

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN ADVOCATE

How do you Advocate for Inclusive Education for your Child?

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Find ways to share what you know about your child.

02

Understand your child's rights and what the law requires.

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Know school staff and their responsibilities for your child.

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Communicate effectively and work positively with all school staff.

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Believe that your voice and your child's voice are important!

How Can I Work with Others to Include My Child?

Including children with disabilities in general education classes with children their own age is not just the law. It works! Research has shown over and over during the past 30 years that inclusion benefits children with disabilities. Some educators and families believe that inclusion is not an option for students with moderate or severe disabilities but there is much evidence that inclusion can - and does - work for children with all types of disabilities. Inclusion also benefits children without disabilities as well as the whole school environment.

Three decades of research have shown that family involvement significantly contributes to improved student outcomes related to learning and school success. Your participation and leadership are needed if your child is to be successfully included. You will need to work in partnership with teachers, administrators, support staff, and others to make inclusive education a reality for your child.

The word "advocate" means to give voice. It is the job of family members to speak up on behalf of their children. But if your child has special needs, the responsibility is even more important.



What Do Advocacy & Working Together Sound Like?

Sharing what you know about your child:

“Jake just spent his first overnight with his grandparents last week and he helped my dad paint a boat. He’s such a smart kid and we all believe he’ll eventually be able to be an independent and happy adult. That’s our goal for him.”

Understand your child’s right to an inclusive education:

“The inclusion we want for Christina is supported by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). It really can benefit the whole school - not just kids with special needs. It can help meet your school’s improvement goals too!”

Know the school staff and their responsibility for your child:

“Mrs. Garner, the speech and language therapist, has tried some new ways to help Benny learn new vocabulary. Let’s see if she will share the ones that work best for him with the general education teacher so Benny can use them in his science class.”

Communicate effectively and work positively with your school staff:

“I think you’re right that Kenyan needs to improve his reading. He enjoys reading about motorcycles, so that might motivate him to read more often. I’d really like to keep in touch regularly on how things are going. What way works best for you?”

Believe that your voice and your child’s voice are important:

“Aaliyah is able to talk about school for the first time. She is having a great year and I think we should invite her to be part of the IEP meeting. I believe she is able to answer some of the important questions herself.”

Your child’s needs should always be at the center of school-related conversations and decisions.

Partnerships for Peter

* Notice the steps Peter's parents took to advocate for him in **bold**.

Peter is an eight-year-old boy with autism and limited communication. From kindergarten through second grade Peter was in a classroom that served only children with disabilities. Toward the end of his second grade year his parents - Daria and Arturo - began to feel that Peter's language and social skills would develop more if he spent the day learning with children who did NOT have disabilities.

Daria and Arturo were concerned that the general education teacher could be overwhelmed by Peter's special needs. What could they, as parents, do to help the school support their son?

In April, **Daria and Arturo met with the school's principal, the special education teacher, and a third grade teacher** selected by the principal. The parents **shared their goals** for Peter's future and **what they had learned about the benefits of inclusion for children**. They wanted the school to consider Peter's abilities. They felt it would just take time for teachers and peers to understand his unique qualities and ways of learning.



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While Peter was still part of the varied second-grade special education classroom, **the teachers and parents began to discuss how the same supports could be provided for Peter in the third-grade general education class**. Daria and Arturo were ready to help with establishing new routines for Peter and **offered to help problem-solve** throughout the year.

Before the end of second grade, **Daria and Arturo met with Peter's IEP team**: the exceptional and general education teachers, the speech-language therapist, and the occupational therapist. During this meeting, Daria and Arturo agreed that Peter's daily needs could be met by the teachers, therapists, and peers. **They would all work to help Peter get adjusted** to his new class schedule and routines. **The team discussed ideas** for helping Peter learn what his peers would be learning. **They agreed to meet again two weeks after school started** to see how things were working.

Although things didn't always go as smoothly as everyone had planned, Peter made significant learning gains and acquired many new friends during his year in the general third-grade classroom.

When meeting with others to discuss your child's education, consider using the following strategy, to help keep the focus on your child.

The Empty Chair

- Place an empty chair within full view of all meeting participants.
- Envision your child sitting in the chair. Using your child's first name, describe his or her characteristics to the group.
- All the discussions and decisions made during the meeting must focus on your child and should be made in his or her best interest.
- People may agree or disagree about what is in his or her best interest, but they are reminded, by the chair, to keep your child as the focus of all decisions.

Although your child remains at the heart of the group's discussion, participants may find that many of their decisions may well reflect what's good for all children.



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Scan the QR code to check out our other F.A.C.T. Folios for a deeper look into inclusion!



The following references and websites have useful resources and/or training to help family members plan for inclusive education in partnership with their child's school.

Beach Center on Disability: www.beachcenter.org

PACER Center: www.pacer.org

Family Network on Disabilities: www.fndfl.org

Inclusive Schools Network: www.inclusiveschools.org

FL Diagnostic & Learning Resources System: www.fdlrs.org

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