



The Parent As Advocate

Advocating for your child means being part of a team--the most important member. The professionals on the team may change; you will be the one constant. That's why your role is so important and why the job of advocate falls to you. Keeping the team's focus on your child and what's best for him or her is your first priority. You provide the information about your child and family's strengths and needs. This information is as necessary as any observations or evaluations of the professionals. Learning how to work as an equal team member will not only help ensure the best services for your child, but it will also give you plenty of practice for the years ahead.

Keep In Mind

- You and the professionals need each other, neither can do the job alone.
- When your team meets, you all have valuable information to give one another.
- If the team is meeting to solve a problem or make a plan, no one member should come ready with that solution or plan. But every member should have ideas toward possible solutions and be ready to share them.
- Each member needs the chance to share in the process of planning and deciding.

As An Individual, you can build relationships with the team, if you:

- Make your needs known.
- Listen to other people's positions.
- Know the laws and your rights.
- Speak up, even if you disagree.
- Be realistic.
- Offer solutions; use your imagination.
- Accentuate the positive; show your appreciation, when appropriate.
- Inform the others of what you know they need to know.
- Persist, if necessary, when you know you're right.
- Recognize others' humanness.
- Remember that the professionals may be unsure at times, too; offer support and forgive mistakes.
- Follow the chain of command if a problem arises.

*You are a vital part of the team. If you don't speak for your child, the team will make decisions anyway, but with insufficient information. They need your input. **Remember to** stay focused, build relationships, get information, and speak up!*

6-Step Model for Resolving Conflict

Every group of people -- even those whose membership is defined by common interest -- is made up of individuals with different experiences, outlooks and values. So, when the group begins working together, some differences of opinion is inevitable. Disagreement can be constructive, if it's used to bring the group to a shared solution. The following process can help accomplish consensus, but only if each person takes part as an equal.

1. **Identify the problem.** This may be tricky, because what people often appear to be arguing about may have little to do with the real conflict.
2. **Brainstorm for solutions.** This is a time to be creative, not critical, so welcome all suggestions or ideas.
3. **Evaluate the suggestions.** First, eliminate those that just won't work. Then discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the others.
4. **Choose the best solution.** It will be the one that meets the most needs of the most number of people involved, and that all can agree on, even if it wasn't their first choice. This solution belongs to everyone.
5. **Implement the solution.** Decide what steps need to be taken, by whom, and by when, and then do them.
6. **Evaluate the solution.** Set a date to talk about how the solution is working. If it is, great! If not, decide if the problem is in how the solution is being implemented. If that is the case, make some improvements. Or, if you need a different solution, go back to brainstorming and work from there.

For more information on this or other topics related to the needs of children with disabilities, call or write Maine Parent Federation, P.O. Box 2067, Augusta, Maine 04338, 1-800-870-7746 (In-State Only) 207-623-2144 or email MPF at parentconnect@mpf.org.