

FAMILY TIPSHEET: Tips for Advocating for Yourself



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Know what you need:

Before you can ask for help or request accommodations, take time to reflect on your needs. Ask yourself:

- What helps me learn best?
- What makes it harder for me to succeed?
- What support or tools do I need to do my best work?

Be Clear, Specific and Respectful:

When advocating for yourself, be clear about your needs. Instead of general requests like "I need help," try to be specific:

- "I need extra time on tests because I need more time to process the information."
- "I get distracted easily in class, so I would benefit from sitting in a quieter area."
- "I have trouble reading small print; can I have larger text on my assignments?"

While it's important to speak up for your needs, it's equally important to do so respectfully. Use polite language and stay calm even if you're frustrated or nervous. Teachers and staff are there to help you, so a respectful tone will make them more receptive to your requests.

Examples of Advocacy

In Class:

- **Scenario:** You struggle with taking notes during lectures and find it hard to keep up.
- **Advocacy Example:** "I have difficulty taking notes while the teacher is speaking because I need more time to process the information. Can I have access to a note-taker, or can the lecture be recorded so I can listen again later?"

During Testing:

- **Scenario:** You find it challenging to finish tests within the standard time limit.
- **Advocacy Example:** "I need extra time on tests because I need more time to read the questions carefully and think through my answers. Could I have an extended time accommodation for this test?"

Social and Classroom Settings:

- **Scenario:** You get distracted easily by noise in a busy classroom.
- **Advocacy Example:** "The noise in the classroom makes it hard for me to focus. Can I sit in a quieter area during independent work times, or use noise-canceling headphones?"

How to Practice Self-Advocacy

1. **Start Small:** Practice self-advocacy with small, low-pressure situations. For example, ask for a clarification on an assignment or request help with a specific task. These smaller acts of advocacy can build your confidence over time.
2. **Role-Playing:** Role-playing is a great way to practice speaking up. Find a friend, family member, or mentor to pretend they are your teacher or school staff, and practice advocating for your needs. This will help you become more comfortable speaking up in real situations.
3. **Write it Down:** If you find it difficult to speak up in the moment, try writing down your needs beforehand. You can bring a written list of your accommodations or requests to the IEP meeting or your teacher's office hours. This will help you stay focused and ensure you don't forget any important points.
4. **Use "I" Statements:** When expressing your needs, try to use "I" statements to take ownership of your feelings and needs. For example:
 - "I feel stressed during tests because I don't have enough time to finish. I would like to request extra time."
 - "I have trouble staying focused in a noisy environment. I would benefit from a quieter workspace."

This approach makes your needs clear without blaming anyone, which helps others understand your situation without feeling defensive.

5. **Practice Self-Reflection:** After you've advocated for yourself, take time to reflect on how it went. Ask yourself:
 - How did I feel about the way I communicated my needs?
 - Did I get the support I asked for?
 - How can I improve for next time?
6. **Ask for Feedback:** If you're unsure how to improve your advocacy skills, ask a teacher or mentor for feedback. They can give you suggestions on how to make your requests clearer or more effective.

Additional Tips for Staying Confident

- **Practice Regularly:** The more you practice advocating for yourself, the easier it will become. Don't wait for a crisis—advocate regularly for small things, like requesting a preferred seating arrangement or asking for more time to complete an assignment.
- **Believe in Your Rights:** You have the right to ask for what you need in school to succeed. The more you believe in your right to advocate for yourself, the more confident you'll feel when speaking up.
- **Remember, It's a Team Effort:** The IEP team is there to support you. Teachers, counselors, and parents all want you to succeed. Keep in mind that asking for accommodations or adjustments doesn't mean you're being difficult; it means you're taking responsibility for your learning and well-being.