

TIP SHEET

Advocating on your Child's Behalf

Advocacy is about identifying problems and negotiating solutions. The following tips are designed to help parents when advocating for children with special needs.

- Gather all available information which describes your child's disabilities, needs and strengths.
- Knowledge is power:
 - Know your rights and responsibilities
 - Know the policies and procedures of the systems you are working with
 - Attend an educational forum on the rules, policies, and procedures related to specific disabilities or legal issues
 - Attend support groups to learn from others who have had similar
 - Experiences (this is where some of the best strategies come from)
 - Research all therapies for safety
- People who are prepared make better decisions:
 - Identify your child's needs, who can meet these needs, and what you can do to get them met
 - Plan based on your child's worst day/situation
 - Make notes about your goals prior to each meeting
 - Write down your suggestions and ask others for their ideas
 - Bring someone with you to meetings - people who bring a friend to support them are more active and effective. Talk with that person ahead of time and identify the main issues you want to address. Ask them to take notes.
 - Be prepared for bumps in the road, the bumps are not as big if you've planned for them.
 - Be creative with your time. Multi-tasking well takes practice, but everyone can learn. Do not let your child, or yourself, get overloaded.
 - Build a support network with your family and friends. Become part of your community and let the community get to know your family.
 - Get involved with the facilities that work with your child by attending events, volunteering, donating and getting to know the staff.
- Put everything in writing:
 - Keep a file including evaluations, medical, educational, service and financial records, and correspondence. Include dates, complete names, a telephone log including numbers and addresses of all the people involved with your child. Bring your file to meetings and be very familiar with its contents.
- Ask questions, listen to answers:
 - Prepare an outline and put questions in writing ahead of time. Don't be afraid to ask questions that seem silly or awkward. Write down the answers that you receive.

- Being clear and thorough saves everyone's time – be specific about what you need and expect. Ask for clarification if necessary. If you do not feel heard, repeat yourself until you get a direct response.
- Identify problems and propose solutions:
 - Focus on strengths, concerns, and priorities
 - You may not be able to achieve your ideal solutions so decide ahead of time what you are willing to be flexible on
 - Remember that all plans must be based on your child's needs. If you disagree with anything, state clearly why you disagree and make suggestions about what needs to be changed.
 - If you are asked to sign something in a meeting, take your time and read it carefully first. You have no obligation to sign. Never sign a blank or partially completed form. Always take proposed plans home, read them carefully and review them with others if you need to. Be sure you understand and agree with the entire plan, and that it describes your child, his needs and the services being proposed in enough detail for you to know what is expected for the duration of the plan. If the plan is not clear or you disagree with any part of it, do not sign it. Put your refusal in writing to keep the plan from being implemented without your consent.
 - Request additional meetings to resolve any problems. If more meetings do not work, get help from an advocacy organization.
 - Remember that you can't control everything and put your energy toward the things you can change.

These tips were compiled courtesy of Arc Greater Twin Cities. To contact Arc, call (952) 920-1480 or visit www.arcgreatertwincities.org. For more tip sheets, visit www.fraser.org.