

Self-Advocacy: The Basics

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 do 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 better 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 impacts communication in different environments. Knowing what one's own 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 while they are young will increase their familiarity with the range of accommodations and enhance their ability to request, obtain, and effectively utilize 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."

What are some ways that deaf individuals can practice self-advocacy skills?

Participate in educational and vocational planning meetings. Individualized Educational Planning (IEP) meetings are an excellent opportunity for high school students to showcase their self-advocacy skills. Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) meetings for individuals utilizing state vocational rehabilitation services afford adults a similar opportunity. The process of articulating and justifying

one's choices during an IEP or IPE 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 the deaf individual 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 their own accommodation needs without family assistance is critical.

It is important that deaf individuals have the opportunity to interact with role models who are deaf. Role models are able to share their own personal experiences with self-advocacy as well offer insight into effective self-advocacy techniques. The impact of exposure to role models cannot be over-emphasized.

Additional Resources

- Deaf Self-Advocacy Training: www.deafselfadvocacy.org
- Self-Advocacy: Navigating Disclosure in the Workplace: www.nationaldeafcenter.org/advocatework

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

References

- ¹ Schoffstall, 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*. Literature review published by pepnet 2.

