

Module 1 Part 9: Exploring Self-Advocacy

This section corresponds with the middle school classroom materials for Module 1 Lesson 6.

Introduction

Learn About It

Understanding Myself

- Review of self-advocacy
- Learn how to advocate for yourself
- Skills needed for self-advocacy
- Case studies
- Putting it all together

Objective Check

Digging Deeper

Introduction

Objective: The student will identify at least one strategy that he or she can use when working with difficult content or class environments. The student will describe and explain the rationale for at least one accommodation that helps him or her to succeed in academic settings.

Estimated time needed: 30-45 minutes

Materials needed:

- Internet access
- Bubble map from the previous lesson

Introductory Video



Learn About It

In the last section, you learned about being a self-advocate by knowing yourself as a learner. As you can guess, there is more to being a self-advocate than that. We will help you take it a step further and look at some other elements of self-advocacy. You will learn to articulate approaches to learning and classroom accommodations that are appropriate for your learning strengths and needs. These skills will benefit you for your entire life!

Parents Chime In

One of the hardest things for a child, or even an adult, to do is to speak up for himself or herself in a clear and articulate manner. It doesn't come naturally, and many times it leaves people feeling frustrated. When frustration comes into the equation, emotions arise that can lead to many negative outcomes.

Work with your child on speaking clearly and without frustration. In the previous sections, your child has set goals, identified strengths and weaknesses, and established his or her learning styles. Your child has the knowledge, and now it's time to practice applying that knowledge. Schedule some time for your child to practice speaking in front of a mirror and then using family members as an audience. The more comfortable your child becomes as a speaker, the less likely it is for frustration to result from the stresses of self-advocacy. Instead, you will begin to see a clear, articulate young adult who is able to be a voice for his or her own education.

Review of Self-Advocacy

Before you dig deeper into the details of self-advocacy, complete this quick review of what it is and what it isn't. Self-advocacy is a broad, ongoing, and proactive concept, and it begins with strong self-understanding. Although you will definitely use your new self-advocacy skills in meetings and conferences, you might find that most self-advocacy happens in the day-to-day decisions that you make during your learning routines and classroom experiences.

Self-Advocacy Is

- Speaking up for yourself
- Making your own informed decisions about your life
- Learning about things that are important to you
- Learning who will support you as you move through high school and beyond
- Knowing your rights and responsibilities
- Problem solving
- Listening and learning
- Knowing how and whom to ask for help

Self-Advocacy Is NOT

- Demanding
- Bullying
- Taking advantage of others
- Using your disability to get an undue advantage
- Selfishness
- Closing yourself off from the ideas or help of other people

Qualities of a Self-Advocate

You have seen these qualities before, but you have mostly focused on knowing yourself well, the first bullet point. Today, go through this list and give examples of when you might need these qualities both in and out of school. Also, think about what you must know about yourself as a learner if it's appropriate. Use the chart for help in organizing your responses. Click on the picture below to load "Examples of Being a Self-Advocate."

Self-advocates:

- Know themselves well
- Know how they learn best in school
- Say what they think and feel in a professional, respectful manner
- Speak up for things that they believe in
- Know and understand their rights
- Take responsibility for their own life and education
- Make decisions that affect their own life and education
- Take steps to help improve their life
- Try to change the way things are done, if needed.

Quality	Example	What do I need to know about me?
Know yourself well		
Know how you learn best in school		
Say what you think and feel in a professional and respectful manner		
Speak up for things you believe in		
Know and understand your rights		
Take responsibility for your life and education		
Make decisions that affect your own life and education		
Take step to help improve your life		
Try to change the way things are done, if needed		

How do you Self-Advocate?

Sometimes it is easy to understand something and feel like you should know what to do, but when it comes down to doing it, it just doesn't come out right. This can absolutely be the case with self-advocacy. You have to learn the skills required to do it, and you have to practice. Start with very specific things that you will need to do to become good at speaking up for yourself, such as:

- Identify individuals in your support network and then build positive relationships with them
- Decide what you truly want to speak up about
- Plan how you are going to speak up, and then do it!
- Make basic choices about the direction of your life
- Enlist the appropriate support to help you make and achieve your goals
- Take responsibility for your decisions
- Believe in yourself.



Skills You Need to Speak Up for Yourself

- Self confidence
- Understanding of your disability
- Being informed
- Being responsible
- Earning credibility
- Setting goals
- Being organized
- Creating a support network
- Being a problem solver.



