

Promoting Self-Advocacy

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Powerful Learning Concepts

Author: Become Your Own Expert!:
A Self Advocacy Curriculum for youth with L.D.

Self-Advocacy

The development of self-advocacy tools enable individuals to become active participants in planning their future. Self-advocates speak up for themselves on their own behalf. They stand up and ask for what they need because they realize that no one else knows how they think and feel.

Self-advocacy is the best kind of advocacy because it puts the individual in charge. There's no waiting for someone else to change the situation. Self-advocates make the changes for themselves.

Research Indicates that children and youth with Learning Disabilities:

1. use little to no self- advocacy skills.
2. have limited self awareness and poor concepts.
3. do not understand what a learning disability is.
4. usually do not have a copy of their IEP, do not attend their own IEP meetings, and can not explain the purpose of an IEP.
5. have difficulty setting and fulfilling goals.
6. are underemployed.
7. often have impaired decision making skills.
8. experience increased levels of anxiety of not being able to keep up as skill gaps widen.
9. face daily frustrations about academic performance.
10. have difficulty with reading, (two-thirds of secondary students with learning disabilities are reading three or more grade levels behind).
11. face challenges with depression and anxiety.
12. struggle with asking for academic accommodations because they don't want to stand out, or be treated differently.

Students Cope in a Variety of Ways:

1. become the class clown or people pleaser
2. abandon their basic wants and needs
3. develop behavioral issues, and/or bully others
4. present a 'don't care' attitude
5. become truant from school
6. overachieve
7. get stuck in pain

**Students face a number
of challenges when
requesting an academic
accommodation**

When a student approaches a teacher to disclose a learning disability and to request an accommodation, it is NOT uncommon for them to feel:

Students May Be Concerned About Being:

- viewed as dumb
- misunderstood
- treated differently
- perceived as less than equal
- punished with a lesser grade

shame
anxious
embarrassed
tearful
humiliation
patronized
angry
insecure

under suspicion
inferior
invalidated
alone
helpless
confused
loss of identity
overwhelmed

Additional Concerns May Include:

- being an imposition to a teacher or other students
- not being believed
- being labeled a trouble maker
- loss of status
- alienation

Common teacher responses to requests for an accommodation by students

“If you’d just try harder”

“Everybody has problems learning.”

“It wouldn’t be fair to other students. That would give an unequal advantage.”

“If I do it for you, I have to do it for everybody.”

“You will have to do this someday on your own.”

Rolling our eyes

Tone of voice

Disbelieving expressions

Sniffs, snorts and sighs...

“You don’t look like you have a learning disability.”

“This is a difficult class. It’s supposed to be difficult.”

“You don’t have a learning disability, you have a motivation problem.”

“Maybe you’re spread too thin. You should give up some activities for awhile.”

“You can’t use a learning disability as an excuse to be lazy.”

Such responses make light of the student’s problems and request, place them under suspicion and communicate value judgments about their potential.

Our judgments of students are not always verbal in nature. We may try to hide our true feelings with the “right” words, but students are rarely fooled.

Body Language can unconsciously reflect our judgments of students and their request for an accommodation through...

Both of these kinds of verbal and nonverbal responses put the student on the defensive and creates a stressful and emotional experience. Research indicates that under these conditions learning shuts down.

Keys to collaboration for regular and special education teachers

I. Appropriate teacher responses to student's requests for accommodation (given in private or one-on-one), that establish positive communication and create emotional reassurance.

a. "It must have been difficult to tell me that. I admire you for your courage."

b. "We will work together. Help me to understand so we can help you to succeed in the best way possible."

c. "Have patience with me. Because I can't see your learning disability, it makes it difficult for me to understand your situation."

d. "In asking for this accommodation, it shows me that you want to succeed."

Listen to the student and recognize that they have honorable intentions when they ask for help.

