

Self-Advocacy: The Basics

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Tip Sheet

Overview

Self-advocacy is the ability to articulate one's needs and make informed decisions about the support necessary to meet those needs. It includes four important elements: knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication skills, and leadership skills. For individuals with one or more disabilities, including those who are deaf, increases in self-advocacy skills contribute to increased quality of life, sense of agency, and overall well-being.¹

Self-advocacy is a lifelong endeavor and can never be learned too early or too late in life. Practicing self-advocacy is a critical element of the self-advocacy developmental process, and individuals who practice are better prepared to self-advocate in the future.

How can self-advocacy skills be fostered in deaf individuals?

Recognize and adopt a team effort. Empowering deaf individuals to self-advocate is a collaborative effort that involves the individual, parents, teachers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and other disability service providers. Working as a team ensures that the individual has a variety of opportunities to learn and practice essential self-advocacy skills, in particular explaining one's communication needs and requesting accommodations.

Start the process early. Successful self-advocacy is based on a strong foundation of positive self-awareness and self-determination. When these fundamental self-advocacy skills are emphasized early in life, both at home and in school, the person is better situated to learn and execute the skills associated with being an effective self-advocate.

Promote the understanding of one's own hearing loss. It is crucial that deaf individuals understand their own hearing loss and how it affects communication in different environments. Knowing what one's hearing loss means in various professional or personal contexts is the first step toward effectively explaining accommodation and communication needs and offering creative solutions.

Encourage flexibility to explore what "fits." Encouraging deaf youth to experiment and learn about accommodations that work best for them increases their familiarity with the range of accommodations and enhances their ability to request, obtain, and effectively use them.

Provide tools that help one identify and understand their legal rights. It is important that deaf individuals learn and understand the laws related to accommodation. Individuals should recognize how these laws apply in a variety of settings and be able to educate others about "equal access under the law."

How can deaf individuals practice self-advocacy skills?

Participate in educational and vocational planning meetings. Individualized education program meetings are an excellent opportunity for high school students to showcase their self-advocacy skills. Individualized plan for employment meetings for individuals using state vocational rehabilitation services afford adults a similar opportunity. The process of articulating and justifying one's choices during an



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individualized education program or individualized plan for employment meeting not only allows the individual to take a lead role in the development of a plan that is in sync with their educational and/or employment goals, but also provides them the opportunity to practice the art of seeking accommodations.

Gain volunteer and school-sponsored work experiences. Requesting accommodations appropriately and reasonably is a vital skill in successful self-advocacy. Participating in volunteer and school-sponsored work experiences is an excellent venue for practicing this skill. These environments allow individuals to experiment with a variety of communication strategies in a range of settings and to interact with individuals who may be unfamiliar with hearing loss in a lower-stakes setting.

Participate in social activities and family outings. Social activities and family outings can be an overlooked opportunity to develop self-advocacy skills. Family members or friends with good intentions often act on behalf of deaf individuals by requesting accommodations or speaking for them, rather than allowing them to navigate communication options on their own. Encouraging and supporting the individual to self-advocate for accommodation needs without family assistance is critical.

It is important that deaf individuals interact with role models who are deaf. Role models can share their personal experiences with self-advocacy and offer insight into effective self-advocacy techniques. The impact of exposure to role models cannot be over-emphasized.

Related Resources

- Deaf self-advocacy training:
www.interpretereducation.org/deaf-self-advocacy
- *Self-Advocacy: Navigating Disclosure in the Workplace*:
www.nationaldeafcenter.org/advocatework

Additional resources on this subject may be available at www.nationaldeafcenter.org/resources

Reference

- ¹Schoffstall, S., & Cawthon, S. (2013). *From theory to practice: Self-advocacy skill development of students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing who are transitioning into post-secondary settings*. Retrieved from https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/sites/default/files/Self%20Advocacy%20Mini%20Book_Final2014.pdf



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Additional resources can be found at www.nationaldeafcenter.org