



## SELF-ADVOCACY: A FOUNDATION FOR FUTURE SUCCESS

Students with learning disabilities are often bombarded with terms and concepts by counselors, learning specialists, and psychologists: accommodations, support services, time management, 504 Plan, IEP, psycho-educational evaluation, etc. *A core component that typically gets overlooked in the swarm of effort to support and assist the LD student is **Self-Advocacy**.* For the LD teen however, learning to be an effective self-advocate is a critical foundation for future success.

### **But what does it mean??**

Literally speaking, “advocate” was originally a Roman legal term with its roots in the Latin *advocare*, which meant “to call to one’s aid.” This is the essential definition for LD students. As a self-advocate, one’s goal is to use resources available (teachers, counselors, advisors, etc.) as a support network to meet and overcome challenges one may face in the classroom.

### **What steps can LD students take to become effective self-advocates?**

In order to take charge of their lives and achieve academic success, students with disabilities need to understand their individual strengths, and limitations. Learning disabilities have been described as “perceptual differences that inhibit intelligence from manifesting itself.” LD students need to be aware of how they process information and what strategies and learning style best work for them. By making a list of their strengths and weaknesses, identifying specific subjects that pose challenges in the classroom, or by writing a learning style “manifesto,” students can create an easily accessible document that they can present to teachers and school support services in order to communicate and clarify their unique needs.

It’s important for LD students to recognize their support system as a work in process. On the first day of school, or even before school begins, students should openly communicate with their advisors, counselors, or learning resource specialists. Maintaining open communication throughout the school year with teachers helps identify budding problems before major issues develop, allowing for simple solutions rather than requiring crisis intervention. It also effectively eliminates a perception that students may be using their disability as an excuse.

Once in the classroom, remember the basics: be on time, complete work by its due date, attend all classes. Teachers are generally more apt to help students they view as conscientious. By developing self-advocacy skills, LD students will not only create an effective support network and gain confidence, they will also strengthen their social skills and emotional intelligence; key components in overcoming any type of disability.

## PARENTING TOOLS TO MAXIMIZE ACADEMIC SUCCESS

All parents are interested in helping their child succeed academically. Did you know that the way a parent and child interact can greatly influence a child's academic success? In fact, the way we relate to our children, *our interaction style*, is often more important than what we are trying to teach them. One study (Gottman, 1997) actually showed that **parenting style is a better predictor of long term academic achievement than children's IQ scores.**

### **What style of parenting is the "best" in terms of academic success?**

The answer to this question lies in understanding how parents impact children's emotional intelligence. Research has demonstrated that emotional intelligence is one of the leading predictors of academic achievement, social competence, and physical health. Emotional intelligence is a skill that can be learned.

*In simple terms, emotional intelligence is the "ability to handle one's emotions."* This skill includes the capacity to control impulses, to delay gratification, to read other's social cues, to self motivate, and to handle the ups and downs of life. A child with emotional intelligence is able to "shift and focus" their attention in the classroom; to address the task at hand. They are capable of pacing themselves, dealing with frustrations, and solving problems.

### **How can parents help their children develop "emotional intelligence?"**

Specific communication skills are the answer. Two of the most effective of these skills are Showing Understanding and Structuring.

**Showing Understanding:** Showing understanding is an empathic way to respond to a child. *It is instrumental in building children's confidence.* If a parent helps the child to communicate honestly by showing that they understand the child's feelings, a connection is open for a more satisfying relationship. From a physiological and neurological standpoint, several benefits result from responding empathically.

Physiologically, showing understanding has a calming effect on a child's body. When children are under stress, heart rates and blood pressure increase and interfere with the ability to process information and problem solve. When children have their feelings reflected back to them in an accepting manner, there is a reduction in heart rate and blood pressure

Specifically engaging particular emotions when speaking to your teenager can directly correlate with their success in processing what it is you want them to understand. Brain scans suggest that negative emotions are processed in the right hemisphere. When children are afraid, sad, or overwhelmed there is more blood flow activity in the right hemisphere. On the other hand, with emotions considered more positive in nature -- those that contribute to a child's motivation to pursue and persist at a task (e.g., optimism, a sense of control, happiness)-- there is more blood flow in the left hemisphere. con't p. 3

