

Transition and Self-Advocacy

By: Lynda L. West, Stephanie Corbey, Arden Boyer-Stephens, and Bonnie Jones, et al. (1999)

What is self-advocacy?

Developing self-knowledge is the first step in self-advocacy skills. Learning about one's self involves the identification of learning styles, strengths and weakness, interests, and preferences. For students with mild disabilities, developing an awareness of the accommodations they need will help them ask for necessary accommodations on a job and in postsecondary education. Students can also help identify alternative ways they can learn. Self-advocacy refers to:

an individual's ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights. It involves making informed decisions and taking responsibility for those decisions. (VanReusen et al., 1994)

Self-advocacy is not a new concept in disability services. Enabling and empowering students to direct their own lives has been an underpinning of federal legislation for some time. For example, the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, Title 1, Vocational Rehabilitation Program, describes the philosophy of independent living as including consumer control, peer support, self-help, self-determination, equal access, and individual and system advocacy, in order to maximize the leadership empowerment, independence, and productivity of persons with disabilities.

How can we improve self-advocacy?

There are many components in developing self-advocacy skills in young adults who are engaged in the transition process. Helping the student to identify future goals or desired outcomes in transition planning areas is a good place to begin. Self-awareness (self-knowledge) is critical for the student in determining the direction that transition planning will take.

Many tools and resources are available to assist transition planning teams in conducting a student-centered planning approach. The following sections provide some strategies to help individuals with disabilities develop self-advocacy skills.

Promote the student as a self-advocate

Encourage the student to be active in the IEP process and other decision-making situations. Assist the student in compiling and developing an exit file. This file should include the last IEP, a transition plan, documentation of disability, recent test scores and assessment summaries, a list of strengths and areas of need, a list of home or work accommodations needed, a summary of learning style, letters of recommendation, and the telephone numbers of service providers. This file empowers the student and encourages self-knowledge. Self-advocacy issues and lessons will be most effective if they are integrated daily.

Respond to students who self-advocate appropriately

Listen to the problem and ask the student for input on possible accommodations or modifications that he or she may need. Talk with the student about possible solutions, discussing the positive and negative sides. A person who self-advocates should not feel alone. Good self-advocates know how to ask questions and get help from other people. They do not let other people do everything for them or tell them what to do. Self-advocates are assertive. Assertive people tell others what they want and need, but they do not demand. They respect the

rights and feelings of other people. They talk over their ideas with other people. They ask questions for guidance, then make up their own minds after reviewing the information. They may have strong feelings, but they try to be objective when making their decisions.

Identify strategies for teaching self-advocacy

Students need opportunities to practice newly acquired self-advocacy skills. Teachers may wish to have students role play various situations, in which they can practice skills such as the following:

- Setting up a class schedule
- Moving out of the home
- Asking for accommodations needed for a course
- Meeting with a rehabilitation counselor or social service caseworker
- Meeting with a medical provider
- Working with a personal care attendant
- Interviewing for a job
- Making choices in an IEP meeting

Students apply self-advocacy skills by calling and requesting information about a service they need for transition from high school. Students can prepare to visit an adult service provider by compiling a list of questions to ask and requests for services.

Identify examples of self-advocacy objectives on an IEP

Following are some examples of objectives for an IEP that would promote development of self-advocacy. Students will:

- State their rights as mandate under the Individuals with Disabilities Act Amendments of 1997, P.L. 105-17.
- State their rights as mandated under Title I of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (Vocational rehabilitation) and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- Be able to access information from the support service staff of the postsecondary school in which they have expressed an interest.
- State the type of information necessary to self-advocate.
- Define the terms assertive, passive, and aggressive.
- Identify assertive, passive, and aggressive behavior in written scenarios.

- State examples of their own assertive, passive, and aggressive behaviors.
- Respond assertively in a given situation.

Identify student skills needed for self-advocacy in a job interview

Students need specific self-advocacy skills for job interviews. Here are a few examples:

- Be prepared: Complete an application and a resume.
- Be alert: Greet interviewer, establish eye contact, and sit up straight.
- Be an interested listener: Show enthusiasm.
- Express yourself clearly: Avoid slang and negative comments.
- Tell about yourself: Describe your strengths, goals, and past experiences.
- Ask questions: Show interest and energy.
- Describe what you have to offer or the types of work you want to do: Demonstrate self-confidence and enthusiasm.

These are just a few examples of the techniques educators and parents can use to ensure that students have the self-advocacy skills needed to make the transition from school to work. It is important that self-advocacy be recognized as a critical component of transition if the ultimate goal of transition-independence-is to be achieved.

Why is self-advocacy part of transition?

No one has a greater stake in the outcome of transition planning than the student with a disability. The student should be an active, participating member of the transition team, as well as the focus of all activities. For a young person with a disability, decision making is complicated by limited choices and the tendency for others to tell the individual what to do.

Too often students are thought that dependence, passivity, and reliance on unseen forces will take care of them. Throughout transition planning, students should be encouraged to express concerns, preferences, and conclusions about their options and to give facts and reasons. They may need to learn how to express their thoughts in a way that others listen to them and respect their views. In order to learn these skills, students need to practice them within a supportive environment. The transition process is a good place to start. Transition planning should be an ongoing opportunity for students to learn and practice responsibility and self-knowledge. Transition is an ever-changing process, and students need to be skillful enough to adapt to the challenge of those changes.

What are a student's rights and responsibilities at the IEP meeting?

Paulson and O'Leary (1991) have expressed their belief that part of the IEP planning process for educators is preparing the student for participation in the IEP meeting. Educators need to stress the importance of attendance at the IEP meeting and encourage the student to take an active part. The student has the right to (a) be at the IEP meeting (b) give his or her opinion, and (c) have the objectives he or she wants included in the IEP meeting.

In return, the student's responsibilities include:

- Thinking about what he or she wants for the future.
- Communicating with parents and teachers to determine realistic goals.
- Sharing feelings with the IEP team.
- Following up on objectives for, which he or she is responsible.

In order to carry out the full intent of federal legislation, ample opportunities must be provided for students to take an active, participatory role in the transition planning process. The IEP meeting is the critical moment when opportunities for participation are fully noted by all team members.