

COTTEY

Disability Services

Strategies for Self-Advocacy

The ability to self-advocate is a very important skill for all people, especially people who may struggle in certain areas. Self-advocacy is not always an easy thing to do; you will find yourself in difficult situations where you'll need to speak up effectively to express your needs. However, there is good news: Self-advocacy is a *learned* skill. With practice, time, and a few tips, everyone can self-advocate. You'll find two articles attached to this document. Both articles provide useful and practical information to hone self-advocacy skills. It is very important that you read both articles and begin to think how they can be applied to your life at Cottey College.

Article Summaries:

Title: Self-Advocacy: Strategies for All Ages

By: Marcia Brown Rubinstien, MA, CEP

Source: <http://www.smartkidswithld.org/ld-basics/beyond-the-classroom/self-advocacy-strategies-for-all-ages>

Summary: This article was selected because each tip, no matter the age, holds true. If you become familiar with each self-advocacy tip and work with those around you to develop the skills needed, you will be able to be assertive and effective in speaking with people about your condition(s). There is a limitation to this article: it was written for parents with children in all age groups. Thus, you have to over look the wording and remember that you are now in the driver's seat of your future success.

Title: Self-Advocacy: Know Yourself, Know What You Need, Know How to Get It

By: Nancy Suzanne James

Source: <http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/sec504.selfadvo.nancy.james.htm>

Summary: This article was written in large part for people with disabilities entering higher education. Since knowledge is power and plays a major role in the ability to self-advocate, this article does a great job explaining rights, procedures, and background of disability services. Further, the article encourages you to find your specific needs and how to go about discussing those with people on the college campus.

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Self-Advocacy: Strategies for All Ages

By: Marcia Brown Rubinstien, MA, CEP

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Students who know how to self-advocate have an important skill that supports lifelong success, yet few children actually are taught how to understand their needs and communicate those needs to others. Following are some tips to help your child acquire the skills that will serve her well as she goes through school and beyond.

Start Early: Young children often worry that teachers don't like kids who remind them of accommodations or ask too many questions. Use the time before school starts to assure your child that teachers respect active learners.

Encourage Self-Awareness: As they progress through elementary school, students with learning differences should become increasingly aware of their specific assets and deficits and what accommodations they need to succeed. Help them articulate their growing understanding by practicing how to ask for help in a positive way. Use role-play and humor to rework situations that proved uncomfortable in the past or to simulate solutions for problems that lurk in your child's vivid imagination. Reinforce the fact that at school, as in most of life, politeness and a positive attitude have beneficial effects.

Stay Positive: A child who is sensitive about LD during the unremitting tension of the academic year may be receptive to poolside conversations about learning preferences or fear of failure. Combine a trip to the ice-cream store with a casual conversation about negative and positive self-talk. Remind her of people with learning differences who have achieved astonishing success. A graceful dive might inspire the story of Olympic gold medalist Greg Louganis. A role in the camp play could trigger the story of Henry Winkler, whose parents called him "dumb dog" in a time before people understood that learning differences have nothing to do with learning ability.

Support Critical Thinking: When your child is in elementary or middle school, assure him that you will advocate for him before the special ed team makes decisions or changes. At the same time encourage him to begin to sort out strengths and weaknesses in non-confrontational settings. This will develop the confidence and awareness needed to speak for himself when he is old enough to attend IEP meetings. In the course of casual conversation ask, "Do you think you learn better when you hear about something or when you look at something?" "Do your teachers usually give a fair amount of homework?" "What happens when you can't figure out what to do and the teacher doesn't seem to know you need help?"

Engage in Problem-Solving: Try to discover which teachers clarify and which ones confuse; which approaches are calming and which are chaotic. After hearing your child discuss the issues he faces, brainstorm helpful coping strategies. Students who envision positive possibilities are better equipped to approach continuing challenges.

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Require Involvement: High schoolers should be encouraged to participate in the process that defines their learning. They should know their rights, be able to present a comprehensive description of their assets and deficits, and contribute actively to IEP meetings. Those using curricular modifications should be able to evaluate which accommodations are useful and which are not.

Plan for the Future: Long before graduation approaches, your child should play an active role in the transition planning that affects life after high school. Summer internships, jobs, or pre-college, campus-based programs can offer wonderful firsthand experience for real-world possibilities.

Build Self-Esteem: For students who learn differently, knowledge truly is power. Use your own creativity to help your child develop the skills she needs to help herself. Successful self-advocacy starts with self-esteem. Catch your child doing something right and praise, praise, praise. The strongest self-advocates are those who feel best about themselves.

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Self-Advocacy: Know Yourself, Know What You Need, Know How to Get It

By: Nancy Suzanne James

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This article is geared toward adults in higher education and/or the workforce.

Some of this information will be helpful to young adults as well.

Self-advocacy is the ability to understand and effectively communicate one's needs to other individuals. Learning to become an effective self-advocate, especially for individuals with a hidden handicap such as dyslexia, is all about educating the people around you.

Knowledge is the key to self-advocacy. Like anything else, the more you know, the better you understand, and the easier it is to explain.

This journey of self-education is an ongoing process, as individual needs change over time. There are three parts to becoming an effective self-advocate: knowing yourself, knowing your needs, and knowing how to get what you need.

Know Yourself

Diagnostic testing is the first step towards better understanding your needs. A psycho-educational evaluation is a series of tests used to diagnose specific learning disabilities and to identify individual strengths and weaknesses.

