

Developing Your Advocacy Skills

Advocacy and Being Part of a Team

Resource parents of children who have experienced trauma need finely tuned advocacy skills in order to ensure that their children receive all the services and opportunities they need to heal and thrive.

As you travel along on this journey, you may find that there will be social workers, other resource parents and support groups, lawyers, teachers, doctors, and others who can help in your advocacy efforts on behalf of your child. But no one will remain as committed or involved as you over the long haul. You have the potential to be your child's primary and best advocate.

To be an effective advocate, you must become informed. You must be assertive. You must be organized and keep accurate records. You will need to develop a sense of self-confidence and believe that you are on par with the "experts" with whom you interact.

The Self-Advocacy Cycle

Tony Apolloni of the California Institute on Human Services has identified a four-stage model that he calls the "self-advocacy cycle" for effective advocacy efforts:

1. **Targeting:** The process of identifying needs and the service agencies responsible to address these needs
2. **Preparing:** The process of getting ready to participate with service professionals in making decisions for helping your child
3. **Influencing:** The process of influencing decision makers within service agencies to adopt the desired approaches for addressing your child's needs
4. **Follow Up:** The process of checking to be certain that the agreements with service professionals are carried out. The following pages offer guidelines and tips to help you in each of these four advocacy stages as you parent a child who has experienced trauma.

Stage 1B Targeting

This step has two parts: (1) identifying your—or your child's—needs, and (2) identifying the service agencies available to address this need

Identify the Need

Start by identifying your—or your child's—basic need. For example: "I want to ensure that my child's mental health provider (therapist) is trauma-informed." Then consider everything that can have an impact on fulfilling that need, such as:

- The only health insurance my child will have is Medicaid.
 - The therapists that my former foster children worked with did not seem to be particularly trauma-informed, and the social service agency seems to only make referrals to that particular provider.
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Identify Service Agencies

Identify the providers in your area that you think are the best options for your child. For help in finding a provider, talk to parents in a resource parent group about their experiences and recommendations. Research as much as you can about trauma-informed services using the Web site and other materials provided the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (http://www.nctsnet.org/nctsn-assets/pdfs/tips_for_finding_help.pdf),

Stage 2. Preparation

Once you have identified several options, it's time to do more digging. Don't rule out any option until you've looked at it closely. Check out as many options as you can and compare the results thoroughly before making a decision. Some steps to take include:

- Gather brochures from various providers.
- Attend information nights or orientation sessions.
- Attend classes, workshops, open houses or other public awareness events.
- Ask each provider if you can talk to one or more of their clients.

Be sure to ask lots of questions. Important questions to ask may include:

- Who are the staff? Are they well trained? What is their experience with children and trauma, children in foster care? Do they seem enthusiastic and committed to their work?
- What are their timeframes for service? Do you use waiting lists or other means of determining when you will receive services?
- u What costs and fees are involved? Will you accept Medicaid? Have you had other foster children as clients, and what forms of payment were they able to negotiate with the agency (if they don't accept Medicaid)?
- What is their overall philosophy about child abuse, neglect, trauma, and foster care?
- How do they feel about older parents, single parents, or any other "descriptor" of your family?
- How do they view resource parents' role in the therapeutic process?
- What if you are not satisfied? What grievance procedures do they have in place?
- How willing and experienced are they at working with other agencies or providers such as the child's school?
- Are they comfortable working with both the child's biological family and resource family?

Know your rights: Every state has advocacy offices, legal aid services, offices for the protection of rights for the handicapped, etc. Use these services and learn your rights as a citizen and a client; then, you will not be intimidated by eligibility requirements at agencies.

