



## Teaching Children Self-Advocacy

You are not always going to be with your child when they are at school, with friends or other social activities, but you can empower them with the ability to advocate for themselves so that when they encounter situations where they will need to speak up for themselves, they will be able to do so.

Self-advocacy is when a person speaks or acts on their own behalf to improve their quality of life or to correct inequalities. This is the ability of your child to speak up, or stand up for themselves, recognize their strengths and weaknesses, ask for help when they need it, and make their own choices. Self-advocacy skills will help to increase your child's confidence in their abilities as they gain their independence.

Self-advocacy skills are important and essential for your child to develop, so that they can be comfortable and confident with their hearing loss and the unique needs that accompany it. Good self-advocacy skills can help your child develop a sense of ownership with their hearing loss and this allows your child to be comfortable in reaching out and asking others for help when they need it. Self-advocacy skills also allow your child to be confident in informing others about their hearing loss or hearing devices as well as explaining their needs to others. Once your child has developed good self-advocacy skills, they will become more independent and you can be confident that your child will be successful in whatever situation they encounter.

In this clip, a mother shares her feelings of why she thinks it is important to teach her sons with hearing loss, self-advocacy skills. "I think it is important just because you know there are going to be several times when they can't hear what is going on, or they are going to have to kind of be motivated to do something to make sure they are hearing. You know, school or even just in social things, just so they, you know, they really know what is going on. And so, to help them, to know that they can do that, I think it requires building up their confidence some, but also talking about it so that they know, and kind of mentioning like in situations where you think "are you really hearing everything?" and just kind of bringing it to their attention and kind of filling it out."

**Start Early.** Development of these skills should begin early so that your child is able to start taking responsibility for their own communication accommodations and assume control over choices that affect their lives. Even as a young toddler, your child can learn simple ways to let you know their hearing needs, such as telling you when their battery dies.



As your child grows, their need for self-advocacy skills will differ. However, there are skills that should be acquired by certain ages. "Success for kids with hearing loss" is a website that has a checklist that allows you to see different self-advocacy skills your child should have by certain ages. For example, early skills include teaching preschoolers to put on their own devices and report when there are problems, and teaching Kindergartners to appropriately ask for repetition of messages they miss, ask the speaker to slow down, speak more clearly, or louder.

Children in the first grade can be taught to request the FM microphone be passed and remind the teacher to turn on the FM microphone. Second graders can be taught to describe the purpose of the FM in simple terms to the classroom teacher.

By middle school children can be taught how to troubleshoot their devices and solve minor problems consistently. In high school children should develop a plan for audiology and amplification services post-high school. The checklist is a resource that can help you get a sense of the skills that your child should have and will need as they grow. Look at the skills your child already has and what they will need to have. This information can guide you in developing a plan to address self-advocacy skills with your child.

One of the first things you can do to help your child acquire self-advocacy goals is to help them see their own strengths. Your child will often feel different from their peers, so it's important for your child to recognize all of their wonderful qualities and embrace and celebrate their differences.

There are many ways to help your child focus on their strengths. First point them out, for example you can refer to your child's hearing device as their super power. Embrace their differences, you can show them how to utilize cool features of their device. Be proud of their differences, show your child that you are not embarrassed by their hearing devices but instead take pride in them, your child will also. Celebrate their differences and this will help your child develop an ownership of their differences and this ownership will lead to increased confidence and self-advocacy skills.

Model self-advocacy skills to your child, this will help them know what self-advocacy looks like. You are your child's greatest role model! Your child is always observing what you do and say.

Be the example for your child. Take advantage of opportunities to advocate for yourself and after modeling this behavior, point it out to your child. After modeling the behavior and pointing it out to your child, talk about what rewards came about because of this behavior. It would also be helpful to discuss what the consequences would have been if you did not advocate for yourself. This will help your child gain an understanding of why it is important for them to learn how to self-advocate.



Many parents have created a video with their child to help them transition into a new grade at school. Prior to entering school, the main objectives of the video are typically to:

1. Let the class know that your child is just like the other children and enjoys the same kinds of activities that they do.
2. Help the class understand why your child needs to wear their hearing device.
3. Teach the class the hearing device isn't a toy and what they should do if they find one.

Spencer and Alex decide that making a short video about Alex and his hearing device would be a great way to introduce Alex's peers to some of Alex's special qualities and some ways that they can help Alex. You might think of other objectives that you would like to address but starting with these can help you build your own script for a video.