II. Try to understand why a student in need of help or an accommodation may not approach you.

III. Challenge your personal philosophy of what constitutes an effective learning environment.

IV. Before you place blame on the child or parent, ask yourself, "Is there any connection between my teaching style, the student's learning style and the problem?"

V. Do I see an academic request as making a student unnecessarily dependent on an adult?

VI. Enlist the help and support of your administrators to create opportunities to teach self-determination/self-advocacy to students.

Parents and Guardians:

You play a critical role in teaching your child self-advocacy skills.

Parents and Guardians

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- I. Educate yourselves about your child's disability so that you can teach your child to become their own expert. Consult with your child's diagnostician or special education teacher to increase your knowledge about your child's test information. Develop an understanding of their strengths, current challenges, (do not call it weakness or limitations!) and learning style. Become informed about how their learning disability impacts learning in reading, writing, math, time management, organization, focus and concentration, and social skills.
- II. Your child may need academic accommodations. Become familiar with the kinds of accommodations that your child has been identified as needing, through the IEP team.
 - a. Your child will take ownership in using accommodations if they see the value, and can feel safe in asking for them.
 - b. Understand the difference between: accommodation, modification, and compensatory skills.
 - c. Students will often need to experiment with accommodations to find out what is best for them.
 - d. Listen to your child's fears about using accommodations. Some students do not want their peers to see them leave a classroom to take a test.
- III. Seek out a professional organization or a group of like-minded parents with whom you can share research and ask questions. Collect articles, books, and research on learning disabilities and attend conferences.
- IV. Include your child in the development and implementation of their IEP or 504 plans.

- a. Request that the school teach your child to eventually run their own meetings
 - b. IEP and 504 plans should be written in the first person.
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- V. Set up opportunities with your child to role-play and problem solve current challenges they face.
 - VI. Encourage your child to feel all of their emotions without judgments or discounting their feelings.
 - VII. Allow your child to be dependent WHILE teaching them to become independent.
 - VIII. If you believe self advocacy/self determination is an important part of school curriculum, schools are more likely to foster an environment that promotes these skills.
 - IX. Provide opportunities for them to develop talents and shine! Their disability doesn't get to define who they are!

“There are no problems that can't be solved, worked out or negotiated.”

Sample Core Self-Advocacy Objectives

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- I. I will be able to define a learning disability.
- II. I will be able to describe my specific learning disability and how it has the potential to impact academic learning and employment.
- III. I will be able to describe any other disability I may have and talk about how it can affect learning and employment.
- IV. I will develop a good understanding of my strengths and potential challenges when learning difficult or unfamiliar information.
- V. With the assistance of my parents and case manager, I will develop a list of specific compensations and accommodations that I will need for academic learning and employment success.
 - a. I will experiment to find out which accommodations are most useful to me.
 - b. Through input from others, I will develop an awareness of those accommodations that are successful when used and have them added to my IEP or 504 plan.
- VI. I will use at least one assistive technology resource.
- VII. I will develop a basic knowledge of the law and disability rights.
- VIII. I will learn how to speak up for myself and communicate my needs through continued dialogue with individuals that I trust. I will practice defining the term self-advocacy.
- IX. I will actively participate in the preparation and planning of my IEP/504 meetings.
- X. I will be open to practicing and rehearsing what I want to say (communicating an accommodation need to a teacher that scares me; or voicing my opinions in an IEP meeting and practice disagreeing without losing

my temper) with individuals that I trust.

- XI. I will apply self-advocacy skills in each of my regular-education classes (use incremental goal-setting to keep from getting overwhelmed).

The above objectives require direct and systematic instruction for students to be able to develop the ability to fulfill them. Under no circumstances should it be assumed that students know what these mean, let alone how to apply them without instruction.

“Let no child be demeaned, not have his wonder diminished because of our ignorance or inactivity. Let no child be deprived of discovery because we lack the resources to discover his problem. Let no child ever doubt himself or his mind because we are unsure of our commitment.”

- National Center for Learning Disabilities