## INSPIRATION CORNER

**" If you think you can, you can.  
And if you think you can't, you're right."**

*Mary Kay Ash*

### Parenting Tools to Maximize Academic Success, con't from p.2

Interestingly, words are also localized in the left hemisphere. When words are used to describe some of these negative emotions, they are processed by utilizing both lobes. In other words, simply providing a word for the feeling actually influences the way these negative emotions are processed. Thus, a child who is overwhelmed or worried that they cannot solve a specific problem will experience a greater sense of hope and optimism having these feelings reflected back to them in an accepting manner. So should you notice that your child seems to have given up in a particular subject in school, or appears to be overwhelmed, you might introduce the topic of conversation by saying: "You are overwhelmed and do not know where to begin..." or "Sometimes does it make you even wonder whether it is even worth trying?" Homework issues can often be exacerbated by parent-child power struggles. Your child may believe that you are overly involved and annoying, when in fact you may worry what will happen if you loosen the reigns. Beginning a conversation with, "It bothers you to have me constantly checking in on you, doesn't it?" or "I bet you wish I would just trust you and let you do it your own way," can often serve as means to remove the struggle, focus on what works for both of you, and nurture your teenager's budding independence.

**Structuring:** Structuring is planning surroundings or events in children's lives so that they will be more able to identify and set reasonable expectations, successfully attain them, and have their own needs met at the same time. In the past, it was believed a child's brain development was complete around adolescence. Current brain research shows that this is not the case. *One of the most important areas in the brain, the frontal lobe, is the last to develop and continues developing into adulthood. It functions much like a CEO and is responsible for planning, problem solving, and controlling impulses.* This is an important skill for all adults, but not always mastered. Structuring is an important strategy to help guide teenagers to learn how to better achieve success in all areas of their life.

#### 5 Steps to Successful Structuring:

1. Define the problem
2. Describe the goal
3. Identify obstacles
4. Brainstorm solutions
5. Communicate and record the plan

Introduce situations for your teenager to walk through these steps with your guidance. Be an advisor they can turn to for counsel, and help them talk through the process. Model situations you have had success yourself! Resist rushing to rescue when an obstacle seems difficult. Positive outcomes achieved without assistance will increase confidence in self-reliance. Emotional intelligence is a skill that can be strengthened. It can serve as a building block for success in academia, and life. The results will be well worth the time you invest.

## SUGGESTED READING LIST

- How to Talk so your Kids can Learn (Faber and Mazlish, 1996)
- Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child (Gottman, 1997)
- Raising Emotionally Intelligent Teenagers: Parenting with Love, Laughter, and Limits (Elias, Tobias, and Friedlander, 2000)

## BRAIN BYTE



*True or False? Good parents should praise their teenager's intelligence whenever possible. **False!***

**Research -- such as a recent 10 year study conducted by Carol Dweck and her team at Columbia University -- is revealing that branding your child as “smart” and lavishing praise does not necessarily foster academic success, but could actually contribute to underachievement. The compliments - while well-intended - communicate a greater importance to “look smart, and don’t risk the embarrassment of making mistakes.” Kids who are taught that intelligence is to be developed - instead of an innate trait one possesses - respect the learning process more, and result being more adventurous in the learning process. Children who are willing and comfortable to risk learning even at the expense of making mistakes, learn more and are more confident.**

## COLLEGE TRANSITION CAMP OPEN HOUSE

Are you interested in this summer’s College Transition Camp at Towson University? Do you believe your child may benefit from high school – to - college transitioning support to become a stronger self-advocate. Are you concerned about your son or daughter’s ability to independently establish a new support system in their college environment? Do you want to learn more about the company, the camp or meet some of the advisors? **Come to an Open House session or visit our booth at the Baltimore’s Child Summer Camp Fair to learn more.**

### OPEN HOUSE SESSIONS

**Friday, Feb 22** 9:00 - 10:30am

**Thursday, March 13** 7:00 - 8:30pm

304 E Pennsylvania Ave., 2nd Floor  
Towson

### BALTIMORE CHILD’S SUMMER CAMP FAIR

**Sunday, March 9** 12:00 - 3:00pm

Timonium Holiday Inn Select,  
2004 Greenspring Drive., Timonium  
[baltimoreschild.com/fairs](http://baltimoreschild.com/fairs)

