



Advocates for Children of New York

Protecting every child's right to learn

Advocacy Skills: Tips to Help you Advocate for Your Child's Educational Rights

Education is a partnership between school and home. You have unique information about your child. Be sure to communicate your concerns, ideas, and suggestions about your child's learning.

ADVOCACY TIPS

Be informed.

- Know your rights as a parent/guardian and know what to expect.
- Stay focused on new solutions to support your child.
- Bring a copy of any laws or regulations that may be helpful.
- You have the right to see your child's records, including general education records (like report cards), special education records (like Individualized Education Programs and evaluations), and disciplinary records (suspension letters, witness statements, charges, etc.—also known as the “suspension packet”).

Be persistent and confident.

You are the best advocate your child has! However, you may not always get a quick response to your request. Keep asking. Keep calling.

Remain calm and polite.

Your child's education is a sensitive and emotional topic. Do your best to stay calm so you can hear what others are saying and so you can be heard.

You are more likely to be heard or helped if you are courteous. Be positive and keep an open mind.

Focusing on the negatives can create a barrier to effective communication.

Most people are never thanked for what they do. Showing your appreciation to those that have helped you and saying “thank you” can go a long way.

Be ready to find some middle ground.

You may not always get what you ask for, so have an alternative plan in mind.

Put it in writing.

Create a “paper trail”. If you speak to someone and he/she agrees to something, send him/her an email to confirm what was said.

Save everything. All of the written correspondence you get concerning your child is very important. It may help you in the future if you have a problem. You should put all written materials (letters from the school, evaluations, etc.) you get in a folder and keep it available.

Saving emails is also very important. In some cases, the Department of Education is under strict time guidelines for fulfilling their responsibilities. Save all emails from the DOE in a folder for future use.

Get people's names. If you are at a meeting, ask people to identify themselves. Take notes and write down names. If you are on the phone, find out who you are speaking to. This will help you hold someone accountable for what they tell you.

Ask questions and ask for help.

If you do not understand something, ask someone to explain it to you. Make sure to ask specific questions. Use phrases such as “tell me more” and “I think what I heard was...Am I right?” These phrases require the person you are speaking with to provide more complete information. This will help avoid confusion and misunderstandings.

Sign documents only after you have read them completely and understand them fully.

Make sure you understand everything that you sign. If you can't read it or understand it, have someone you trust explain it to you.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS!

If you need translation, ask.

You have the right to translation and interpretation services if your native language is not English.

TIP:
Review the DOE's
[Parent Bill of Rights](#)

Get involved.

Join others who are organizing for the same goals. There is power in numbers, reach out to other parents and work together as advocates. Parent groups often understand how a “system works” and how to navigate the system.

Remember, everyone has a supervisor.

If someone is unable to answer your questions, ask to speak to a supervisor. Get the name of the supervisor and continue up the “chain of command” until your questions are answered.

Seek out professional advice.

Sometimes you need the help of a professional who can make a big difference in the outcome. Try contacting an attorney or professional advocate.

For additional resources on specific education-related topics, please visit AFC's website,

www.advocatesforchildren.org

You can also call our free Education Helpline at **(866) 427-6033**

EFFECTIVE LISTENING TIPS

Positive communication means using effective listening skills. The following are things you should keep in mind to be a good listener.

Concentrate on listening.

Too often we are busy preparing our response to someone rather than listening to what they're saying. This can result in missing important information.

Watch your non-verbal communication, or “body language.”

Often your body language will tell the person that you have stopped listening, even if you haven't.

Use eye contact, head nods, and lean toward the person with whom you are speaking.

It will indicate that you are interested in what they are saying.

Do not text or talk on your cell phone while you are in a meeting.

Please put all electronics on silent or vibrate.

Ask questions for clarification.

When you don't understand something, it's important to ask follow up questions. This will also show people that you are paying attention to what they are saying.

Summarize and restate.

Repeat what you heard in your own words to make sure you understand what the other person is telling you.

Take notes.

If you want to remember important information, jot down notes so that you can look at them later. You can always refer to your notes if you have to follow up with another meeting, letter, or phone call.

Virtual Meeting Tips

Stay engaged and don't get distracted, if you're not listening the other person will be able to hear the difference in tone, even if they can't see you. You also may not hear all the information you need.

If possible, push for a video call where you will be able to see all participants.