing appropriate services for their child.

**Example:** My son has a writing disability. The very act of handwriting is laborious for him. In lecture classes, he often missed 75 percent of the information presented because he was focused on trying to copy down what was on the board. Through his educational plan, we requested that he receive copies of classroom notes, be able to tape record his lectures, and have access to a word processor. This has increased his ability to participate in classroom discussions and to focus on the information presented because he is no longer worrying about copying information off the board.

However, had I not known I could make requests for accommodations through the school child study team or IEP team, he would have continued to struggle and fail in his classes. With these three simple accommodations, he is able to excel in his academic classes and compete with his peers who are not learning disabled.

## **SKILL 3: LEARN TO BE IN CHARGE OF YOUR EMOTIONS**

As Kenny Rogers says, "know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em." As parents, we need to learn to step back and bring in others to help us when we are having difficulty with our child's school. Oftentimes, our natural reaction is to push harder and scream louder, thinking that the school will then do what we want. Unfortunately, more often than not, what occurs then is a "battle of wills," with both parties expending emotional energy to be right. They may lose focus on the real issue -- a child's success in life and school. It is vital, as a parent advocate, that you learn how to step back, reflect, rally your troops, and encourage others to think outside the box, be creative, and find common ground. Compromise does not mean one is "giving in" or losing. It means meeting one another half-way.

## SKILL 4: LEARN TO BECOME A CLEAR COMMUNICATOR

Be sure to document all conversations in writing, especially verbal conversations and meetings with any member of the school community. It is essential for you as a parent to have accurate records and written documentation. These summarize all conversations and document your understanding about the next steps or follow-up actions to be taken concerning your child.

By requesting written information, by documenting in writing, and by allowing others to respond in writing clarifying your interpretations, you create a paper trail that can be used in court, if necessary. More often, it provides a reminder about what has been agreed upon and who is responsible for ensuring that your child's needs are met.

I strongly suggest parents organize their child's school records in a binder to ensure they have it all in one central location. I frequently recommend that parents include the following sections in their binders:

- Medical/diagnostic information
- Educational plans (Individual Education Plan (IEP) or 504 accommodation plan)
- Report cards
- Educational assessments and State testing results
- Communication log and copies of all emails
- Requests for services
- Assessments
- Meetings
- Teacher notes (positive and negative)
- Any other written documents pertaining to your child's education
- Work samples

**Example:** I have found that by clarifying all conversations in writing, as well as keeping copies of all written communications, I am able to eliminate forgotten conversations or he-said/she-said situations. This is particularly helpful when I have to advocate for my child during a time of stress or conflict.

## SKILL 5: LEARN TO WORK COLLABORATIVELY WITH YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL

Remember to focus on the positives. It is vital to recognize efforts of individuals and provide support, encouragement, and recognition of the difficulties involved in working with your child. Teachers and school personnel are human beings with their own personal lives. As parents, we may at times become so focused on our child's needs that we unintentionally present ourselves as insensitive or demanding. This can create barriers to communication.

As your child's primary advocate, you must refrain from making personal comments or attacks toward the school or any school personnel. When a staff member has acted inappropriately or insensitively towards your child or yourself, put your concern in writing. Address it to the individual involved, with a copy going to the district office. Share your point of view, as well as your suggestions for remedying the situation.

When a staff member has acted kindly towards your child, it's equally important to put your compliments in writing. Send a note to the individual, with a copy to the district office. Research clearly shows that all humans like to be appreciated and respond to positive reinforcement.

**Example:** Over the years, I have found that making the extra effort to work collaboratively with the school and school administration has paid off. When my child is faced with a difficult teacher, or when a member of his child study team is not working in his best interest, I am able to voice my concerns and have them heard and addressed as valid rather than being pushed to the side as complaints from a pushy parent.