

Becoming An Effective Advocate For Your Child: **The Basics**

Personal Attitude and Beliefs:

- Believe in yourself! You can make a difference.
- You are the expert on your child – you know the big picture. Promote your child's strengths, talents and interests. Think about how your child's needs impact his/her school experience.
- View yourself as an equal partner and team member.
- Trust your intuition and follow your hunches.
- Take care of yourself. Remain determined but do set boundaries and balance. Set priorities and do what you can without getting stressed out. Advocating for your child's education should not consume your whole life.
- Stay objective and focused. Remember your goal – to get your child the education he/she needs.
- Be aware of the feelings you bring to the table. Keep emotions and egos separate from the important issues. Listen. Consider the other team member's intentions, experience, and expertise.
- Attitude does count. Be respectful. Do not be afraid to speak up but do pay attention to how you say things as well as what you say.
- Participate (PTA, volunteer, teacher meetings, share ideas)
- Network

Vision:

- Create a vision – What are your dreams for your child? What values are most important to you and your family?
- Dream big – do have high expectations for your child – all children deserve that!
- Person centered planning tools such as MAPS and PATH can help.
- Share your vision with the team – it will help guide the decisions you make.
- Remember your vision – refine your vision.
- Listen to your child – he/she will lead the way!

Knowledge:

- Knowledge is power! Learn the basics – you do not have to know it all.
- You need to know:
 - Where to find the information about federal, state, and local laws and regulations.
 - How your local system works – ask for your district’s guide to special education services; as well as for key people and how to contact them.
 - Who do you go to first, what is the chain of command?
 - How your child’s disability impacts his/her participation in school. Be aware of the general education curriculum. Know what the children are into. Stay tuned into the whole school community.
- You should be aware of:
 - The major provisions of IDEA, Section 504, ADA, No Child Left Behind, Procedural Safeguards.
- It is okay to ask questions!

Communication:

- Learn how to be a good communicator! Learn to convey your message clearly – orally and in writing.
- Clearly communicate your vision for your child.
- Golden Rule: Put it in writing and get it in writing.
- Establish a system of ongoing communication that respects all team members’ time and work schedule.
- Remember the time before and after the meetings is equally if not more important.
- Do ask questions: Who, What, Where, When, How? No jargon!

Get Organized:

- Get copies of your child’s records and reports.
- Keep the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) handy – review it regularly; make it a working document.
- Keep your records and other documents in one place – use a notebook, binder, file or tote bag (whatever works best for you).
- Develop and log a meeting and paper trail.
- Develop written agendas for meetings.
- Follow through – this is where most things fall apart!

Resource: Wrightslaw.com

Disability Rights IOWA

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