Here is an example of a video created by Alex and his parents to help his new friends and teachers have a better understanding of his hearing loss and the devices he uses. As you watch the video, think about the message that you want to share with your child's peers. "Hi, I am Alex, and this is my brother Lance. He also goes to Provost. Me and Lance like to play frisbee together." "We also like playing catch." "Hey, it is hot, let's set up the slipping slide!" "Ok. Come on." "I also like biking." "When we are inside, we like playing with Legos, it is a lot of fun playing with Alex." "I was born deaf, so I do not need earmuffs like these. When there is a loud noise, I simply take off my coil." "Oh, are you ready to check out Alex?" "Yep!" "Is this all for you today?" "Nope, I have got one more stack." "You are quite a reader Alex!" "Hey Alex, what are you reading?" "A book that has cochlear implants." "El Deafo? I love this book. Don't you have cochlear implants too?" "Yeah!" "How do they work?" "This is the microphone that sends it to, up through this cord to the coil, there is another coil inside my head, and that sends it to my brain." That's really cool!" "Thanks." "Hi Alex, how are you?" "Good." "Good to see you, welcome back to school. Remember everybody, don't touch Alex's processors, he needs them to hear." "Alex, A, L, E, X."

Like Spencer and Alex, you and your child can create your own video. To do this, think about who your audience will be and what your objectives are. Whether you're creating something for your family and friends to help them learn about your child's hearing loss or creating something for your child's classmates to learn about their devices, a video can be a very useful tool. Once you know your audience and your objectives, write a general script to use. Remember that this doesn't need to be very specific, but instead a general idea of the setting and situation you would like to use. If your child is old enough, allow them to help you think of what they want their audience to know and what to include in the script. It's also helpful that you keep the video short so that you can keep the attention of your audience. Once you have a script, rehearse it with your child and then have someone film it. Most importantly, remember to have fun. If you and your child enjoy this process, your child will enjoy being a part of this project and will be excited to share it.



A simple yet very useful way to help your child learn self-advocacy skills is by doing role play with your child. Children love to role play, so use this as an opportunity to help your child determine what they will do if they encounter situations where they will need to speak up for themselves. It can be as simple as playing restaurant with your child and helping your child know what to say when the server asks them what they want at a restaurant or what toppings they want on their pizza. You can encourage your child to ask you to repeat something if they didn't hear you.

Other scenarios that you might want to role play include problems with their hearing technology or an inability to hear their teacher or friends. You might need to play the role of your child and show them what you would do in the situation before they will know what to do. Your child may not have the language skills to know what to say in these situations, so model this and help them to use this same language when it is their turn. Once you've done this, engage in different scenarios with your child and help them come up with different ways they can handle these situations that they will encounter.

While teaching your child self-advocacy skills, it's important to start small and then continue to build up to more difficult tasks.

A simple yet very important task to start with is to have your child tell you when their hearing device isn't on. This will require some time, but once your child is able to do this consistently, build on this and expect more of them. More difficult tasks might include having them ask their teacher to repeat what they didn't hear or asking to be moved to a different seat so that they can have better access to sound.

One of the best ways to help your child learn self-advocacy skills is to provide them with opportunities to implement self-advocacy.

As a parent, it is often hard to sit back and not intervene when our child needs help. However, we won't be with our children all the time, so we need to encourage them and allow them to advocate for themselves. If an opportunity presents itself where your child may not have heard something, encourage him to ask for it to be repeated. Don't step in but instead, allow them some time so that they can have the opportunity to do it themselves. Encourage your child to advocate for themselves but also let them know that you are there to support them and will help them when needed. Finally, remember to praise their efforts on what they did to help resolve the issue. This will help to build your child's confidence and will encourage them to continue to advocate for themselves.

Your child will take more ownership of their hearing loss if they are involved in making decisions that will affect them.



This could include inviting them to the IEP meeting if they are old enough or talking with them about options, they can use to inform a teacher that their hearing device isn't working. Instead of telling your child what they need to do, allow them to decide what and how they can advocate for themselves. Together, you and your child can set specific goals and make a plan for how you can achieve them. As your child works on achieving these goals, check in with them frequently to see how they are progressing and to learn of ways that you can support them.

As you help your child develop their self-advocacy skills, remember that there are resources available to assist you in this. Your child's audiologist can help you think about skills your child will need, they can show your child how to properly use their technology and even practice using it in the office. Your child's audiologist can also help connect you with other families of children with hearing loss to talk about and share experiences or with other adults with hearing loss. These people can help you get a better idea of different situations that your child may encounter and how they navigated through those situations. Other resources include your child's SLP or early interventionist. They can help you by implementing different strategies into their sessions to help your child develop self-advocacy skills. Look in the resources section of this tutorial for other helpful resources.