

Self-Advocacy: What is it?

Advocating for yourself typically means you are letting people know your needs in a very specific way. You will also need to be able to explain this in a way so that the person understands your needs and sees themselves as a person who can help you to meet your needs. Being able to express this in a way that is clear, concise, and positive is usually most effective. Most of the time, accusing, blaming, yelling, criticizing, or otherwise belittling others while advocating for yourself is not helpful. It's okay if you need help in figuring strategies for how to deliver your advocacy message in an effective way.

The first thing you need to do is think about (and make a list) of the things that help you to learn best, work best, and participate best. But, thinking about what you need to do and who you need to talk to is only the start. You still need to identify the person to whom you need to speak.

Why is this so critical in young adulthood?

When younger, it's a caregiver or parent's role to connect with others to make sure your needs were met. Caregivers and parents can't do this forever! As we age, we need to develop a voice of advocacy. But it takes time and requires practice. Sometimes, advocating for oneself can be done in person and other times it can be done online (internet searches to gain information, emailing, texting, etc.).

It's okay to help a trusted person (or trained professional) to help you develop ways to advocate for yourself. Self-advocacy is a critical life skill!

There are different types of self-advocacy:

As a person with a social learning difference, it is important for you to be able to explain your needs because it might not be obvious to others. You may want to disclose that you have a diagnosis, but a diagnosis doesn't tell the person much about you. You will need to explain more as it relates to:

- a. Organizational strengths or needs
- b. Struggles to establish social networks
- c. Social anxiety or other anxiety
- d. Sensory differences
- e. Social needs
- f. Your personal goals

Sometimes you may need to advocate for yourself to get basic questions answered. You may need to advocate for yourself to better understand the details of a task or policy. This type of advocacy is something everyone needs to know how to do in order to do their job and/or understand the nuances of a workplace.

You will probably need to advocate for building your own social networks. This doesn't need to be a large network (1-3 people is still a network). Remember, those 1-3 people know at least 3 or 4 other people. It is through these connections that people make other friends, find jobs, and hear about ways to connect with others who have similar interests.

You may need to advocate for yourself within your own family. If your diagnosis is new or if you have just discovered your social learning differences, share those with your family members and let them know the ways that help you to participate in family functions (e.g., downtime, low sensory, short visits, etc.).

Can you think of other ways you need to advocate for yourself. Remember, belittling people, demanding without explanation, or yelling while trying to advocate usually makes self-advocacy less effective.