

Advocacy

Getting Started as an Advocate

Dr. Julia Link Roberts and Tracy Ford Inman

Whether we admit to it or not, we all hear voices in our heads. Some of those voices remind us of tasks yet to finish, while others encourage us to complete that next set of sit-ups. Sometimes we hear voices dissuading us from buying those uncomfortable (but very cute) shoes or eating one more piece of cake. More often than not, we listen to these voices, for they speak reason. But sometimes the voices keep us from doing what we need to be doing. They whisper self-doubt. They create barriers. Those voices in your head may very well try to talk you out of being an effective advocate for your child, using excuses such as lack of time, knowledge, or experience. Don't listen to that voice—rather, reword those messages into proactive ones. You have the potential to make a great difference in the life of your child and other children who are gifted and talented.

Don't listen to: "I'm not an educator. What do I know?"

Listen to: "I need to find out everything I can in order to be a better advocate."

You don't have to be a professional educator or have a Ph.D. to advocate for your child. No, you may not be familiar with the latest educationese or have a personal library of best practices, but you certainly have motivation to learn the basics that you need in order to advocate for your child.

Educate Yourself

First, you know your child—his areas of strengths and weaknesses, interests, and needs (which probably stem from his strengths). Now learn about the characteristics and needs of other gifted children. NAGC's Web site (<http://www.nagc.org>) has an excellent Parent Section to guide you. A *Parent's Guide to Gifted Children* is an additional resource to get you thinking about characteristics and the needs that result from each of them. Remember, the more specific knowledge you have, the

better you can communicate with teachers to help your child and other children make continuous progress and to thrive in school.

Second, become familiar with your school, district, and state policies and regulations. You must know your target in order to keep abreast of what should be happening. You must know your child's rights. Does your state identify giftedness in multiple areas? What's the district policy concerning early admission to kindergarten? Is there a mandated Individualized Education Plan that guides your child's learning? Know which questions to ask and where to find the answers. NAGC's Web site has a wonderful section that provides some insight into each state's policies and laws. The Davidson Institute Web site (<http://www.DavidsonGifted.org>) also provides information about each state. Even more beneficial, perhaps, are the links to the individual state's advocacy organizations and departments of education. Both institutions should answer some of your questions. If not, they will point you in the right direction.

Don't let a lack of knowledge keep you from being an advocate. Read. Ask questions. Learn. Knowledge is a powerful tool to use in the advocacy process.

Don't listen to: "I am so busy. I don't think I can add anything else to my schedule."

Listen to: "Although time is short and overscheduled, I can match my skills and interests to a part of the advocacy plan."

Getting the Right Balance

You've probably heard the adage, "If you want to get something done, ask a busy person." Busy people tend to have excellent organization and time management skills. You've probably also realized that most people tend to find time for those things that are really important to them. For some, that means waking up an hour early for exercise; for others, it means working late a few nights in order to free up time for a 3-day weekend. Of course, this

also involves organizing your responsibilities and managing your time. So, when considering being an advocate for your child and other gifted and talented children, don't just give the automatic response of lack of time.

Although it may be true that you are already overstretched, advocates can certainly commit varying levels of time. Look at school volunteers for a fall festival as an example. Some parents can devote 2 or 3 days a week to help plan and organize the festival, find donations from area businesses, and even physically set up the festival. For others, volunteering could mean sending in a cake for the cakewalk or working a booth for an hour. It takes all types of volunteers to make the festival successful. The key is matching interest and skill of the volunteer to the task. The same goes for advocacy. For some, a 10-minute phone call to a school board member is all the time that can fit into an overly tight schedule. Realize, though, how powerful the right connection can be! Other advocates may be able to devote months to developing a chapter advocacy group for their state organization. Most will probably fall somewhere in between.

Don't listen to: "I've never done anything like that before. It's just not my personality."

Listen to: "Even though this is a new experience and a bit intimidating, by doing my homework and working with others who are experienced, I know I can be an advocate."

There's a first time for everything, and often when we try something new, we're out of our comfort zones. That's why joining forces with others can prove so beneficial, especially when those others have some experience. Becoming a member of your national, state, and local gifted advocacy organizations adds oomph to the organizations' negotiating power (numbers are important!) and puts you in contact with kindred spirits. Learn from others in the group. Don't be afraid to ask lots of questions.

Combining Your Voice With Others

Advocacy involves discussing the right message in the right way with the right people. Earlier advocacy columns in *Parenting for High Potential* have addressed these topics because they are so critical. Few of us have experience in drafting a message but "Craft Your Message" (2006, June) guides you through the process step-by-step from exploring the mission statement of your school to wordsmithing your message. How do you go about spreading that message? Reading "Communicate Effectively" (2006, September) will get you on the right track with ideas. Then "Communicating with Decision Makers" (2007, June) provides numerous tips about figuring out who those right people are. These decision makers range from teacher to superintendent to state school board member. We aren't born knowing how to

advocate for our children, but through learning, asking questions, and teaming with fellow advocates, we gain experience and confidence.

Changing the Voices

The next time you hear voices providing excuses, try rephrasing those doubts into challenges. The voices will be speaking to you—just make sure you're listening to the right ones. No one else will advocate for your child as you will. After all, no one knows your child as you do. The cumulative effect of individuals advocating for gifted children multiplies as the numbers grow. You and your fellow advocates will make a difference. Don't miss this opportunity!

References

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