Being part of a larger group can be quite an asset during the preparation stage. Other parents can provide you with a wealth of information, listening ears, valuable contacts, and advocacy clout when needed. Don't wait

until you are in a crisis or a state of desperation—establish your connection to the group before you need help. Consider the following:

- Local resource parent support groups (if there isn't one, consider starting one)
- Specialized groups for parents of children with special needs, such as United Cerebral Palsy or the Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC)

Stage 3. Influencing

It's important to develop a partnerships with service agencies or mental health workers in order to effectively work together to help your child. You will be most successful in your efforts if you view yourself as a partner with the professionals with whom you work. Steps you take early in the process to develop this partnership will pay off later. Once you have selected or been referred to providers you will interact with, do the following:

Build a relationship

- Don't only be the person who calls with a problem. Try to attend social gatherings, fund raising events, open houses, etc.
- Become a volunteer.
- Always be clear and pleasant when speaking about your needs.
- Learn names, especially the names of the receptionist and others with whom you will need frequent interactions.
- Stay in contact with all providers at least once a month, and more often when circumstances warrant*

Handle ourself like a rofessional

- Begin every interaction with either a positive statement or an empathy statement, such as: "I understand you have a large caseload or "The information in the packet you sent was so helpful . . e"
- Describe the problem using an "I" statement, not a "you" statement: "I am concerned about the length of time it is taking to get the initial assessment completed," rather than "You are taking too long to get me the information I asked for."
- E Ask for acknowledgment and clarification: "Do I have all the information straight? Is there more I need to know?"
- z Maintain an even voice tone, eye contact, and non-offensive body language.

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- Offer options and possible solutions: "If scheduling is an issue, would it help if I came to your office instead?" z Plan a time to follow up: "Can I call next Thursday to see where we stand?"
 - Always thank them for their time and end on a positive note.

Be accessible

Most social workers, social service, and mental health agencies are operating on limited resources and are stretched very thin. The more accessible you are, the better service you will get.

- Leave daytime phone numbers and alternatives (cell, etc.).
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- Attend all scheduled meetings and appointments, be on time.
- If you must miss an appointment, call in advance.
- Be flexible with your time; be willing to take an afternoon off from work, or be willing to travel outside of your community.

Be organized

- Write everything down, take good notes, and keep them with you.
- Keep copies of anything you mail or turn in.
- Make sure information you provide is legible and clean.
- Keep a log of all contacts including date and time, nature of contact (i.e., phone call, scheduled meeting, unplanned visit), names and titles of all involved, and any promises made.
- Follow up every verbal contact in writing; send a letter summarizing your phone conversation or the results of a meeting.
- When speaking to someone who does not have an answer for you, plan a specific time to call back to get the answer; do not wait to be called back.

Stage 4. Follow Up

Being an advocate is an ongoing process. Once you have identified an agency and established a partnership with the people working with your child, be sure to stay in frequent contact. If problems arise, be proactive in dealing with them.

- Increase the frequency of your communications.
- Draw upon the support of resource parent groups, the state foster parent association representative, and/or child advocacy organizations.
- Avoid "us" versus "them" conflicts; try to maintain the role of a partner because you are jointly working to solve a problem.....
- Move up the ladder one step at a time. If you have a problem with a caseworker that you are unable to resolve, go to that person's supervisor next—not all the way to the head of the agency.
- Use the formal grievance procedures available to you within the agency.

Once you have exhausted internal mechanisms, consider going to the power brokers in your state, such as legislators and the governor's office. Get ideas, guidance, and support on these steps from more experienced members of your parent support group.

As an advocate, there will be times when you will operate alone, advocating for specific services for your child. At other times your efforts will accomplish more and be more effective if you work with others by participating in resource parent groups and/or advocacy organizations. As you go through this process, be sure to celebrate your victories and let others know about what you have learned—share your knowledge.



There will be times when you will advocate for a service to be provided that already exists and to which you are clearly entitled. Other times, you will be advocating for (and even demanding) that a system (such as the social service system) create a service or program that does not currently exist in your community.

At times, you will work to see that existing laws and regulations are followed and your rights are being honored. At others times, you may band together with others and work to change laws or create new laws. Sometimes the changes involve budgets rather than laws.

At all times and in all situations, keep your goals clearly in mind. Continue to ask lots of questions, and never settle for answers that you do not understand or that are too vague to be helpful. Finally, remember these two important facts:

Advocacy is hard work—you can't give up and you can't sit back hoping others will do it for you.

There is always hope.

Adapted from: National Adoption Exchange. (1998/1999). Becoming your own adoption advocate: A guide for families. Families Across Michigan. December/January. Available at <http://www.mare.org/FAM/Archives/1998/D98J99.htm>