Be aware of co-existing disorders (learning disabilities that are found together). For example, a person with dyslexia has roughly a sixty-percent chance of also having Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit with Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Therefore, it is important to find a psychologist or neuropsychologist specializing in diagnosing language-based learning disabilities and related disorders.

In order to communicate with others you need to understand what tests are used and what and how they measure. A good evaluation should include the following:

- aptitude test
- achievement test
- test of memory
- test of phonological processing

The results and recommendations should be clearly stated in a written report and clearly explained in a one-on-one meeting. You should know your skills levels, strengths, and weaknesses.

Testing can be costly. Be sure to check with your insurance company to see if your policy will cover all or part of the testing cost. A formal diagnosis of a learning disability is important because it entitles you to rights under federal law. Although some employers may not, all educational institutions require formal documentation of a diagnosed disability before providing services.

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Know What You Need

After you receive a formal diagnosis, it is important that you know your skills, strengths, and weaknesses. Learn about your disability and how it affects your daily activities, communications, and social interactions. It's important to keep in mind that no learning disability affects two people the same way.

There are three areas worth investigating to determine what you need to improve your skills and/or compensate for your weaknesses: interventions, accommodations, and modifications.

Interventions are evidence-based instruction to improve skills (reading, spelling, math, comprehension, speech, etc.). This instruction is multisensory, systematic, and direct with the opportunity for guided practice.

Intervention may also include psychological counseling and/or support groups to help you work through the emotional aspects of living with a hidden disability. The goal of intervention is to improve skills and work towards independence. Regardless of age, it is never too late for intervention.

Accommodations are tools to help accomplish a goal that do not change the integrity of the task (books on tape, extra time for test, copies of handouts before a meeting, editor, use of a calculator, etc.). Accommodations compensate for disabilities, and vary from person to person based on the type of disability and the degree to which it interferes with daily activities.

The ability to use some accommodations is dependent upon intervention. For example, spelling, typically a major difficulty for people with dyslexia, must be mastered at a fifth grade level for a person to use a spell checker independently. Many people with dyslexia benefit from using the spell checker on the computer along with a hand-held spell checker that reads words and provides definitions. When you use these two spell checkers together, you can accurately spell words that look alike and/or sound alike.

Individuals with a physical handicap who use wheelchairs are entitled to ramps and elevators to have "equal access" to buildings. The same is true for individuals with language-based learning disabilities.

For example, if a person with a learning disability has difficulty reading or writing, voice recognition software on a computer would be an appropriate accommodation. This software allows the person to speak reports and e-mails into the computer, and to hear information off the screen. This accommodation does not change the quality of writing the individual is capable of creating, but assists the person to accomplish the goal. Accommodations are not meant to replace intervention, but to assist with day-to-day tasks.

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Modifications are alterations to assignments that do change the overall task; for example, writing a two-page report instead of a four-page report. It is important to keep in mind that nearly all employers and most educational institutions (colleges and universities) do not provide modifications.

It is important that you understand the differences between interventions, accommodations, and modifications and how they may or may not meet your specific needs. This knowledge will help you better communicate what you need and why.

Communication takes practice and can be emotionally draining. It's easy to get caught-up in feelings of guilt that you are asking for "special treatment" or that you don't need an accommodation because you excel in other areas. Having a supportive friend and/or support group to help "coach" you through this process is important to keeping you grounded.

Know How to Get What You Need

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 guarantees equal access and equal opportunities to individuals with physical and/or hidden learning disabilities that significantly interfere with one or more major life activities (communicating, reading, physical movement, etc.).

Public and private institutions are required to provide "reasonable accommodations" to individuals with a documented disability, as long as these accommodations do not create an undue hardship for the company or university. Employers and universities are prohibited from discriminating against a person with a learning disability if they are "otherwise qualified."

Accommodations help to overcome the obstacles of the disability. If the disability does interfere with a work or educational activity, it is the responsibility of the individual with the disability to share this information with their supervisor, human resources person, administrators, and/or professors.

Documenting communications and interactions in a journal and keeping copies of all letters, e-mails, policies, and procedures is a good way to provide information if you have difficulty getting your accommodations and you need to file a complaint.

Understanding your rights and knowing how to clearly communicate with others in a constructive way is just as important as clearly communicating your disability and individual needs.

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Finding a college or university that meets your needs may not be easy. Review guidebooks that list colleges and universities that provide accommodations and/or full programs for students with learning disabilities. When deciding on a school that is right for you, consider the following:

- course offerings
- size of campus
- private vs. public
- rural vs. urban
- extra-curricular activities
- accommodations vs. full program (or both)

After you narrow down your options, anonymously call the office of academic support and the departments from which you wish to take classes and ask questions. These calls will allow you to learn a bit about the types of accommodations and sensitivity you can expect to find at the college before you reveal your identity. If you are dissatisfied with the answers, the school may not be right for you.

Although public and private institutions are required to comply with the ADA, some schools are more willing to do so than others. Regardless of how good a school may look in a catalog or sound over the phone, you should always request a written copy of the policies and procedures for accommodations, for backup accommodations (if a book on tape is not audible), and for filing complaints.

Make sure these accommodations and backup accommodations will allow you to complete your course work on time. If an institution does not have a plan in writing, including backup accommodations, the school is not equipped to provide basic accommodation in a timely manner.

In summary, the better you understand your disability, needs, and rights, and the better you can communicate and document this information, the easier self-advocating will become.

Self-education, effective communication, and maintaining a support system are your keys to becoming an effective self-advocate.