



Guide to Educational Advocacy with Christine Levy

Educational advocates are hired by families to help get their child the support, services, and placement that they are entitled to. Advocates are knowledgeable about the Special Education process and the laws at state and federal levels. They have familiarity with the IEP process and can help families interpret Neuropsychological Evaluations, including behavioral and educational testing results, to best plan for their child educationally. They can help you understand your child's rights and what they are entitled to in terms of their social and emotional development and education.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS:

“I don't want it to get legal”

Hiring an advocate doesn't mean that things will get legal. While sometimes the process of advocating for your child may ultimately end in lawyers getting involved, it's safe to say that nobody wants this. The goal of an advocate is to support you during meetings and the process, and to mediate when necessary. Educational advocates aren't lawyers, although they have thorough knowledge of the laws and have partnerships with lawyers should one need to get involved.

“I'm worried this will create an adversarial relationship with the school”

This process does not have to be confrontational. Bringing an advocate to meetings does not mean that conversations will become heated. More likely, with a strong, experienced advocate, communication will stay calm, positive, and productive.

“I'm going to just wait and see”

It's never too early to bring an advocate onto your child's team. Most advocates will recommend that you not delay making initial contact with them. Trust your gut if it tells you that something is not right with your child's plan at school. If you're unsure or worried, it's best to at least initiate a preliminary conversation with an advocate.

“I don't want it to get emotional”

The process of advocating for your child, with or without a professional advocate, will likely be emotional. You are fighting for your child and you might not feel like you're being heard. Add to the mix unfamiliar terms and policies, a lot of people around the table, uncomfortable moments, and fast-paced meetings. The process can be overwhelming, but with persistence, positivity, and preparation, you and your advocate will help your child.

“Our district doesn't do it that way”

There is a fine line between laws (both federal and state) and the systems that schools and districts have built on their own. This is an area where an educational advocate can provide clarity and guidance.

SOME SUGGESTIONS:

Document everything. Keep a folder of all emails between you and the school. Keep track of progress notes, report cards, and even samples of your child's work. If your child exhibits symptoms of anxiety and/or stress-induced illness before school, make a note of that. Do the same thing if there are tears or tantrums over homework.

With or without an educational advocate, you should do some research and know the basics about the process and policies. To the best of your ability, know your procedural safeguards and rights as a parent.

You don't have to sign anything you aren't absolutely certain about. It's ok to feel confused or to have questions. If you're pressured to sign something, know that you have time to think about it and consult with others.