

# How Parents Can be Advocates for Their Children with Learning Difficulties

Parents are often the best educational advocates for their children, especially children with a learning disability. True advocacy is a largely positive process, which should build on your child's strengths and challenges. As your child's best advocate, you are in a unique position to identify and implement positive changes. The Coordinated Campaign for Learning Disabilities has developed the following tips to help parents champion their child.

## 1. Know the rules

All public schools abide by specific laws and regulations, which provide special services for children with learning disabilities who qualify for such services. The criteria for eligibility varies from state to state, but all schools must adhere to a minimum federal standard. To find out the laws in your state and your rights as a parent, contact your local school district office, or state Department of Education.

## 2. Get to know the people who make decisions about your child's education

Connect with educators and administrators in both casual and formal settings. Talk with your child's teacher on a regular basis. If possible, volunteer in the classroom and help out with school functions. If you have concerns or problems that a teacher can not or will not address, be willing to follow the chain of command through the school, and if necessary, to the district office. Remember that you as a parent have the right to request that the school evaluate your child if you think he or she may have a learning disability. Be sure that your request is in writing.

## 3. Keep records

Parents should maintain an organized file of educational records and assessment information. Take notes during telephone and face-to-face meetings, and ask for people's full names and contact information when communicating by phone or by email. In addition, keeping less formal examples of children's academic progress, such as homework papers, artwork, and writings, may be useful in establishing patterns and documenting both abilities and challenges.

## 4. Gather information

Read books and articles on learning, attend conferences, and join a parent support group or affiliate organization in your area. Get comfortable with education acronyms and jargon. Ask professionals lots of questions, and don't be afraid to ask for clarification if their answers are confusing or complicated.

## 5. Communicate effectively

Come to meetings prepared, and know the specific outcomes you want. Be clear, calm and direct when speaking and put things in writing whenever possible. Listen, and take time to think about pertinent information. Consider when documentation or data might help your case, and present it in an orderly and readable format. While assertiveness and persistence are crucial, anger and aggressiveness can work against you and damage important relationships.

## 6. Know your child's strengths and interests and share them with educators

By highlighting a struggling child's capabilities and talents, you not only help professionals know your child as a whole person, you can also assist in identifying learning accommodations.

## 7. Emphasize solutions

While there are no miracle cures or magic bullets for learning disabilities, it's important to stress the positive, and to help identify ways to improve your child's experience. Once appropriate programs have been identified and agreed upon, make every effort to encourage follow-through.

## 8. Focus on the big picture

Simply put, don't sweat the small stuff. Knowing the specifics of a law may be important on one level, but constantly arguing technicalities can ultimately waste time and inhibit rapport. Try not to take things personally, and always consider both sides of the story. Details are important, but don't let them get in the way of negotiating the best educational experience for your child.

## 9. Involve your child in decision making as early as you can

Learning disabilities are a lifelong issue. Mastering self-advocacy skills is one of the keys to becoming a successful adult. Resist the natural urge to pave every road for your child, and respect and support your child's need to take informed academic risks.