

THE FACTS ON EDUCATION



How can teachers and parents help students with exceptional learning needs develop self-advocacy skills?

For students with exceptional learning needs, self-advocacy refers to communicating their needs and securing support. While much of the support that these students receive is managed by the school, the same provisions are not usually made by post-secondary institutions or places of work. It is in every student's best interest to learn about their specific needs, what they are entitled to, and how to communicate to others what they need. Researchers have linked self-advocacy skills to high school completion rates, and there is broad consensus that developing self-advocacy skills can start as early as possible.

Strategies to help students develop self-advocacy skills

Demystify the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process:

- Students should attend and contribute to IEP meetings as much as possible.
- Teachers could create activities focused on getting to know the IEP (e.g. a scavenger hunt) to identify the number of goals, identified areas of need, and types of supports they are entitled to. Parents could assist their child to complete the activities.
- Teachers should be open with students about what supports they are providing to meet their needs, and why they are using specific supports.
- Teachers should initiate regular check-ins with students to discuss their experience with provided support. Parents can help their child prepare to speak about their current struggles, what is working well, and what might be of further assistance to them.
- Students should be encouraged to regularly review their IEP, and to seek help from teachers in interpreting any parts that are unclear.

Promote accessible communication:

- Teachers could work with students to create a more accessible version of the IEP that uses language they are comfortable and familiar with.
- Parents can work with their child to identify goals, strengths, and needs that they have beyond what is currently on their IEP, and to practise communicating about them so they are prepared to do so in the IEP meeting.
- Teachers should be clear with students about who is responsible for what in terms of them getting support (e.g. students should let a teacher know if a support is not working, or no longer needed).

The most important goal here is for students to be able to explain the support that they need. Without knowledge of their specific challenges and what types of support work best for them, students are not equipped to meaningfully access parts of society that are not built with them in mind. While efforts toward demystification and accessible communication are valuable, so too is consistency in what we are saying and doing to support these students. Parents and teachers must communicate with each other about how they are supporting the development of self-advocacy skills, so they can design a consistent program of support that extends beyond what happens at school.

For online resources and references please visit:
www.edcan.ca/facts-on-education

Authors,
Sunaira Tejpar and Ian Matheson

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