



Essential Skills in Self Advocacy

Angela Kwok, M.S.W., R.S.W.
BC Centre for Ability

Self advocacy means speaking on behalf of oneself and taking charge of what one wants to do. The principle of self advocacy is built on the belief that all people have the potential to make decisions and choices to improve the quality of life.

Self advocacy is an important skill-set for persons with disabilities to navigate through the service systems to get support required to meet their life goals.

To become an effective self advocate, you should pay attention to the following:

Self Knowledge

- Understanding key life domains and their impacts on your wellbeing - It is important to consider all areas of your life such as home, social/leisure, community and school/work. Each area of our life is important, success or failure in one area will affect how well we do in another area. It is important to find balance in which you have some level of satisfaction in each life area. An effective self advocate has a clear picture on how he/she is doing in each life area.
- Getting to know your own feelings and emotions – Emotions and feelings affect our behaviors and actions. Effective self-advocate takes times to understand his/her emotional responses to situations, such as what situations can trigger anger, fear, or feeling overwhelmed. Self awareness in your emotional responses to situations will enable you to recognize warning signs and avoid inappropriate behaviors or emotional outbursts in stressful situations. It is the first step to learn how to articulate your feelings and express what your needs effectively.
- Identifying your strengths, challenges, likes and dislikes – Everyone has strengths, challenges, likes and dislikes, but everyone is uniquely different. Strengths are areas that we do well; knowing your strengths will assist you to promote yourself and let others know how you can contribute and participate in life. Everyone also has challenges; challenges are areas that we are not as good as others. A challenge may also be a difficult life situation. Knowing your challenges will help you to figure out what areas you require assistance and support.
- Knowing what you need and want – An effective self advocate must have a clear picture of what he/she needs and wants. Knowing what you need will help you to take steps to improve the life situation. Knowing what you want will give you direction and ideas for planning the future.

Knowledge of Your Rights and Responsibilities

You have rights and responsibilities as a Canadian citizen, a BC resident, and a consumer of services and become knowledgeable of these rights are extremely important in becoming an effective self advocate. The following are key strategies to learn about your rights as a consumer of medical and social services:

- Obtain information from service providers regarding their service delivery, including mandate, service offered, clients' rights and responsibilities, and complaint and conflict resolution procedures. Many of the medical and social service agencies have an informational pamphlet and/or a consumer handbook designed to help consumers to understand their service delivery, and many organizations also provide an orientation session to new clients to explain services and client's rights and responsibilities.

- Internet search on government websites - All BC Ministries have their own web page which outlines service areas, Ministry service plan, annual report, recent news and development, contact information, and reports and publications on subject areas that are of interests to consumers and service providers.
- Internet search on service provider websites - Most service organizations have a website that outline their mission, service mandate, operating guidelines, and important contact information.

Advocacy Action Plan

Once you have identified what you need, the next step is to develop a plan of action to advocate for your needs. The advocacy plan may include the following:

- Develop a clear objective of what you would like to achieve. For example, a student with special needs is having problem taking notes in class, and his objective may include receiving a set of lecture notes from the teacher, or permission to have a recorder in the classroom.
- Identify the organization and the contact person in the organization that you need to present “your case”. Take time to understand the agency/organization’s mandate, policies, as well as scope of services and service limitations, as this will provide you with a better picture on what you can expect from the agency/organization. Learn about the chain of command and the reporting structure of the organization so you know who to contact and what will be the logical next step to take when the interchange with the contact person does not yield the results that you are looking for.
- Collect and prepare relevant information to support your request. For example, if you are asking for special accommodations in the classroom, notes from doctors, assessment reports from the psychologist and therapists will further substantiate the needs for special accommodations.
- Determine strategies to present your needs. This may include writing a letter, and/or setting up an appointment for a face-to-face meeting.
- Have a follow-up plan after your request is made. This may include a follow-up phone call and/or a follow-up letter to confirm understanding of the meeting and agreed-upon actions.

Communication and Negotiation Skills

Respectful and effective communication skills take time to develop; nevertheless, these skills are extremely important to assist you to clarify needs and solicit support to get the needs addressed. Clear and respectful communication includes the following:

- Practice active listening – Active listening does not mean you are sitting still with the mouth shut! Listening is an active process that requires your participation in the communication interchange. To understand fully the meaning of the communication, you usually have to ask questions and give feedback. In a give-and-take manner, you get a fuller appreciation of what is being said. Active listening usually involves paraphrasing, reflecting back on what one has heard, clarifying, and seeking feedback.
- Send “I” message – “I” messages help an individual give direct and clear messages. By focusing on what “I” want or need, one takes off the pressure of “your” faults or what “you are not giving me”.
- Skillful “I” messages are those that clearly and neutrally identify one’s needs. For example, “When I get tired, I usually cannot concentrate and listen properly, so I will appreciate if we could set up another time for further discussion.”
- Use open-ended questioning – Skillful questions are “open-ended” and non-offensive and usually start with “how” and “what” rather than “why”. For example, “How can you help me in getting the support I need rather than why can’t you help me in getting the support I need.”
- Pay attention and respond to nonverbal communication – A good communicator pays attentions to other’s body language and will seek clarification to ensure that one is interpreting the nonverbal communication correctly.

- Clarify expectations – Express what you are expecting and invite others to express their expectations will help to build a foundation for good working relationship, as this will provide a clear understanding of each others' perspectives.

In addition to clear and respectful communication, you should have a good understanding of the basic rules of negotiations to become an effective self advocate. The following are some of the basic rules of negotiation:

- Separate the person with the issue. A situation can be considered separately from the personality involved. It is important to keep the person separate from the issue at hand.
- Understand the opponent. It is important to demonstrate respect in communicating with the opponent. Use effective communication skills to understand the other persons' perspectives.
- Understand your own needs and interests. A clear understanding of your own needs and interests will enable you to establish priorities in the negotiation process.
- State the issue/problem in terms of interests. In conflict situations, there are always shared and compatible interests, as well as opposing ones. You should take time to explore interests and avoid making assumptions of the situation.
- Focus on mutual gain. In the negotiation process, it is important to explore ways to ensure the outcome is a win-win solution for both parties.

Finding Support

Another cornerstone to effective self advocacy is finding allies; people who will support your advocacy efforts. The following are possible sources of support:

- Family/Friends – Family and friends are key sources of support for many individuals, and bringing family members or friends to a meeting will help to realign the power structure if you are meeting with a large team.
- Elected Officials – Public officials such as Members of Parliament and Members of Legislature Assembly often have resources to cut through bureaucracy. Meet with your local public officials and solicit their assistance.
- Advocacy Groups – In British Columbia, there are advocacy groups such as the BC Coalition of People with Disabilities and BC Association of Community Living, with a mission to advocate on behalf of persons with disabilities and will often support individuals' self advocacy efforts.
- Peer-to-Peer Support Group – In British Columbia, there are many active parent-to-parent support groups that are a great source of information and support for families with children with special needs. For example, Moms on the Move is an extremely active group promoting services for children with disabilities.

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PO Box 30521, Burnaby RPO Madison, BC V5C 6J5
604-875-6704 | www.bcepilepsy.com | deirdre@bcepilepsy.com or sonia@bcepilepsy.com