

ADVOCACY – YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Being involved in your child’s intervention and schooling makes a difference. Parents who participate in informed decision-making about their child’s intervention are able to implement strategies and monitor their child on a daily basis. These parents are getting information from professionals and integrating that information together with their own knowledge of their child to appropriately advocate for resources and support.

Some ways to begin to advocate for your child include:

- Gather information through talking with other parents;
- Ask questions;
- Clearly state your opinions/feelings regarding your child’s and families needs;
- Look at your style of communicating and learn how an assertive style is more effective than an aggressive or passive style

Define your role on your child’s team of professionals. Consider yourself an *expert* on your own child.

You have valuable information that is important for making decisions. The information you have is important as you and your team try out various strategies that can help your child develop successful communication.

Some benefits, as shared by parents, to working as a team with professionals include:

- Feeling respected and listened to when they contribute their observations about their child;
- Better problem-solving and awareness from others, such as teachers, other family members and friends, when they have had the opportunity to describe their child’s needs and abilities;
- More confidence about detecting changes and having concerns when they are actively involved in assessing and monitoring their own child;
- More awareness of their child’s progress and what they themselves are doing that has a positive effect on their child’s development

At some point you may be invited to or initiate a team meeting about your child. To some parents, these meetings may feel intimidating. Below are some hints that other parents have found useful:

GETTING PREPARED

- Make a list of questions/concerns you would like addressed at the meeting;
- Make a list of your child’s strengths;
- List what you would like your child to be able to do within the next year ... the goals, objectives, skills & knowledge you hope your child will acquire. **Be specific, be realistic!**
- List the types of services/professionals you feel are needed in order for those goals to be achieved. Compromises may be necessary so consider your priorities and on which of them you are willing to yield.

- Think of any possible conflicts which may occur and list possible solutions to any of these. Sometimes professionals are more willing to adjust a plan or solve a problem if you are able to suggest possible alternatives;
- Invite a spouse or friend to attend with you and have one of you prepared to take notes at the meeting (may also consider audio/videotaping);
- Gather all reports/records of your child and bring to the meeting;
- Be knowledgeable about the law, your child's rights to an appropriate education, and funding for special services;
- Request the services of a language interpreter if needed. When sharing information about your child, it is important to reduce the possibility of misunderstandings between you and professionals.

AT THE MEETING

- Be on time;
- State at the beginning what you want to discuss
- Be friendly. Don't put your other team members on the defensive by starting the meeting as if you are ready to do battle;
- Take notes to help you recall specific points of discussion;
- Ask for an explanation of any terms you do not understand. Use wording such as "It is important to me to understand everything we discuss today, so I may stop someone and ask for clarification of a term I am not familiar with."
- Give praise to team members who have been helpful, doing a good job, etc.;
- Offer possible solutions rather than lay blame;
- Don't hesitate to question any recommendations or statements made by a professional. **Remember, the team is discussing your child!**
- If a rule or policy is mentioned, you may want to ask to see it documented in writing;
- Make sure results of the meeting are summarized in a clear manner at the end. If specific services have been agreed to by the professional team, make sure you keep a record of who will be doing what and by when;
- If you are not in agreement with the decisions made, ask about the appeal process. Use wording such as "I am not in agreement with these decisions. I understand that I have the right to appeal this decision. I need you to inform me of the appeal process in this school district/agency/or other."

You can and you do make a difference for your child!