

How You Can Help Your Child Learn to Be a Good Self-Advocate

It is never too early to start teaching your child how he or she can advocate for himself or herself. Like many other important life skills, self-advocacy is a critical tool your son or daughter needs in order to achieve goals, increase self-sufficiency, and become a successful young adult. It is a lifelong process that begins with your child learning by watching you, as a parent, be a good advocate. As your children become older, the ways in which students can participate in their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings increase.

What exactly does self-advocacy mean?

Self-advocacy means taking the responsibility for communicating one's needs and desires in a straightforward manner to others. It is a set of skills that includes:

- Speaking up for yourself
- Communicating your strengths, needs, and wishes
- Being able to listen to the opinions of others, even when their opinions differ from yours
- Having a sense of self-respect
- Taking responsibility for yourself
- Knowing your rights
- Knowing where to get help or who to go to with a question

One of the best places to start teaching your child about self-advocacy is in his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Including your son or daughter in the IEP meeting provides him or her with an opportunity to learn and practice important life skills. Some advantages your son or daughter may gain by being involved in the IEP process include:

- Learning about the impact of his or her disability
- Practicing goal setting
- Building teamwork skills
- Developing an ability to speak up for himself or herself
- Participating in a process of resolving differences
- Gaining an understanding of his or her strengths and needs
- Learning how to ask for and accept help from others.

It is important to discuss the meeting process with your youth beforehand. Role-playing an IEP meeting with your son or daughter can be a great teaching tool and may help him or her to feel less anxious about participating.

If your son or daughter is uncomfortable attending the meeting, ask him or her to participate just in the opening of the meeting. This helps your youth get to know the IEP team members better and be more comfortable in a meeting setting. It also ensures that everyone at the meeting has your son or daughter as the focus. You can also receive input from your youth before you attend the IEP meeting. Ask if there is anything he or she would like to share, or have you share at the meeting. It can also be beneficial to ask each team member to state one positive trait or skill your son or daughter has as you begin the meeting. Be sure to include your youth in this sharing of positives. After the IEP meeting, sit down with your youth and explain the goals and services, or answer any questions he or she may have.

Ways for your youth to be involved include, but are not limited to:

- Writing down ideas, questions, and concerns before the IEP meeting

- Rehearsing what he or she wants to say in the IEP meeting
- Introducing him- or herself
- Talking about his or her interests, strengths, and desires for the future
- Explaining his or her disability to the team
- Leading all or part of the IEP meeting
- Helping the team develop IEP goal areas
- Asking for explanations if he or she doesn't understand something
- Reviewing what the team has agreed upon at the end of the meeting

Some questions you may want to discuss with your son or daughter prior to the IEP meeting are:

- What do you want to learn or work on this year?
- What are your special concerns for the school year?
- How do you learn best?
- What do you need to be successful?
- What would make learning easier for you?
- What do you wish your teacher and other school staff would understand about you?

Discuss with your child how to handle the situation if something negative or difficult to hear is said about him or her in the meeting. Determine at what point, if any, you would stop the meeting and have your child leave. If the meeting is likely to be too stressful or negative, have your child only attend part of it and determine the agenda ahead of time with the team. Be sure to include your child's input on the agenda. If your child chooses not to attend a meeting, ask if he or she would be willing to share ideas or opinions in writing or on an audio recording to provide to the team.

Federal special education law (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA) requires youth to be invited to the IEP meetings any time their transition services or needs are to be discussed. Transition is about planning for your young adult's future and taking a look at his or her unique skills and needs in order to prepare them in the three areas of transition: employment, postsecondary education, and independent living. IDEA requires that transition be addressed by age 16 (some states require that transition planning begin by age 14 or 9th grade).

When your child reaches the age of majority (18 in most states), all parental rights will transfer and he or she will be

signing his or her own IEP. Therefore, including your child in IEP meetings from a young age ensures they have as much practice in self-advocacy as possible before turning 18.

Teaching your youth self-advocacy skills will have benefits throughout the school years and far beyond into adulthood. Knowing and exercising your rights as a parent are the first steps in teaching your child to become a strong self-advocate.

For more information on transition, parents' rights, or age of majority, please contact PACER at 952-838-9000 or visit PACER.org/transition.