



10 Tips for Advocating for Your Child

There are many circumstances in which you may need to advocate for and with your child. These general tips can be adapted to help you think about your specific situation.

- 1. Find allies you trust.** Depending on the issue around which you need to advocate, there are likely national and local groups who specialize in supporting families with high-quality information and resources to address specific issues. There may also be a network of parents you can connect with to learn how to work the systems that need to be worked.
- 2. Build relationships.** Get to know both decision makers and people who make things happen within systems. Polite, respectful, and courteous. Your warmth will make it more likely they will take you seriously and work with you for a solution.
- 3. Be prepared.** Gather accurate information about the situation, including information on the issue, the relevant policies or practices, and recommended solutions (including examples of where they have worked, if possible). Keep track of documents and keep records of issues, decisions, obstacles, and other.
- 4. Set priorities.** Have clear and specific goals. You probably won't get everything you want, so focus on achieving what's most important to your child.
- 5. Listen first.** Be sure you understand how the people involved are thinking about the issue or situation. Not only will they feel heard, but you can adjust your message to respond to their limitations, biases, or questions.
- 6. Highlight your child's strengths,** particularly when you're dealing with systems that focus on young people's difficulties or the challenges involved. Bring a big-picture view to the conversations about what your child needs.
- 7. Give your child a voice.** If your child is comfortable, encourage her or him to speak on her or his own behalf. However, respect her or his desire for privacy.
- 8. Don't constantly complain.** You're unlikely to be taken seriously about the things that really matter to you if you argue about everything. Try to remain calm and clear when addressing the issues, even if they are very emotionally and difficult for you.
- 9. Give yourself breaks,** and celebrate "wins" and progress along the way. The breaks and successes will give you more energy to keep going.
- 10. Join with others.** The issue your child faces may be part of a broader situation that can best be addressed through changes in policies or public attitudes. Consider working with others who are passionate about the issue to bring about those changes through political advocacy or efforts to educate the public.

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