



Being an Advocate for your Child or Yourself



Attending meetings about your child, or for yourself, can feel very stressful, as you may not be sure of who you will meet, what the focus of the meeting will be, or what is expected of you.

Here is some information to help you feel more confident:

As parents, we are the best people to advocate on behalf of our children if they need support to help them meet their full potential. You know your child's strengths, and the things they find a challenge.

But this can feel like a daunting or tricky role, and you may not be confident in your ability at first. Here are some tips to help you advocate for your child:

Be informed

Find out as much as you can about how your child's condition affects them – read up on their condition, or observe what they find easy or difficult. This will help you work with the school to find ways to support your child.

Get it in writing!

Keep copies of all report cards, progress reports, multidisciplinary evaluations, IEPs, medical records etc. If you don't receive these automatically, ask for a copy. They can provide insights into your child's learning differences and how much progress they are making. As time goes on, it can be hard to remember details, so good organisation helps with this.

If a meeting is coming up, ask what will be discussed, or ask for an agenda. Make notes for yourself about what you'd like to discuss - choose one or two of the most important points.

If you are having a discussion or dispute with the school, particularly where some actions are agreed, always communicate (briefly!) by email, even after telephone or face to face conversations. Keep it short - 'thanks for your call today about x - my understanding is that we have agreed.../ this will now happen.../so-and-so will do x' This allows any misunderstandings to be corrected, and gives everyone something to refer back to.

Build relationships

Get to know your child's teachers and any other people working with them, such as educational psychologists or speech therapists. This can help to keep the lines of communication open. There's less chance of misunderstanding if everyone knows and talks to each other.

Ask questions

It's important to make sure you fully understand what support is being offered to your child before you agree. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification, ask for further evaluations, or express disagreement with the school's recommendations if you think, after due consideration, that they are not right for your child.

If you need more time to think, it's OK to say this, and tell them you'll come back with a decision as soon as possible. Confirm any decisions/requests/ actions agreed in a brief email after the meeting, and keep track of progress, who you spoke to and when, afterwards – write notes, don't rely on your memory.

Where possible, request a written confirmation of key points (can be email). This helps to create a 'paper trail' which everyone can refer to, to avoid misunderstandings.

Stay calm and collected

Although at times you may find meetings difficult and upsetting, remember that the teachers and other school staff members involved are there to help, even if you disagree with them. Make a list of the topics you want to cover in important meetings – try to pick out the most important ones (if you have a lot, the others can be covered in another meeting later).

Practice a few phrases that can help to keep the meeting on track and defuse tense situations. And consider bringing a friend or relative who can take notes for you and help you stay organized and on track – they should not get involved, but can perhaps prompt you about key points you wanted to make if you forget.

If you feel yourself getting upset, ask if everyone can take a break for a minute or two while you recover.

Remember that you're part of the team

Parents shouldn't feel pressured by school staff to make a decision. Keep in mind that you're an equal member of the team which supports your child. So while it's important to be receptive to the school staff's thoughts, and give them due consideration, you don't have to agree to something you think goes against what's best for your child.

Know your child's rights

Learn about your child's rights by looking at resources such as **Enquire's** guide to educational support needs. Enquire also have a helpline.

The logo for ENQUIRE, featuring the word in a bold, purple, sans-serif font on a yellow rectangular background.

Talk to your child

Touch base with your child about how their day went. Ask open-ended questions. If you ask a question that can be answered with one word—yes or no—that's what you'll get. Try instead to make an observation "I heard you learned about dinosaurs today – how was that?" or try "What was the best thing you did at school today?"

Avoid negative questions. If you think something isn't going well, your questions may come out in a negative way, with emotion-packed words like sad. Asking in a positive way lets your child express concerns – "did you have fun with the speech therapist today?" This can help you know whether the plan of support is being used, and is working.

Speak the same language

If you hear phrases you don't understand from educators, health-care providers and other professionals, ask for an explanation. It can help you to understand the 'jargon' and feel part of the team around your child. The same goes for abbreviations like 'IEP' - don't just nod along, ask for an explanation.

Communicate regularly

It's helpful to keep a contact list handy, of all the professionals involved with your child, so that you know who to speak to if a problem occurs. Try to communicate when things are going well, as well as when there are hiccups – let them know that you've noticed an improvement, or that your child mentioned something positive – but keep it brief!

If things get difficult...

If you find that your relationship with the school or other services is becoming very difficult, Signpost may be able to offer some support, but our capacity is limited. Please contact us to discuss your situation.

Cerebra have also written a helpful guide to accessing public services, which includes sample letters for different situations. You can find this here.

The logo for Cerebra, featuring the word in a white, sans-serif font next to a yellow starburst icon, with the tagline "Working wonders for children with brain conditions" below it, all on a blue background.

(Inspired by an article by Amanda Morin at Understood)

Signpost was a West Lothian charity which provided information, support and guidance for carers of young people with disabilities or additional support needs. We unfortunately closed our doors in March 2023, but our website will remain online until March 2025 as a repository of information, useful links and resources.

You can find our website at [signpost-online.co.uk](https://www.signpost-online.co.uk)
