


What Advocates in Special Education Can Do for You

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Advocates are individuals who work on behalf of people with disabilities to get needed services. They help students with [learning disabilities](#) and other disabilities as well. Advocates negotiate with schools and other service providers by offering opinions, conducting research, and by representing or coaching parents in [IEP team meetings](#).

When Advocates Are Necessary

Advocates in special education can help parents get important services for their [children with disabilities](#). Most people use them when schools or other service providers deny services, treatments, or equipment a child needs.

When weighing whether to involve advocates, parents should ask for specific reasons their requests for services are being denied. When determining the need for advocates, parents

should carefully consider what they are wanting and whether or not a representative can actually help:

- Is the [service or accommodation](#) a want or a need for my child?
- Will I (or my child) still meet learning goals without this item or service, although it may take longer or may not be the method I would prefer?
- Is my request based on sound research?
- Is there a possibility that the item or service could be ineffective or harmful?
- Is this item or service experimental or not a mainstream method?
- Is my request reasonable?

If parents believe the service is valid and necessary, they may want to consider consulting advocates for help if they are not getting reasonable responses from the school district.

How to Find an Advocate

Advocates come from all walks of life and various professions. There is no required license or certification, and many advocates have learned from their own experiences. You can find representatives through:

- Resources in your state
- Your state's department of education
- An area mental health agency or local health department
- Nonprofit organizations serving people with disabilities
- A school or private social worker or counselor
- Referral from other parents of children with disabilities

How to Tell If Advocates Are Right for You

- Look for advocates with experience in your disability area. If none are available, find a support person who has a good track record of successful negotiations.
- Ask for references. Ask references about the advocate's level of knowledge, professionalism, and effectiveness. If possible, talk with others who are familiar with the representative who can provide an unbiased critique of their services.

- At a minimum, advocates should have a good working knowledge of special education law. Professionals with formal training are preferable if available.
- Look for advocates who will be honest with you and not just tell you what they think you want to hear.
- Look for an advocate who is supportive and realistic about what they can do for you.
- Ask about fees, and have the advocate write out exactly what services you will get for those fees. Representatives may be available at no cost to you through government agencies. When fees are involved, be especially careful. Unfortunately, there are unethical advocates who would prey upon your misfortune. Trust your instincts. If you do not feel comfortable with the advocate's fees, look elsewhere.



Beware of advocates who:

- Make promises that seem too good to be true
- Claim they are the only ones who can help you
- Promise to win money or help you get rich
- Seem overly dramatic or antagonistic to you or the service provider
- Drag out the process or charge you despite little progress in your case

Follow your instincts when determining if advocates are right for you. Steer clear of those who use scare tactics and increase your anxiety. Avoid representatives who are overly critical or

slanderous toward your service provider. Be skeptical of advocates who waste your time or your provider's time with scare tactics, harassment, and game-playing. Never allow your representative to act without discussing strategies with you and your giving permission.

Best Negotiating Style for Advocates

Advocates' styles may vary a great deal, and only you can decide if you are comfortable with that style. Some are calm but effective negotiators who win your cause by presenting your request with solid data to support it. Others are highly aggressive and may attempt to intimidate to get the matter resolved to your preferences.

Whatever approach is used, it is important to:

- Ensure your request is appropriate and reasonable.
- Ensure representatives do not destroy any hope of your working with the school district or provider in the future. Good advocates should not make you dependent on them for life.
- Ensure you have solid data to support your request, such as recommendations from physicians. Data and other supporting information that clearly show why the service or item is needed can help your case.
- Determine in advance whether you could or would compromise if appropriate.
- Ensure you know what the likely objections to your request will be and what your response to those objections will be.

Some Advocacy Strategies That May Help Get the Outcome You Want

- Spend some time researching your position. The disability sites on the Internet, libraries, and nonprofit organizations dedicated to your specific disability area are good resources for information. It is a good idea to get information from resources other than the manufacturer of the item or the provider of the service that you want so you have objective information to share with the IEP team.
- [Know your rights](#), and be prepared to exercise them. If you have demonstrated a clear need, you made an appropriate, reasonable request and have supported your request with solid, objective data, and the agency still refuses your request, you may want to consider filing a [formal complaint](#) or grievance with the administration of the agency or school.
- If you have attempted to resolve the problem through the administration of the agency or school and you still have not received the support you need, consider filing a formal complaint with the appropriate state government office that oversees the agency. For schools, that would be the state's department of education. If your complaint is against a health insurance company, contact their customer service department for instructions on filing a complaint. You may also have rights to file complaints through a state consumer protection agency or board of licensure or insurance when dealing with non-school agencies.

Related: [Reasons Why Parents File IDEA Complaints and Lawsuits](#)

Article Sources

Verywell Family uses only high-quality sources, including peer-reviewed studies, to support the facts within our articles. Read our [editorial process](#) to learn more about how we fact-check and keep our content accurate, reliable, and trustworthy.

1. National Association of Special Education Teachers. [Board Certification for Advocacy in Special Education \(BCASE\)](#). 2019.
2. The Advocacy Institute. [State-by-State Information on Filing IDEA State Administrative Complaints](#). 2020.