

Parents Can Be Advocates

1. **Know the rules:** All public schools abide by specific laws and regulations which provide special services for children with learning disabilities who qualify for such services. The criteria for eligibility vary in each state and some school districts, but all schools must adhere to a minimum federal standard. To find out laws in your state and your rights as a parent, contact PRN.
2. **Get to know the people who make decisions about your child's education:** Connect with educators and administrators in both casual and formal settings. Talk with your child's teacher on a regular basis. If possible, volunteer in the classroom and help out with school functions. If you have concerns or problems that a teacher cannot or will not address, be willing to follow up the chain through the school, and if necessary, to the district office. Remember that you, as a parent, have the right to request that the school evaluate your child if you think he or she may have a learning disability. Be sure that your request is in writing.
3. **Keep records:** Parents should maintain an organized file of educational records and assessment information. Take notes during telephone and face-to-face meetings, and ask for people's full names and contact information when communicating by phone or by e-mail. In addition, keeping less formal examples of children's academic progress, such as homework papers, artwork, and writings, maybe useful in establishing patterns and documenting both abilities and challenges.
4. **Gather information:** Read books and articles in learning, attend PRN workshops, state conferences, and join a parent support/action group. Get comfortable with education acronyms and jargon. Ask professionals lots of questions, and don't be afraid to ask for clarification if their answers are confusing or complicated.
5. **Involve your child in decision making as early as you can:** Learning disabilities are a lifelong issue. Mastering self-advocacy skills is one of the keys to becoming a successful adult. Resist the natural urge to pave every road for your child, and respect and support your child's needs to take informed academic risks.
6. **Communicate effectively:** Come to meetings prepared, and know the specific outcomes you want. Be clear, calm, and direct when speaking, and put things in writing whenever possible. Listen and take time to think about pertinent information. Consider when documentation or data might help your case, and present it in an orderly and readable format. While assertiveness and persistence are crucial, anger and aggressiveness can work against you and can damage important relationships.
7. **Know your child's strengths and interests and share them with educators:** By highlighting a struggling child's capabilities and talents, you not only help professionals know your child as a whole person, you can also identify learning accommodations.
8. **Emphasize solutions:** While there are no miracle cures or magic bullets for learning disabilities, it's important to stress the positive and help identify ways to improve your child's experience. Once appropriate programs have been identified and agreed upon, make every effort to encourage follow-through.
9. **Focus on the big picture:** Simply put, don't sweat the small stuff. Knowing the specifics of a law may be important on one level, but constantly arguing technicalities can ultimately waste time and inhibit rapport. Try not taking things personally, and always consider both sides of the story. Details are important, but don't let them get in the way of negotiating the best educational experience for your child.

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