

Tips for Teens: Use Your IEP Meetings to Learn How to Advocate for Yourself

Self-advocacy is a key step in becoming an adult. It means looking out for yourself, telling people what you need, and knowing how to take responsibility. No one is born knowing these skills. Everyone has to learn them. Ready to begin learning? Here is some great information that can start you on your way.

What is self-advocacy?

Self-advocacy means taking the responsibility for telling people what you want and need in a straightforward way. It is knowing how to:

- Speak up for yourself
- Describe your strengths, disability, needs, and wishes
- Take responsibility for yourself
- Find out about your rights
- Obtain help or know who to ask if you have a question

Where can I practice self-advocacy?

A great place to practice self-advocacy is in your Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. With the support of your team members, you can learn ways to:

- Explain your disability to others
- Set goals for yourself
- Build teamwork skills
- Share with teachers what works and does not work for you
- Ask for accommodation
- Accept help from others
- Lead all or part of the IEP meeting

But I don't like going to these meetings!

Understandable. But did you know there are still many ways you can be involved and learn self-advocacy skills? Which of these ideas might work for you?

- Come for just a few minutes, instead of attending the whole meeting
- Write down your ideas, questions, and concerns before the meeting
- Practice or role-play ahead of time what you want to say in the meeting
- Introduce yourself
- Tell team members about your interests, strengths, and desires for the future
- Explain to the team what it is like to have your disability
- Help your special education teacher write the agenda
- Help the team develop IEP goal areas
- Ask for explanations if you do not understand something
- At the end of the meeting, review what the team decided
- If you choose not to attend the meeting, share your input with your parent(s) or special education teacher before the meeting and review the meeting's events afterward

Be prepared!

Most people are more comfortable at meetings if they have had some time to think about what they want to say. Before your IEP meeting, you could think about these questions:

- What do I want to learn or work on this year?
- What are my special concerns for the school year?
- How do I learn the best?
- What do I need to be successful?
- What would make learning easier for me?
- What positive information about myself can I share at the meeting?

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What does the law say about my attending IEP meetings?

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The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) says that you must automatically be invited to all of your IEP meetings once you are 16. (You don't have to go, but it's a good idea. After all, no one knows you better than you.) Minnesota law says that your IEP team needs to invite you at age 14 or in 9th grade when you are talking about transition services. You may want to discuss attending you IEP meeting with your parents. Transition is about planning for your future. You will look at your skills in five areas:

- employment
- postsecondary education
- home living
- community participation
- recreation and leisure.

All this planning and self-advocacy will serve you well. When you turn 18, you will be considered an adult—and will make lots of decisions on your own. You will be signing your own IEP. This is why it is a great idea to practice self-advocacy as much as possible before turning 18.

Learning good self-advocacy skills is cool. It will help you while you are in school—and when you become an adult. Knowing and exercising your rights are an important steps in becoming a strong self-advocate.

For more information on special education rights, please contact MSFN at 952-838-1360 or 1-866-204-1360.

The Youth Advisory Board is comprised of 8-10 youth between the ages of 14-18 with mental health needs. They have regular meetings, an annual retreat, maintain a website, and are available to give presentations at workshops, in-services and conferences. Please contact MSFN for more information.