



First Steps

3

Tips for Successful Advocates

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the families who have asked questions and found successful ways to advocate for their child for providing the inspiration for these fact sheets.

*One key to a path for success is **highly involved parents** and other family members. Remember that you are an important member of the child's team as you are the person who knows your child the best. Families must be equal participants in the Individual Family Service Plan or Individual Educational Program process for their child.*

There may be times in your journey that you have a concern about your child's services or progress toward outcomes/goals. Ideally, we want to solve problems while maintaining relationships. Informal ways of resolving conflict work best.

Here are some strategies for being a successful advocate.



Communicate. Start meetings and interactions on a positive note. Take part in every step of the process. Let team members know your child's and family's strengths and needs. Ask questions! Speak up if you have a suggestion or disagree. State your concerns in a constructive manner to the service coordinator, staff and/or administrator. Let them know what you are thinking and why. These conversations can be very valuable. Many problems can be solved by this step alone. Your situation will certainly be viewed in a much more favorable light if you've tried informal communications first. Letter writing is also a good tool to use to make sure that everyone involved gets the same information. Remember to keep copies of all correspondence.

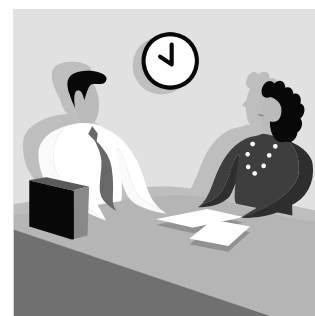
Build your support network. Use friends, relatives and experts to support you and help you think about resolving issues. Bring someone with you to meetings. This person can take notes, listen to what others say ask questions and provide moral support.

Stay Informed. Know your family's rights and responsibilities as they apply to your situation. Local agency policies or rules cannot supersede state regulations or standards and the state regulations cannot supersede federal law. Attend conferences, trainings/workshops or support groups; visit libraries or agencies. Use the Internet to check out web sites. One key to positive outcomes is inclusive settings and communities. When children with disabilities learn in environments with their non-disabled peers, good things happen. *High expectations bring better outcomes.*



Be a Problem Solver!

1. **Identify your goal.** Know exactly what you want and why you want it. Another key to success is a well thought out plan for the future that is developed early and is followed by all. Be able to describe the goal/problem and how it can be achieved or resolved favorably. If the problem is complex, list the intermediate steps that will move towards a final solution.
2. **Define the problem.** Before you can solve a problem, you need to identify it. Some problems are clear. Sometimes there are several interrelated problems that have no easy solution. Separate each problem. Decide which problem needs to be solved first. A list may help.
3. **Look for the cause.** Decide if you have been denied services because of the interpretation of rules and regulations, lack of money, unavailability of the service in your area or some other specific reason. Don't be afraid to ask for an outside opinion.
4. **Think about solutions.** Keep in mind your child's needs and try to work out disagreements through discussion and compromise. Be flexible. Most problems have solutions. Ask those involved for possible solutions. Big problems may have simple solutions. Look at the possibilities. Be creative!
5. **Find the power source.** Ask questions. Find out who has the power and authority to make the decision you want. Ask what they need to make a favorable decision. If they are unwilling or unable to help you, find someone who can help them change their minds. Always begin at the lowest level in the chain of command. Begin at the local agency level before moving on to the State Department of Education.
6. **Keep copies of reports,** your child's Individual Family Service Plan or Individual Educational Program, medical information you receive, as well as any email messages, letters or notes that you make.
7. **Remember you have options** at all levels to resolve disputes.



"Parents have to be recognized as the special educators, the true experts on their children; and professional people - teachers, pediatricians, psychologists, and others - have to learn to be consultants to parents."

Nicholas Hobbs, Vanderbilt University

For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.



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