



## Learning to Self-Advocate

Now it is time to learn how to advocate for yourself. It's natural to feel uncomfortable talking about your disability or asking for help. With practice, and time, it will become easier. State and federal laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act were passed to give you an equal opportunity to education and employment. These laws allow you to access the same facilities and programs available to individuals without disabilities. The ADA and Section 504 also give you the right to request specialized instruction, modifications to the curriculum, accommodations in non-academic and extracurricular activities, adaptive equipment or assistive technology devices, an aide, assistance with health related needs, school transportation, or other related services and accommodations. It is your responsibility to take advantage of these laws by becoming a self-advocate. There are a number of steps you can take to learn how to speak up for yourself and get the help you need in order to be successful.

- **Describe your accommodation needs in terms of making things equal, rather than asking for an unfair advantage.**

Some teachers or employers may think that providing accommodations for you is unfair or unnecessary. They may worry about the reactions of other students or employees who think you are receiving special treatment. Learn how to describe your accommodation needs in terms of making things equal. Clearly communicate that you need certain accommodations in order to be successful and that you are NOT asking for standards to be lowered.

- **Develop an assertive style of communication.**

You can stand up for your rights, and be a role model to others, by being polite, respectful, and prepared. Do not be aggressive, demanding or confrontational. Remember the old adage, "you can attract more bees with honey than with vinegar." But, don't be passive either.

- **Practice, practice, and practice.**

Speaking up for oneself is easier for some people than for others. For many, it takes time to develop good self-advocacy skills. Practicing self-advocacy skills while you are in middle school and high school can give you the confidence you will need to advocate for yourself as an adult.

- **Identify barriers to effective communication and include specific self-advocacy objectives in your IEP.**

Think about the areas in which you need to develop specific skills such as listening, asking for help or accepting criticism. These are all skill development areas that affect your ability to effectively self-advocate, and can be translated easily into goals for your Individualized Education Program (IEP). It is very important that you attend and participate in your Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings where your IEP will be discussed and developed. As you grow in confidence as a self-advocate, you may want to consider leading a portion of this meeting.

- **Know when and when not to disclose your disability.**

Disclose information about your disability only on a "need-to-know basis," or when you require accommodations. Safe people with whom to share information include your parents, doctor, teachers, school psychologist, counselor, college disability specialists, college professors, employer, and one or two trusted close friends. Do not use your disability as an excuse to try to obtain compassion or understanding regarding personal problems. It is important to share about yourself discreetly, knowing your audience and the reason for disclosing personal information.

**For more resources on transitioning from school to adult life,  
visit [www.cpacinc.org/hot-topics/transition-to-adult-life](http://www.cpacinc.org/hot-topics/transition-to-adult-life).**

*Adapted from "Stepping Forward: A Self-Advocacy Guide for Middle and High School Students," 2014.*



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