



HOW TO BE A GOOD PARENT ADVOCATE

All parents naturally want to be good advocates for their children. There are a few steps you can take to help you be more effective.

Know your child

- Be able to communicate your child's strengths and weaknesses. This is important in evaluation and Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) meetings, but it is also helpful in everyday interactions with teachers, therapists, and staff.
- Understand your child's diagnosis and how it affects him or her. How is your child like or unlike what is the norm for other children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)? What are your child's special interests and how might they interfere with or support learning? Does your child avoid social contact or does he or she struggle to know how to initiate or maintain an interaction?
- Know what others have said about your child, including medical professionals and educators.

Know the law

- Make sure you know the special education timelines for your child and monitor them to make sure that they are being followed. When should your annual IEP/IFSP occur? How long until your child's next evaluation? Have you discussed ESY (Extended School Year) in time to get a placement for summer (for students over age 3)? When are important papers due (for example, the NOREP - Notice of Recommended Educational Placement)?
- Understand the concepts of FAPE (Free and Appropriate Public Education) and LRE (Least Restrictive Environment). Understand other legal constraints, such as: How can a child with an IEP be disciplined? How many students can be in an autism support classroom? Is an aide allowed to

provide academic instruction?

- Exercise your right to be a member of your child's team. Contribute to the evaluation and the IEP/IFSP.
- Recognize that special education is broader than academics. Your child may be entitled to services related to social, behavior, communication, motor skills, and self-help skills as well, just to name a few.
- Understand your options if you are unsatisfied with your child's special education evaluation or program or if legal procedures and timelines have not been followed.

Know your community

- Stay informed about what is happening at your child's school, at other schools within your district, and in other neighboring districts.
- Join your school's parent organization and any disability support groups in your community. These organizations may provide valuable information about what services are being offered to other students, new special education programs in the area, and information about teachers who are "autism-friendly" (and those who are not).
- Learn the chain of command at your Early Intervention (EI) agency, school, and/or school district. Who can you go to if you need help resolving a problem? Who is the special education director in the district? The superintendent? Who is on the school board and when do they hold open meetings?
- Know the resources available in your community. Attend local conferences and workshops to learn about ASD, special education, and ways to help your child.

Be courteous and respectful

- Being a good advocate doesn't necessarily mean being adversarial! While you may have a different opinion than someone else about what is appropriate for your child, try hard to communicate your opinions in a professional manner and with facts and data that will support your opinions.
- Make sure to thank teachers, therapists, and staff when good things happen; don't let problems be the only time you communicate. Forming a good relationship with school personnel can often be a way to learn

valuable information and can be an additional motivator for teachers, therapists, and staff to want to help your child.

Stay organized and prepared

- The longer your child is in the special education system, the more paperwork you will accumulate. Keep a binder with all materials (for example, evaluations, IEPs/IFSPs, written requests, progress reports, report cards, emails, and letters).
- When you have phone calls or in person conversations related to your child's IEP/IFSP, document what is discussed through an email and keep it in your binder as well. If an email seems unnecessary, write down what is said, who says it, and when, and put the note in your binder.
- During IEP/IFSP or other important meetings, take notes (or have a friend take notes). Keep your notes in your binder.
- Set reminders for important events, such as when progress reports on IEP/IFSP goals are due, when the annual IEP/IFSP should occur, and when ESY should be discussed.
- Set several times a year (perhaps coinciding with IEP/IFSP progress reports) when you will review your child's IEP/IFSP on your own.

Show up to meetings ready to contribute

- Know what kind of meeting you are attending, who will be there, and what will be discussed. If you are unsure, ask your school or Service Coordinator. Some meetings (for example, IEP meetings) require the school to give you notice of the purpose of the meeting and who will attend. Refer to the notice document for information when available.
- Ask for an agenda or outline of what will be discussed ahead of time. If you requested the meeting, prioritize what you want to discuss, and provide the school or your Service Coordinator with your agenda. For IEP/IFSP meetings, consider requesting an IEP/IFSP facilitator to help keep the meeting on track if your team has a history of unproductive meetings.
- Come prepared. Review any relevant documents ahead of time. For IEP/IFSP meetings, think about whether your child has been making progress with the current program. Make a list of what you think is working and what needs to be adjusted. Request a copy of the draft IEP/IFSP if your school or EI agency plans to bring one to the meeting, and review it ahead

of time.

- Be on time for meetings, and respect reasonable time limits. Remember, most meetings don't have to be completed in one session, and most meetings don't require you to make an on-the-spot decision.
- Don't take a back seat at the meeting! Sit across from the person running the meeting and make appropriate eye contact with them and anyone else who is speaking. Don't be afraid to speak up when you have something to contribute or have questions.
- If you are meeting to discuss a problem, think in advance about possible solutions. Before attending the meeting, discuss options with trusted family, friends, and professionals who work with your child outside of the education system.
- Bring any supporting documents that may be helpful, such as your child's communication notebook, report cards, or a private evaluation.
- If you are uneasy about attending the meeting alone, consider bringing a therapist who works with your child, another professional who knows your child, a friend, or an advocate along with you.
- If you need to take a break during a meeting, ask for one. It is normal to get emotional about decisions related to your child. A break can help you get your emotions (whether anger or sadness) in check and can make the rest of the meeting more productive.

Follow up after meetings

- Request a summary of each meeting and attendance list, or prepare one yourself and circulate to other people who were there.
- If not everything is accomplished in one meeting, make a list of what was accomplished and what still needs to be done. Schedule the next meeting.
- Review your notes and follow up after a reasonable period of time to ask if things which have been promised have occurred.
- Hold yourself accountable to deadlines as well. If you promised to complete a questionnaire about your child, send in a medical evaluation, or provide another piece of information, do so promptly.
- Take time to think about what is discussed before agreeing or disagreeing with any proposal. After a reasonable time to think and consult with your family and with any professionals who are working with your child outside of the education setting, get back to the school or EI agency with questions

or a decision.

- Had a bad meeting? Regroup and try again. Seek the advice or input from someone outside the situation or appeal to someone else in your district for help (the principal or special education supervisor, for example). When necessary, pursue legal remedies, such as mediation or Due Process.

Related Articles:

- [Advocating for Your Child](#)
- [What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?](#)
- [Infants and Toddlers Early Intervention Basics](#)
- [Preschool Special Education Basics](#)
- [School-Age Special Education Basics](#)
- [All These Appointments! All This Paperwork! How to Stay Organized](#)

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