

How to Advocate for Your Child at School

Step-by-step guidance for families supporting children with SEND, neurodivergence or SEMH needs

Advocating for your child does not mean being difficult. It means helping school understand what your child needs to learn, feel safe, communicate and belong. This article gives families a calm, practical route from noticing concerns through to preparing for meetings, asking for support and following up clearly.

Who this resource is for

Parents and carers who want to speak with school about learning, communication, behaviour, anxiety, sensory needs, attendance, emotional regulation, dyslexia, ADHD, autism, SEMH or wider SEND support.

The aim

- To help you feel more prepared before speaking to school.
- To keep the conversation child-centred and solution-focused.
- To support clear written communication, especially when emotions are high.
- To help you record what has been agreed and what should happen next.

A gentle reminder

You know your child in a way no one else does. School sees your child in a different environment. Good advocacy brings these two pictures together so support can be clearer and more consistent.

Step 1: Get Clear on What You Are Seeing

Start with patterns, not blame

Before contacting school, write down what you are noticing. This helps you move from a general worry to a clearer picture that school can respond to. Try to include what happens before, during and after the difficulty.

Home patterns

Meltdowns after school, refusal to go in, sleep disruption, tummy aches, masking, shutdowns, big emotions, exhaustion or distress around homework.

School patterns

Low confidence, avoidance, friendship difficulties, behaviour incidents, reduced work output, sensory overwhelm, poor organisation or difficulty following instructions.

Strengths

Interests, talents, preferred subjects, helpful adults, safe spaces, strategies that already work, and times when your child feels successful.

Triggers

Noise, transitions, unstructured times, changes, handwriting, reading aloud, group work, playground, uniform, lunch hall or unclear instructions.

Helpful phrase

“I am not looking to blame anyone. I am trying to understand the pattern so we can work together on what my child needs.”

Family notes before you contact school

Prompt	Notes
What is working well?	
What is becoming difficult?	
What support has been tried?	
What would help next?	
Who will do what, and by when?	

Step 2: Gather Evidence Gently

Small notes can make a big difference

Evidence does not have to be formal. It can include examples, screenshots of school messages, homework struggles, behaviour logs, medical letters, reports, your child's words, or a short diary of what happens over one or two weeks.

Type of evidence	Example	Why it helps
Child voice	"The classroom is too loud" or "I do not know where to start."	Shows the child's lived experience.
Home diary	After-school distress, sleep, anxiety, refusal, exhaustion.	Shows patterns that may not be visible in school.
School examples	Marked work, behaviour points, emails, attendance, reading records.	Links concerns to learning and wellbeing.
Professional input	Reports from paediatrician, OT, SALT, EP, GP or therapist.	Adds specialist observations and recommendations.
What works	Movement breaks, visual checklist, quiet space, chunked tasks.	Keeps the focus on support and solutions.

Keep it manageable

You do not need a huge file. A simple one-page summary is often more useful than a large bundle of information.

Step 3: Know Who to Speak To

Use the right route in school

Start with the class teacher, form tutor or pastoral lead if the concern is day-to-day. If your child may need additional support, ask to speak with the SENCO or SEND lead. For emotional wellbeing, attendance, safeguarding or SEMH needs, school may also involve pastoral staff, the designated safeguarding lead or external support services.

Concern	Good first contact	What to ask for
Learning difficulty	Class teacher and SENCO	A meeting to discuss barriers, support and next steps.
Anxiety or distress	Pastoral lead, class teacher and SENCO	A calm support plan and agreed check-ins.
Sensory overwhelm	Class teacher and SENCO	Reasonable adjustments and sensory-aware strategies.
Attendance concerns	Attendance lead, pastoral lead and SENCO	A supportive plan that explores underlying needs.
Bullying or friendship issues	Class teacher, head of year or pastoral lead	Clear recording, monitoring and follow-up.
EHCP concerns	SENCO and local authority SEND team	Review of provision, outcomes and evidence.

Helpful phrase

“Please could we arrange a meeting with the SENCO or appropriate member of staff to discuss what support may be needed and agree a clear plan?”

Step 4: Prepare for the Meeting

Go in calm, clear and child-centred

Meetings can feel emotional, especially when your child is struggling. A short preparation sheet can help you stay focused. Aim to leave the meeting with clear actions, timescales and a review date.

- Write down your top three concerns.
- Write down what your child says helps or makes things harder.
- Take examples, but keep them brief and relevant.
- Ask what school has already noticed or tried.
- Ask what support can start now, even while further evidence is gathered.
- Agree who is responsible for each action and when it will be reviewed.