Yes, you need certain skills in order to be a successful advocate for yourself. You don't just need these skills for yourself, but also to show your parents, teachers, and others that you know how to speak up for what is needed. You need to show them that you have the needed level of maturity so that they will take you seriously.

Remember, when advocating for what you need and want, use a respectful tone and attitude. Don't make others feel that you're not ready to make your own decisions. Be careful not to demand things or use disrespectful words when self-advocating.

If you need some help with this, ask teachers or parents to help you come up with ways to speak without offending anyone or making yourself look foolish. Think about this old saying: "You get a lot further with sugar than with vinegar." What do you think that means?

Time for Practice

Very soon it's going to be time for you to take important steps to verbalize your learning styles, your strengths and weaknesses, and your need for accommodations. But before you analyze your own situation, let's look at four different scenarios and analyze those. Sometimes looking at examples can give you ideas and broaden your understanding of the total concept. In this activity, read each scenario and brainstorm the following:



- Elements of the student's learner profile
- Possible learning styles
- Potential accommodations
- Ways that the student could address the teacher in order to be an effective self-advocate.

After you've collected your thoughts, [click on the scenario](#) to see a possible response. Have fun and think outside of the box!

Scenario #1

You love learning about history and find American history especially fascinating. It's the beginning of the school year, and you can't wait to dive into this year's curriculum.

Since early in elementary school, you have been aware that you have dyslexia, and the volume of reading in middle school has been a challenge. You love watching the History Channel, and you have a great memory for big ideas as well as specific historical facts and details. Friends who have had your new teacher in the past warn you that it might be a tough year. They explain that this teacher moves quickly through class material. Tests occur every Friday, and students often enter class to find that they have a pop quiz on sections of the textbook that they read the night before.

The teacher is enthusiastic and interesting when she lectures. However, the textbook is the primary vehicle for sharing information in this course. One of the teacher's most frequently used ways to ensure all students have heard the material in the text is to go around the room calling on students to take turns reading aloud.

[Watch this Powtoon video example of Scenario #1.](#)

Possible Response #1

(Make this something that pops up after they have read the scenario and brainstormed for themselves.)

Key elements of the student's learner profile: Love of learning about history (especially American history); dyslexia; high-volume reading assignments are a challenge; great memory for big ideas as well as specific historical facts and details; reading out loud is a challenge and is also something you find embarrassing.

Possible learning styles: Auditory learning is strong.

Potential accommodations: Text provided electronically and text-to-speech software; pre-reading opportunity for text to be read aloud; tests read aloud.

Ways that the student could address the teacher in order to be a self-advocate: A wise step would be for the student to communicate (a) enthusiasm for the class and the class content and a sincere desire to learn as much as possible about a topic he finds very interesting, and (b) a description of how he learns best, his intention to have a strong work ethic, and his thoughts about what the teacher can do to help maximize his learning. The student (and his parents, if desired) can set up a meeting with the teacher. The student could lead the meeting and be sure to communicate ideas like the following:

- "I can't wait for this class to begin—it's one of my favorite topics! I'm looking forward to learning from you."
- "I've heard your lectures are interesting. I'm looking forward to them, and learning by hearing is also a great match for my learning style."
- "I'll work on getting accustomed to the synthesized speech of an electronic reader so that I won't need a human voice to read text aloud."
- "I love watching the History Channel. Do you have any shows to suggest I watch that would align with the curriculum for this year?"
- "I have dyslexia. That makes reading very laborious for me, so I want to think ahead about how to best learn from the textbook. I've also heard that we will be expected to stay on top of course readings and that this class moves pretty quickly. I want to work hard and keep up with our readings, and don't want my dyslexia to get in the way of being able to do so."

Possible Response to Scenario #1 Continued...

(note to slayton/tanner: This can all be in the same section when put online – I just had to move to the next page for the pdf)

