

A Guide to Advocating for your Child

What is Advocacy?

According to the Institute of Family Advocacy and Leadership Development, the definition of advocacy is “the process of standing alongside an individual who is disadvantaged and speaking out on their behalf in a way that represents the best interests of that person.”

Advocacy has no prescribed or clearly determined method, it can take a number of forms. It may involve speaking, acting or writing on behalf of another person or group who may need support to exercise their rights or to uphold their rights. Commonly it will involve working against established or entrenched views or structures. It is important to note that advocates are not impartial. It can be difficult for parents to take on this role of challenging authority or institutions over the course of their child's life. They often feel ill-equipped to perform this role. However, there are skills that parents can build to assist them in this essential role on behalf of their child.

Learning to Embrace your Natural Authority as a Parent

Did you know that you as a parent have a natural authority that you can call on when acting for your child?

Parents know and understand their child better than anyone else and as a result, parents are their child's natural advocate. They have a natural authority because of this relationship and this authority holds weight in decision making processes.

If you are unsure of your authority as a parent or family member, this exercise may help to clarify this:

- Make two lists on a sheet of paper
- In the first column list all the people who have been constant in your child's life.



- In the other column list all the people who have come and gone over the same period.

Keep a hold of the first list – it may be quite short, if you are lucky there may be other family members on it, perhaps a few close friends. This is a valuable list – these people can begin to claim some authority in your child's life. The other list will be enormous, but probably not that relevant.

Developing Advocacy skills.

Learning to advocate is a process. It will involve building new skills along with using existing skills that the parent already has. Parents can help themselves by getting better informed about their child and their school life. This means getting involved and linking into the latest information on education and support. Other parents are also a good source of information and support.

School is often where parents are called on to support or advocate for their child, as there is a realisation that the playing field is not a level one at mainstream school, where most deaf children go to school in NSW.

Working with your School

School is going to be a big part of

your child's life. You need to work with the school and be a parent that helps out where you can. By doing this you will learn how it works, and you will build knowledge and relationships with the staff. These relationships will be important if and when a problem arises for your child as you can speak up and be assured of being listened to, as you are not just arriving with a problem.

Tips for Being an Effective Advocate

Reprinted from the Association for Children with a Disability's guide, Through the Maze, there are a number of tips to being a good advocate:

- Have a clear idea about the outcome you want for your child.
- Find out who is responsible for the decision and action you are seeking.
- Try to stay calm.
- Focus on getting a positive outcome for your child.
- Follow up verbal agreements in writing if needed.
- Keep accurate records about your efforts relating to a specific issue.
- Ask a friend or professional to help you if you need support.
- Seek further information and advice from an advocacy organisation if you need to.