Meeting tip

You can take someone with you for support, or ask for notes afterwards. It is also okay to say, “I need a moment to think about that,” or “Could you put that in writing so I can process it properly?”

Meeting preparation sheet

Prompt	Notes
What is working well?	
What is becoming difficult?	
What support has been tried?	
What would help next?	
Who will do what, and by when?	

Step 5: Ask for Support Clearly

From concern to practical action

It can help to ask for support in clear, practical terms. Instead of only saying what is going wrong, explain what would help your child access learning and feel safer in school.

Concern	Possible support to discuss
Difficulty starting work	Chunked instructions, a first-step prompt, example of finished work, visual checklist.
Overwhelm in noisy spaces	Quiet entry, ear defenders, lunch club, calm space, planned sensory breaks.
Emotional regulation	Trusted adult check-in, regulation plan, safe signal, recovery time after distress.
Reading or writing fatigue	Assistive technology, reduced copying, printed notes, extra processing time.
Transitions	Visual timetable, warning before changes, transition object, meet-and-greet at start of day.
Friendship or social communication	Structured group roles, adult-supported play, social understanding work, safe club.
Homework distress	Adjusted expectations, reduced volume, clear purpose, alternative ways to show learning.

Useful question

“What reasonable adjustments or SEN support can be put in place now, and how will we know if they are helping?”

Use child-centred language

Try “My child is communicating that something is difficult” rather than “My child is refusing.” This keeps the focus on unmet needs and support.

Step 6: Understand Key Support Terms

Plain-English explanations

Term	What it means in plain English
SEN support	Extra or different support provided by school when a child has special educational needs.
SENCO	The Special Educational Needs Coordinator. They help coordinate SEND support in school.
Graduated approach	A cycle often described as assess, plan, do, review. It means support should be planned, tried and reviewed.
Reasonable adjustments	Changes that reduce disadvantage for disabled pupils, such as extra support, aids, adapted approaches or changes to practice.
EHCP	An Education, Health and Care Plan for children and young people who need support beyond what is usually available through SEN support.
One-page profile	A short summary of what matters to your child, what people like about them, what helps and what makes things harder.

Step 7: Follow Up in Writing

Kind, clear and evidence-based

After a meeting, send a short email thanking staff and confirming what you understood was agreed. This creates a shared record and reduces the chance of misunderstandings.

Email template

Thank you for meeting with me today to discuss [child's name]. I appreciate the time taken to explore what may help. My understanding is that the agreed next steps are: 1) [action], 2) [action], 3) [review date]. Please let me know if I have misunderstood anything. I look forward to working together to support [child's name].

If things do not improve

If agreed support is not happening or your child's needs are escalating, ask for a review meeting. Keep your tone calm and factual. Explain what has changed, what has not worked, and what you are requesting next.

Review request template

I am writing to request a review meeting because [child's name] is still finding [area] difficult. Since our last meeting, we have noticed [brief examples]. Please could we review the current support plan, what has been implemented, and whether further assessment or additional support is needed?

Step 8: Keep Your Child Involved

Advocacy should include their voice

Children may not always have the words to explain what is happening. Give choices, use visuals, draw it out, or ask them to rate things. The aim is not to interrogate them, but to understand their experience.

Ask gently

“What part of the school day feels easiest?” “What part feels hardest?”
“Who helps you feel safe?”

Use scaling

“On a scale of 1 to 5, how hard is the lunch hall?” “What would make it one point easier?”

Offer choices

“Is it the noise, the people, the work, the time pressure, or something else?”

Notice behaviour

Behaviour can be communication. Look for patterns before assuming intent.

For children who mask

Some children appear fine in school and then release distress at home. This does not mean the difficulty is not real. It may mean school needs to understand the hidden cost of coping all day.

Advocacy Checklist

A quick page to print or save

- I have written down the main concern and examples.
- I have included my child’s voice where possible.
- I have noted strengths and what already helps.
- I have contacted the right member of staff.
- I have asked for a meeting or review in writing.
- I have taken notes or asked for written minutes.
- The actions, responsible person and review date are clear.
- I have followed up with a short confirmation email.
- I have kept copies of important emails, reports and plans.
- I know what the next step is if support is not working.

Useful Signposting

Where families can find more information

These links are provided for general information. Families should also check their local authority SEND Local Offer and speak with school about local processes.

- [SEND Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years - GOV.UK](#)
- [Children with special educational needs and disabilities - GOV.UK](#)
- [Disability rights in education - GOV.UK](#)
- [Reasonable adjustments and disabled pupils - Department for Education blog](#)

Final thought

You do not have to have all the answers before asking for help. Advocacy often starts with one calm sentence: “I am worried, and I would like us to work together to understand what my child needs.”