- “If we can get an electronic copy of my book, I can use a computer to read it aloud to me.” [Note: If this is something you would like to do, you would want to work with your IEP team to ensure it is listed as an accommodation. Middle school is a good time to begin.]
- “It would help me to have tests and quizzes read aloud. That will make it so I can show you what I am learning about history each week, rather than having to use all my mental energy decoding the words themselves on the tests.” [Again, work with your IEP team on including this accommodation in an IEP]. “I will work hard to keep up with my readings, but just need this accommodation on my tests and quizzes so I can show you what I am learning.”
- “I have heard that you often like to go around the room and let students read aloud. I understand that it’s a good way to be sure all the students hear the text content, but to be honest, reading aloud in class is a nightmare for a student with dyslexia. I generally spend so much time worrying about whether I’ll be able to read my section correctly that I am not able to listen to and learn from hearing the other sections, and I certainly don’t comprehend the section I’m reading aloud because I’m so focused on decoding the words. I might not be the only one in class with this challenge. Could we work out a system where I can participate in class, but my dyslexia does not make it a very embarrassing experience?”
- “Here are some ideas that teachers have used in the past: (1) You could tell me what paragraphs I will be reading the day before (and make a note in your book to call on me for those paragraphs). That way I can review them the night before to be sure I can read them fluently. (2) You could read the material to the class instead of calling on students to do so, just in case other students have similar challenges but are hesitant to talk with you about them. (3) We could work out a signal system for me to tell you which paragraph/s I would feel comfortable reading—maybe a green card I put on my desk when we’re about to move on to a paragraph I feel good about reading. If these strategies don’t sound good to you, we can talk about other ideas that might fit with your teaching style better.”

Notice that the student is consistently sending messages to the teacher that (a) he is planning to work hard in the class, (b) he respects the teacher’s authority in the classroom, and (c) by making some basic accommodations or modifications to her instructional and assessment practices, the teacher can significantly reduce barriers to his learning.

Having this early conversation with the teacher and following through on his commitment to have a strong work ethic are both important parts of self-advocacy. It helps to set the stage for collaboration with the teacher around the learning process and reduces the likelihood of conflict. Remember that middle school teachers are juggling a tremendous amount of responsibility and duties each day. Reminding the teacher about accommodations might be necessary from time to time. That is another part of self-advocacy: don’t feel that you are annoying the teacher or being a bother when you need to do so.

Scenario #2

You have a writing disability that primarily causes challenges with spelling and mechanics. In writing class, you have just been assigned to write a paper about major themes you found in *Where the Red Fern Grows*, a novel your class recently read. Your teacher has allocated three class periods during which you will be able to work on this paper, and you want to make the best use of this time.

[Watch this Powtoon video example of Scenario #2.](#)

Possible Response #2

Make this something that pops up after they have read the scenario and brainstormed for themselves.

Key elements of the student's learner profile: Writing disability (spelling and mechanics).

Possible learning styles: Auditory learning strength; difficulty with organization and executive function (this was not specified in the profile).

Potential accommodations: Collaborate with teacher to make a writing plan; leniency with spelling errors when grading; pre-reading to assist with spelling/grammar errors; use of a computer (with spell check capabilities) for writing the paper; ability to take the paper home and work in the evenings in addition to the class time dedicated to the project. (Note: Some of these are more common than others; the student would need to work with her teacher to determine what is most appropriate for the class.)

Ways that the student could address the teacher in order to be a self-advocate: A wise step would be for the student to communicate (a) her enthusiasm for doing a good job and learning as much as possible through this assignment and (b) a description about how she learns best, her intention to have a strong work ethic, and what the teacher can do to help maximize her learning. The student can ask to meet after school or before school with the teacher to make a plan. Some sample communication points might be:

- "I'm looking forward to writing this paper and want to do a good job."
- "I want to be sure I'm using my time during the next three periods in class and during my evenings at home effectively."
- "Would you work with me on a step-by-step plan to break down the paper assignment into manageable steps that will cause me to have a first draft complete before our last class period to work on it? I want to have the chance to ask you and my parents to read the paper to give feedback before I do my final editing." (Note: Even more effective here would be to go into the conversation with a draft of such a working schedule for the teacher to review and help refine.)
- "Would you be willing to read my paper and give feedback before I write my final draft, especially about spelling and grammar? If you just alert me to words that are spelled incorrectly, I can look up the proper spellings. If you do not have time to help me find my spelling and grammar errors before the paper is due, will I have a penalty for spelling errors?"

Possible Response #2

The student might also want to consider asking the teacher to check in at the end of each of the three class periods to look at her progress and suggest very specific steps that the student could take for homework to keep the assignment moving along. Having this early conversation with the teacher and following through on her commitment to a strong work ethic are both important parts of self-advocacy.

When asking the teacher to look over the paper in advance or provide along-the-way feedback, the student should consider the teacher's schedule and plan ahead so that the teacher will have time to do so. This means that the student needs to diligently stick to her writing schedule as well.

Scenario #3

You enjoy learning and get along well with your teachers. The pace of class in middle school has, however, been a challenge. Your processing speed seems different from that of your peers, and class often seems to be moving along at break-neck speed. This is especially true in science. The teacher does not use a book. Instead, the students "create" their book through hands-on lab-based activities and teacher lectures. The teacher is enthusiastic and the class is fun. Still, you feel like you can never keep up. Your lab book is due at the end of each week, and your teacher grades based on how thorough your notes are. Moreover, the tests come from these experiences and the notes students take.

