

What is advocacy?

“Advocacy” refers to the efforts of an individual or group to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate or assert the interests, desires, needs and rights of yourself or another person. An *advocate* is a person who speaks up for, and defends the rights of him or herself, or of another person. A *self-advocate* is a person who speaks up for him or herself, and defends his or her own rights.

Finding Support

The most important step you can take to becoming an effective advocate is to find people in the community who will provide you with information and support. A support person can be a friend, family member, or a person who works for a community agency.

Individuals often feel intimidated or uninformed when dealing with others in positions of power. Finding a support person is one of the best ways to even up this power imbalance. A support person can:

- Listen to your problems and help you to find solutions
- Give you moral support
- Attend meetings with you
- Be a witness at meetings to protect you from mistreatment
- Help you gather information that you will need
- Help you to write a letter, or write a letter on your behalf
- Help you to understand how the system works
- Help you understand your rights

Know Your Rights

Defending one’s rights, or the rights of someone who cannot speak up for themselves, is not always easy. Though you may be guaranteed certain rights by law, defending those rights can sometimes be a long, difficult, and expensive process.

To advocate effectively, you need to educate yourself about the relevant law, policies and rules.

Staying Organized

Put together a file or record of documents. A three-ring binder is a good way to keep your file organized. You can add, copy and transfer information easily, and use dividers to separate information into different categories. Keep this file at home, and take it with you to meetings. Some things to do:

- Write down all telephone calls that you make to get information or services. Include the name and title of person you spoke with, the purpose of your call and its results, as well as the date and when to call back.
- Write down the date, purpose, and outcome of all visits, appointments, meetings, and conferences. And anything else you observe during the process.
- Write down difficult or special words and get explanations and examples from professionals.

- Keep a dated copy of all letters you receive.
- Keep copies of information provided to you by resource people in the community that you found useful.
- Keep a record of the names of the people you have talked to. Obtain names, addresses and telephone numbers so that you can contact them for help and information.

Preparation and Planning

Before communicating with others, it is important to think about your concerns, or problems, to be clear about your options, and to think about how the problem might be resolved.

If you are not sure what you think should happen, you probably need more information, or you need to talk to a support person.

Setting priorities will help you to figure out what is really important and what is not. Deal with one problem at a time. Choose your battles carefully—you may not have enough time and energy to fight them all.

Make sure that what you want to happen is realistic. This does not mean giving up, or letting other people tell you that something is not possible.

Being Assertive

Effective advocates are assertive advocates. Assertiveness can be defined as the direct, honest, comfortable and appropriate expression of feelings, opinions and beliefs through which one stands up for his/her own rights - without violating the rights of others --*Alberti & Emmons, 1970*

Assertiveness is...

- Expressing your needs clearly and directly
- Expressing your ideas without feeling guilty or intimidated
- Sticking up for what you believe in
- Knowing what your rights are and how to get them
- Treating professionals as partners
- Exhibiting self-confidence when communicating
- Self-reliance and independence
- Persisting until you get what you need and deserve

Assertiveness is Not...

- Relinquishing your right and responsibility to advocate
- Beating around the bush before stating your needs
- Feeling too guilty or afraid to express your needs
- Agreeing with others when you would rather not
- Leaving decisions to others because "they know best"
- Reliance and dependence on others, giving into defeat
- Giving up when you run into "red tape"

- Making assumptions and decisions before you obtain all the facts

Communication Styles

There are three ways that we can communicate with other people; we can be assertive, aggressive or passive.

Assertive

Assertive behavior involves standing up for our personal rights and expressing our thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest, and appropriate ways that do not hurt others or violate their rights.

Assertiveness involves respect--respect for ourselves by expressing clearly our needs and defending our rights, and respect for the other person's needs and rights.

We can be assertive and polite at the same time.

The goal of assertive behaviour is to defend our rights and to have our needs met, while showing respect for other people.

Aggressive

When people are aggressive, they stand up for their rights and express their thoughts and feelings in ways that are inappropriate, and show disrespect for the other person or violates their rights.

The goal of aggressive behavior is to dominate or humiliate other people.

Passive

Passive behavior fails to express feelings and beliefs honestly, and permits others to "walk all over" them. It can also include expressing themselves in an apologetic and self-degrading manner.

The goal of passive behaviour is to please others and to avoid conflict.

Guidelines For Assertive Advocacy

- Be specific when introducing a complaint.
- Focus on one issue at a time.
- Don't just complain. Overloading another person with grievances can make her/him feel hopeless, and suggests that either you have been hoarding complaints, or you have not thought carefully about what really troubles you.

- Do not focus on past grievances. Focusing on problems that happened in the past can interfere with what you are trying to accomplish right now. Complaints, or grievances should be brought up at the earliest possible time, or the other person has the right to suspect that they have been carefully saved as weapons.
- Take time to think before you speak. Do not feel that you must rush to say something or to sign something.
- Do not consider counter-demands until your original demands are clearly understood, and there has been a clear response to them.
- Consider compromise. Look for solutions that meet the concerns of all those involved.
- Don't assume that you know what another person is thinking until you have heard what that person has to say.
- Do not assume that you know how another person will react, or what they will accept or reject.
- Avoid correcting another person's statement about his/her own feelings, or telling another person how s/he should feel.
- Repeat major points of a discussion to make sure that there is agreement, and to reassure the other person that you understand what has been discussed.
- Avoid sarcasm.
- Avoid labels and name-calling. Do not be intolerant. Be open to the feelings of other people. Try not to say things that you will regret later, and never make racist or sexist remarks that will offend others and violate their rights.

Be Respectful

Even if you do not like someone who works for the school, it is still important to respect their professional roles as a teacher or principal, for example. Showing respect to other people does not mean agreeing with everything another person says.

How you say something can be just as important as what you say. It is usually not a good idea to raise your voice unless you have planned on what you want to say, and you have planned on making this point clearly and forcefully. You can use phrases like:

- I was thinking that it would be a good idea if...
- I would prefer...
- What do you think of the idea?

Ask a Lot of Questions

If you do not understand something, ask questions until you do understand.

Dealing with Emotions

It is important to notice if your own feelings are getting in the way of expressing yourself clearly and in an appropriate way. It is hard to be respectful, when you are full of emotion. If you are feeling confused or angry...

- ask questions until you understand
- take a break
- reschedule the meeting or telephone conversation