



Teens and Young Adults with Disabilities: Be Your Own Best Advocate

As a teen or a young adult with a disability, you're probably used to adults in your life advocating for you. Your parents may have spoken out at Individualized Education Program (IEP) team meetings to help you get the services you needed at school. Your teachers might have made sure you got the support you needed to be successful in your classes. When you go out to eat with your family, someone usually talks to the server about your dietary restrictions, so you don't have to.

Becoming an adult and learning to be your own best advocate will make a big difference in your life. Speaking up for yourself will give you more control over making choices in your life and make it easier to stand up for your rights. Advocating for yourself will help people around you better understand what you think, what you want, and what you need.

Opportunities to advocate for yourself

You may need to advocate for yourself in many situations in your daily life. Practice helps! Here are some examples of times when it could be important to make your voice heard. For each situation, think about what you would do or say. You may want to role-play these situations with a family member or friend:

- A substitute teacher hands out a test. You have an accommodation to take your tests in a quiet room, but the substitute does not know this.
- Your bus arrives and someone you don't know offers to help you go up the steps. You would rather not have help, even if it takes you a few minutes longer to board the bus and take your seat.
- You have a reading tutor who works with you in the library every Thursday at 3:00 p.m. The tutor shows up late for the fourth week in a row.
- You rent an apartment with a good friend. He gets home from work earlier than you do every day. Lately, he's been opening your favorite magazines that come in the mail addressed to you before you get home, without asking you first.
- You're sick, so you ask your mom to take you to see your doctor. At the appointment, your doctor keeps asking your mom questions about your symptoms and how you're feeling instead of asking you.

Strategies to help you advocate for yourself

Advocating for yourself is a skill you will use throughout your whole life. Here are a few ideas you can use to help you build your advocacy skills.

- 1. Remember YOU are the expert on YOU.** No one knows more about how your disability affects you. The one person who can use their voice to speak up for you better than anyone else is you. If someone assumes something about you that is incorrect, speak up and politely correct them.
- 2. Give respect to get respect.** Show people the respect you expect them to show you. When you speak for yourself, talk to people the way you want them to talk to you.
- 3. Go straight to the point.** Say only what you need to say. Information about your disability is private; you don't always have to tell people about your disability when you advocate for yourself. In many situations, you can just explain what you need, what you want, or what you think.

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- 4. Ask for help if you feel overwhelmed.** When a situation gets too big to handle by yourself, ask someone you trust to get involved and support you. Asking for help is a very important part of advocating for yourself.
 - 5. Give yourself permission to make mistakes.** Becoming your own best advocate takes time and practice. You can do this; the more you advocate for yourself, the better you'll get at it.

Learn more about self-advocacy

There are a lot of resources for teens and young adults with disabilities that will help you become a better advocate. There are also resources created to use with your family that will support your success as you get ready for adulthood. You and your family can get a good start with these:

PACER's Advocating for Myself webpage

Advocating for yourself means knowing what your needs are and speaking up for yourself to get your needs met. It takes practice! Watch the videos in this collection and explore other resources on this site. You'll hear tips from other students with disabilities who have learned to advocate for themselves in high school, college, and at work.

PACER.org/students/transition-to-life/advocating-for-myself.asp

PACER's Inspiring Possibilities e-newsletter

Sign up for monthly updates from PACER's National Parent Center on Transition and Employment. Each issue focuses on an important topic for teens and young adults with disabilities and their families. Featured resources provide strategies to help you find your voice and achieve your post-school goals.

PACER.org/transition/news/optIn-inspiring-possibilities.asp

Minnesota Association of Centers for Independent Living (MACIL)

Centers for Independent Living provide many different services to support people with disabilities in independent living, including helping young people transition from high school into adult life in the community. People with disabilities are greatly involved in making policy decisions and the delivery of services at Centers for Independent Living. There is an interactive map at this site to help you and your family find the Center for Independent Living in your region.

<http://macil.org>