[Watch this Powtoon video example of Scenario #3.](#)

Possible Response #3

Make this something that pops up after they have read the scenario and brainstormed for themselves.

Key elements of the student's learner profile: Enjoy learning; get along well with teachers; processing speed is slower than peers'—difficult to keep up with class content.

Possible learning styles: Visual learning strength; processing speed challenges.

Potential accommodations: Organizational structure for lab book provided in advance; copies of lab partner's notes or fill-in-the blank format for lab sections provided by teacher in advance (Note: some of these are more common than others. The student would need to work with her teacher to determine what is most appropriate for the class. There could be lots of options here; the point is to collaborate with the teacher to work out a plan that maximizes learning and performance and also fits with the teacher's style.)

Possible Response #3

Ways that the student could address the teacher in order to be a self-advocate: A wise step would be for the student to meet with the teacher and communicate (a) enthusiasm for doing a good job and learning as much as possible through the lab experiences and (b) a description about how she learns best, her intention to have a strong work ethic, and what the teacher can do to help maximize learning. The student can ask to meet with the teacher before classes begin or early in the school year, and she may want to invite her parents.

Some sample communication points might be:

- “I like learning, and am looking forward to science class this year.”
- “I have heard that you don’t use a textbook, and that students are responsible for developing a lab-based book throughout the year. That sounds exciting and interesting, but there are some things that I need to share with you about my learning disability that might impact my performance if we don’t work out a plan together.”
- “I have some challenges with processing speed. I can learn the class content, but sometimes the pace of a typical class makes it hard for me to keep up—especially in a lab setting if I’m expected to take lots of notes (and organize those notes), listen to my teachers and classmates, and process information I’m learning, all at the same time. I don’t want this to cause me to fall behind in making a high quality lab book. That will cause problems in two ways: (a) on my lab book grade and (b) on my test grade if I don’t have sufficient notes to study. Can we talk through some possible accommodations that will help me be more successful?”
- “If you feel like it is important that I take notes in class during the labs, I will work hard to do so. That said, I may need some assistance in ensuring I leave each day with a strong set of notes. One possibility would be for you to give me (and the rest of the class) a fill-in-the-blank format that reduces the quantity of writing we do and provides a structure for us to follow. Or, if you feel it is important for us to develop our own structure and notes, may I have a copy of my lab partner’s notes to use to fill in any missing information in mine during the evening after each class?”
- “I will take time each evening to review my notes while the class is still fresh in my mind.”
- “We can determine a plan that works best for us both; I just want to ensure that my challenges with processing speed do not get in the way of learning the science content goals you have for us this year.”

Notice that the student is consistently sending messages to the teacher that (a) she is planning to work hard in the class, (b) she respects the teacher’s need to develop an accommodation plan that keeps the teacher’s learning priorities in mind, and (c) by making some basic accommodations or modifications to her instructional and assessment practices, the teacher can significantly reduce barriers to the student’s learning.

Having this early conversation with the teacher and following through on his commitment for a strong work ethic are both important parts of self-advocacy. It helps to set the stage for collaboration with the teacher around the learning process and reduces the likelihood of conflict. Remember that middle school teachers are juggling a tremendous amount of responsibility and duties each day. Reminding the teacher about accommodations might be necessary from time to time. That is another part of self-advocacy: don’t feel that you are annoying the teacher or being a bother when you need to do so.

Scenario #4

It really doesn't matter how interesting the content is; staying focused for a full hour of any class is torture. Added to this that you find math to be boring and challenging all at the same time. Your teacher is very bright, and makes a genuine effort to keep class interesting. Yet you still end up at home each day with big gaps in your notes and fragmented understanding of the content covered.

Your teacher prides himself in assigning homework every night and providing frequent opportunities for students to practice what they have learned. Homework takes forever though, and the missing information in your notes does not help. Mom and dad have forgotten most of what they learned in middle school math, and you are struggling to keep your grades where you know they should be.

[Watch the Powtoon video example of scenario #4.](#)

Possible Response #4

Make this something that pops up after they have read the scenario and brainstormed for themselves.

Key elements of the student's learner profile: Staying focused for a full hour of time is difficult; math is not an area of interest; notes often have gaps; homework is laborious and takes a long time; parents are not able to help with math content, so a strong set of notes is crucial.

Possible learning styles: Attention challenges; strengths in visual learning (this part was not specified in the scenario).

