



## HOW TO BE A GOOD ADVOCATE FOR YOUR CHILD: TIPS FOR PARENTS

**IMPORTANT:** ELC's publications are intended to give you a general idea of the law. However, each situation is different. If, after reading our publications, you have questions about how the law applies to your particular situation, contact us for a referral or contact an attorney of your choice.

### **Get Involved, Be Informed:**

- ▶ Know the facts of your child's situation, including her strengths and weaknesses and the views of those who work first-hand with your child in school. If your child has a disability, know how it affects your child in school.
- ▶ Know your rights and legal procedures. Make sure that you have all the details.
- ▶ Know your school. Get to know teachers, therapists, and other personnel. Build positive relationships and contribute to the school environment. Know who the decision-makers are and what motivates them. Stay informed about what's happening in your school and school district.

### **Keep Records:**

- ▶ Make your requests *in writing*, (they do not have to be typed), even if you have also spoken directly to school personnel.
- ▶ Keep copies of everything you get or send to the school.

- ▶ If possible, send important letters to the school "Return Receipt Requested." If you hand-deliver materials, make note of the date and time, and the person who received it.
- ▶ Don't rely on phone calls or casual conversations. Keep a record of the conversation: date, time, name and position of the school personnel and any decisions reached.
- ▶ Whenever possible, ask for written confirmation of what is promised to you.
- ▶ Organize your records. A notebook or binder is helpful.

#### **Prepare:**

- ▶ Decide what you think the district could do to solve the problems you've identified; if you can figure out what should be done there's a much better chance of a successful outcome.
- ▶ What kind of meeting is being scheduled? Is it an IEP meeting? A mediation session? If you're not sure, call the district to find out. Ask what will be discussed. Identify any legal requirements that relate to the meeting, such as what kind of notice you must receive, what staff must participate, and any time deadlines that apply.
- ▶ Find out about the real story; do not rely on gossip or hearsay.
- ▶ Decide what you want to accomplish. Prioritize. Be selective. It may help to bring a checklist and to agree with the district concerning the agenda or topics to be discussed before you go.
- ▶ Bring materials that will help you get your point across: evaluations, report cards, evidence of your child's performance, records, copies of the law or guidebooks, private evaluations.

- ▶ Bring someone to help you at the meeting. If you can't locate an advocate, bring a friend or neighbor or a member of your church or synagogue.
- ▶ If necessary, bring others who have worked with your child who may help the school see the problem differently - a psychologist or therapist, or a community leader who works with your child.
- ▶ List questions that you want answered to keep your focus during the meeting.
- ▶ Make appointments for meetings, and call to confirm them the day before.

#### **Use Meeting Time Effectively:**

- ▶ Be polite and courteous at all meetings. Be on time and respect reasonable time limits.
- ▶ Acknowledge when good things have happened and special efforts have been made.
- ▶ Sit across from decision-makers. Keep eye contact. Take notes, or have a friend take notes while you listen.
- ▶ Say what you want in your own words. Be clear, concise.
- ▶ Ask questions! And make sure you get answers.
- ▶ Take the time to make good decisions:
  - Repeat what they say to make sure you understand.
  - Don't feel pressured to discuss something if the school did not prepare you, or to make a decision immediately if you need a day to think about it.
  - Take breaks when needed to cool off, consult, or cry.

- ▶ End meetings with a plan of action or "next steps." Set deadlines.
- ▶ Get a summary of what was agreed to and who was present.

### **Use Resources Creatively:**

- ▶ Go up the "chain of command." If you are unsuccessful in resolving matters with the principal, go to the superintendent's office, your special education director, or other personnel at the district level. If that is unsuccessful, go to the school board.
- ▶ Find other parents with your concerns, and approach the problem as a group - use your PTA, support groups, or talk to other parents in your child's class.
- ▶ Look for other programs or resources that may help: violence prevention programs, instructional support centers, mediation.
- ▶ Talk with other parents and advocates about what works and what does not work. Learn from each other's experiences.

### **Follow Up:**

- ▶ Keep track of deadlines. Communicate with personnel.
- ▶ Report on progress as well as problems.
- ▶ Be firm about timelines, but patient enough for the school district to accomplish what it needs within those timelines.

### **Remember:**

- ▶ **YOU** are an expert on your child.

- ▶ Focus on the problem, not the people. Avoid getting sidetracked by personal conflicts. Bring the focus back to your child.
- ▶ Don't get bogged down in "legalese." You will be the most convincing in your own words. Make sure the school district staff speak clearly and don't get bogged down in jargon you don't understand - ask questions!
- ▶ Focus on the present and future, not the past. Work first on fixing the present problem; address remedies for the past second.
- ▶ **There may be more than one way to get what your child needs.** Work toward mutually agreeable solutions. Be flexible and creative. Problem solve! Problem solve! Problem solve!
- ▶ The "big picture" - remember what is truly important to you - and your child - and advocate for it!

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