Self Advocacy -

Learning to advocate for one’s needs is an important skill, and one that can never be started too early in life. Children who practice advocating for themselves will be better prepared to continue to do so as they get older and as their needs change. This is a critical component of the developmental process, and especially critical for individuals with one or more disabilities, including deaf children. Increasing self advocacy skills helps people have a better quality of life, a sense of empowerment, and feelings of well-being as they are making sure their needs are being met appropriately.

How can we as educators and parents, friends, and colleagues foster advocacy skills? We can start by recognizing that none of us are in this alone. Team work makes the dream work! We need each other along with members of community agencies (MCDHH, MRC, DDS, DCF, WCS, as well as doctors and many more) to collaborate. This provides students with many opportunities to practice advocating for themselves, explaining communication needs and requesting accommodations.

Start the process early. Allow children opportunities to make their own decisions and make mistakes. Help children set goals and action plans to achieve those goals. Create conditions where deaf children are expected to make decisions for themselves. Low expectations of individuals who receive special ed services are commonplace and do a disservice that can lead to a lack of independence and autonomy.

Individuals need to be able to understand their own abilities/struggles and how that affects communication in various environments. Knowing how to explain accommodations and communication needs, as well as collaborating on creative solutions is a necessary ingredient for problem solving and healthy relationships. We can encourage our children to explore and experiment to help them understand accommodations.

We can also provide them with tools to help them understand their legal rights. One way to do this is to have them participate in their IEP meetings by age 14 at the latest. They can also volunteer in the community and school-sponsored work experiences. And of course children should participate in family outings and social activities. Encouraging children to communicate for themselves and request accommodations in social outings is a crucial life skill and will help children develop relationships with hearing family and community members. Another great resource is to have role models who can share their experiences.
and offer support and advice to younger children learning to navigate self advocacy skills in a world that often disregards disabilities.

Children who set goals, develop action plans, and evaluate progress will learn valuable information about themselves. Increasing self advocacy skills helps children learn to make better decisions and to help others along the way. Making connections with other youth through school, mentor programs, family, and community opportunities will ensure that our students, our children will be better equipped to manage the responsibilities of adulthood.