

Advocating for Your Child

“Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.”—Sir Winston Churchill, British politician

As a parent, you're your child's most important advocate. To help your child succeed and grow up well, there will be times when you need to step in and stand up for your child. Of course, you gradually want your child to learn these skills as she grows older, but you're more equipped to advocate for your child when it comes to maneuvering through systems and red tape. Consider these ideas.

Try it...

For all parents

- Get to know your kids as well as you can. Which issues do your kids struggle with? Are there special needs? Medical issues? Learning differences? Something else?
- To be an effective advocate for your child, you need to be talking to your child and understanding his perspective as much as possible. Sometimes your child will want and need you to intervene, and sometimes your child just wants your support as he advocates for himself.
- When you advocate for your child, be ready to invest a lot of time. Systems often are not easy to move through, and it takes time to learn which people are key in helping you.
- Connect with people who are willing and skilled to help. For example, if you have a child with special needs, find the individuals at school who can assist you with an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Visit [The Parental Advocate](#) for more ideas on advocating for a child with special needs.
- Keep up to date on information about your child's situation and condition. For example, if your child has asthma or severe allergies, learn as much as you can about the condition and how to keep up with the advancing treatments.
- Stay on top of the paperwork and the timing. Some systems require an extensive amount of paperwork for you to complete and turn in. Keep copies of everything. Make a timeline of who to contact if certain steps don't happen within timeframes that you were told to expect.
- Create a team of advocates for your child. Every child needs caring adults who believe in her. For moving stories of how adults made a difference in the lives of young people, read the asset-building book [Just When I Needed You](#).
- Gradually teach your child to advocate for himself. This entails sorting through what you want, communicating what you want, and negotiating with others who may or may not give you what you want.

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Many child-care centers and preschools have set higher standards for behavior, and some even expel young children if they don't meet behavior guidelines. If your child is on the verge of expulsion, meet with administrators to see if there are steps you can explore to teach your child appropriate behaviors and to allow more time for your child to learn these behaviors.
- If your child has a serious medical condition, make sure every adult who comes into contact with your child knows about it. You don't want to label your child, but you also don't want your child to have a seizure or health setback because adults weren't informed of her health needs.
- Decide what you want for your child. Some preschools have become competitive and exclusive, placing high levels of stress on parents and kids. If that's what you want, then work with those systems. If not, know that there are many alternatives, such as HeadStart or Montessori preschools.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- Get to know your child's teacher, bus driver, and adults who lead the activities your child is in. Build a relationship with these individuals. It's much easier to advocate for your child when relationships are in place.
- Pay attention to your child's eating habits, sleeping habits, and moods. Sometimes your child may be having a hard time with something, and you'll find out by asking questions because of changes you notice in your child. Ask and then advocate for your child, if need be.
- Advocate that your child learns to read well. Spend time each day reading aloud to your child and having your child read aloud to you as he learns to read.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Even though it's time consuming to attend open houses and parent-teacher conferences, particularly when your child has many teachers instead of only one, it's an important investment into your child and her well-being. Learn what teachers and other adults expect of your child and then be your child's guide in helping her meet those expectations.
- Find out how your child's interests may be changing as he grows. Then research ways to connect your child to activities and trusting adults who are involved in these interests.
- Keep on top of possible problems and difficulties that can arise as kids get older. If you suspect your child is getting into trouble, step in right away. Advocate for the well-being of your child.

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Talk with your older teenager about how she wants you to advocate for and help her. For example, some teenagers become overwhelmed with the college application process, and they're happy when you research ACT and SAT test dates and help them sign up for these tests.
- Even though many older teenagers like to advocate for themselves, sometimes it's important for you to step in, particularly if there's a serious issue, such as your child

wanting to drop out of school or contemplating suicide.

- Continue to be there for your teenager. Sometimes the best advocates are the ones who know how to listen, who create a home where teenagers feel safe, and who are willing to help out when teenagers ask for it.

More help. Check out the [Parenting Resources](#) on MVParents.com for more practical tools to help you raise healthy, caring, and responsible kids.