Potential accommodations: Copy of peer or teacher notes; ability to take movement break or have fidget object in class; permission to audio-record class, if the school allows it. (Note: Some of these are more common than others; the student would need to work with her teacher to determine what is most appropriate for the class.)

Ways that the student could address the teacher in order to be a self-advocate: A wise step would be for the student to meet with the teacher and communicate (a) his enthusiasm for doing a good job and learning as much as possible through the class and (b) a description of how he learns best, his commitment to a strong work ethic, and what the teacher can do to help maximize learning. The student can ask to meet with the teacher before classes begin or early in the school year, and may want to invite his parents.

Some sample communication points might be:

- "I want to be sure I stay on top of your class and learn a lot this year. I need to be honest: math is a subject that is tough for me. I can usually understand the concepts, but it's hard for me to focus and homework seems to take me forever. I need to find a way to stay on task in class and leave with a full set of notes. I will work with my parents on a strategy for being sure I stay on top of my homework."
- "One problem I have when my attention wanders in class is that I end up with gaps in my notes. I'm going to work very hard to focus in class, but this is not easy for me. Is it possible for me to get a copy of your notes or another student's notes at the end of each day? I will take the time to review my notes and fill in any gaps while doing homework each night. If you allow audio-recording in class, that is another great way for me to have a resource at home that I can listen to when filling in gaps in my notes and doing homework."

Possible Response to Scenario # 4 (continued)

(note to slayton/tanner: This can all be in the same section when put online – I just had to move to the next page for the pdf)

- “We can determine a plan that works best for us both; I just want to ensure that my challenges with attention do not get in the way of learning the math content goals you have for us this year.”

Notice that the student is consistently sending messages to the teacher that (a) he is planning to work hard in the class, (b) he respects the teacher’s need to develop an accommodation plan that keeps the teacher’s learning priorities in mind, and (c) by making some basic accommodations or modifications to his instructional and assessment practices, the teacher can significantly reduce barriers to his learning.

Having this early conversation with the teacher and following through on his commitment for a strong work ethic are both important parts of self-advocacy. He will have to plan his daily schedule to allow for homework and reviewing/filling in class notes. This also helps to set the stage for collaboration with the teacher around the learning process and reduces the likelihood of conflict.

Especially in a situation where a legitimate learning challenge may *look like* a lack of motivation or effort, it is smart to set a positive tone with the teacher early on. Remember that middle school teachers are juggling a tremendous amount of responsibility and duties each day. Reminding the teacher about accommodations might be necessary from time to time. That is another part of self-advocacy: don’t feel that you are annoying the teacher or being a bother when you need to do so.

Parents Chime In






You might not need to go through each scenario with your child. The scenarios are designed to give your child the opportunity to see a good example of what the language could look like when describing learning styles, strengths and weaknesses, and ways to explain their needs to teachers or other members of his or her support network. If you feel rusty on some of these topics, contact your child’s teacher to ask for help. Hopefully with the support that is in place through these activities and your child’s school, you will be able to understand how your child can become a self-advocate.

Expand Your Learning Profile Description

In the last section, you began a bubble map that gave you the chance to describe yourself as a learner. Now you get a chance to take that one step further. Use your bubble map from yesterday.

- For at least one of the green bubbles (strength), add a square-shaped extension that describes a study strategy that you can use that capitalizes on this strength.
- For at least one of the red bubbles (weakness), add a square-shaped extension that describes a strategy that helps to compensate for this limitation.
- For another red bubble, add a triangle-shaped extension describing an accommodation that the teacher offers (or could offer) that would help you be more successful in that class.

Here's a key if you need a visual to help you with this project.

- Green Circle – strengths 
- Red Circle – weaknesses 
- Green Square – study strategy that capitalizes on strength 
- Red Square – study strategy that compensates for weakness 
- Triangle – accommodations 

Have you accomplished today's objective?

Objective: The student will identify at least one strategy that he or she can use when working with difficult content or class environments. The student will describe and explain the rationale for at least one accommodation that helps him or her to succeed in academic settings.

If so, congratulations!

If not, review this lesson and use the "Digging Deeper" resources to help you respond to the questions throughout this lesson. Ask your parent to review this material with you.

Follow Up

Review with your parent or family member: You have learned a lot about yourself as you've gone through these lessons. Look back through some of the materials you've created throughout this process. Can you clearly tell your parent or family member the following things?

- Your goals
- Your learning styles
- Your strengths and weaknesses as they pertain to learning and studying
- Your accommodations
- Strategies you can use in difficult classes.

Digging Deeper: