

## **Hints and Tools: How to Be an Effective Advocate for Your Struggling Child**

### **Be Positive:**

Assume everyone wants to provide an appropriate education to your child. Effective parent advocates strive to create a productive and supportive partnership between home and school. Keep your eyes on the prize: an appropriate education for your child.

### **Focus on Outcome:**

The long-range goal is to raise a child to be independent. While your child needs your help now, one of the ways you can help your child become independent is to support his or her development of self-advocacy skills. As you advocate for your child, remember to include your child in the process as much as possible and as appropriate for his or her age. A student with strong self-advocacy skills should be able to state:

Who I am! (Strengths and Weaknesses)

What I Need! (Adaptations and Accommodations)

These Tools Work for Me! (Interventions and Strategies)

This is How I Get What I Need to Succeed! (Communication Skills)

As early as elementary school, if you are planning to write an e-mail to staff concerning your child, have your child join you so he or she can participate in writing it. Eventually, your child will learn how to send appropriate communications.

By the time your child is in middle school, your child may be ready to take a more active role in advocating for his or her needs, and you can support your child in the following ways:

- Offer solutions your child can take to the teacher.
- Role play to prepare your child for talking with the teacher. First, you can be the child and the child can be the teacher; then, switch roles.
- Help your child send e-mails directly to the teacher through Edline.
- Monitor this process so that the teacher is treated respectfully and your child doesn't create a problem.
- Step in as necessary after allowing your child the opportunity to learn to advocate for him/herself.

Self-advocacy is the marker for success but takes time to develop. These skills will continue to grow and will become workplace skills when your child is an adult.

### **Do Your Homework:**

Create a written profile of your child (with his/her input) identifying areas of strength and weakness, interests, talents, etc. Share this with new teachers and staff members each year. Ask teachers where they see your child's strengths and weaknesses.

## **Hints and Tools: How to Be an Effective Advocate for Your Struggling Child**

Conduct your own research using a variety of resources, such as books, articles, videos, interviews, and websites. Prepare a list of questions. Research can bring you into the school to ask questions and get ideas from teachers. Use this as an opportunity to work together as a team by sharing your ideas and information with the teacher and by listening to their ideas as well.

### **Be a Good Listener:**

Listen carefully to what the teachers tell you. Where it doesn't match what you know about your child, let the teacher know you see a different child. You each contribute pieces of the puzzle and this open conversation might lead to ideas the teacher wants to try out. Be prepared to work as a team, striving for consistency between home and school.

### **Research Solutions:**

The place to begin finding solutions and seeking services is in the home school. Talk to the teacher, the counselor, the special educator, and/or an administrator and ask what support is available. If you know of programs or services available in other schools, this can be an opportunity to bring new information to the school. Use *Navigating the System* ([www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/parents/guide/](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/parents/guide/)) and the *Twice Exceptional Students* document series ([www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/curriculum/enriched/gtld/](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/curriculum/enriched/gtld/)) which are available online and in hard copy at each school as sources of information.

### **Prioritize:**

List items of concern and categorize and prioritize them. Focus on a few areas in which you would first like to see improvement. This will ensure that success is possible and will allow you and the teacher to work together to come up with possible solutions to address the most important concerns.

### **Practice Positive Communication:**

Listen well. Then, state your position. Tools such as taking notes, breathing slowly and doodling will help you be a better listener. Repeating and restating in your own words what you hear the other team members say slows you down and allows you to think with your brain, not your emotions.

Share solutions! Include suggestions for solutions such as possible accommodations or supports. If there is something specific you want, be sure to ask for it.

No matter how personal it feels, remain dispassionate. No matter what you feel, never make it personal about the other people on the team. It is okay to show your

## **Hints and Tools: How to Be an Effective Advocate for Your Struggling Child**

emotion and the intensity of your concern, but do so in a way that maintains the collaborative spirit of the team. Remember, the goal is to help your child and the best way to achieve that is to help the school see what it is your child needs.

Follow the “chain of command.” Always talk with the teacher first. If concerns are not resolved, research the appropriate system-wide order, after the teacher, for sharing concerns.

Take advantage of electronic communication as a tool for understanding homework expectations (e.g., email or Edline). Instead of focusing on overall grades, look to see if assignments are complete and turned in on time.

Include your child in positive communication. Reflect on meetings and discuss with your child what went on. Remember to choose your language and tone of voice wisely when talking about the teacher to your child.

### **Prepare for Formal Meetings:**

There is limited time in formal meetings so whenever possible, make written preparations. The school team will appreciate anything you can provide in advance.

- Make a list of things you want to discuss.
- Bring written ideas and suggestions for accommodations.
- Provide documentation of your concerns such as emails, tests, copies of homework, writing samples, charts of how long it takes your child to do homework, and a completed *Parent Version: GT/LD Pattern of Strengths & Weaknesses* ([www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/curriculum/enriched/gtld/](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/curriculum/enriched/gtld/)).
- Take your spouse or a friend to the meeting to help you communicate well, to take notes, and to be an extra listener and a support for you.

At the end of these meetings, ask that someone summarize the action steps that the team has agreed to so that everyone has the same understanding about what is to occur and who is responsible. Ask that meeting notes be taken for formal and informal meetings; it is helpful to take your own notes also. Keep a binder with meeting notes and all other important documentation.

### **When You Just Can't Reach Agreement:**

There will at times be disagreements about concerns or the best ways to respond to them. When faced with this situation, try to do the following:

- Compliment the other side and restate what they have said. Ask them to state what you have said. Acknowledge that the two sides have different views.

## **Hints and Tools: How to Be an Effective Advocate for Your Struggling Child**

- Ask, “What options do we have?” That lets you reconnect in a positive way. You can always say, “We agree we have a problem.” Then look for areas to agree on, reminding everyone you are on the same team.

If you find that you have concerns that the team does not share, perhaps your child presents a unique profile with which the teacher or team is not familiar. In particular, GT/LD students and their needs are hard to understand. In this situation, do your research and learn and share as much information about your child’s learning needs as possible.

Network with other parents whose children have similar needs both in and outside of your school community. For example, the GT/LD Parent Network (available at [www.gtdnetwork.org](http://www.gtdnetwork.org)) is an organization in Montgomery County that advocates for the needs of twice exceptional students.

Educate yourself about not just your child’s needs, but how other schools have dealt with similar children. Most educators are eager to expand their knowledge and will be open to learning if the information is presented in a positive way.