

< Working with your child's teachers

# 8 Steps to Advocating for Your Child at School



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Have you ever wondered if you should—or can—speak up about something that's happening at school? When things aren't going well at school, you are your child's voice. You know your child's strengths, challenges, and interests. Advocating helps make sure your child has the support to thrive.

Here are eight tips to help you advocate for your child at school.

### **1. Understand what it means to advocate.**

You may feel like you have to be confident and know everything to advocate for your child. But “advocate” just means speaking up about your concerns.

You can also speak up in a way that's comfortable for you. You don't have to be loud or talk in front of a lot of people. You can advocate quietly and with just one person like your child's teacher.

### **2. Know it's OK to speak up.**

You might not see it as your place to get involved in your child's education. It might even feel like it's overstepping. But it's OK to speak up if you're worried. It's not disrespectful to share your concerns. Teachers want kids to do well. They know that families have a lot of information to share that can help.

### 3. Write down your thoughts.

It helps to write down what you want to talk about. If you need help, use [this parent-teacher conference worksheet](#) to organize your thoughts and think through what things are important to talk about.

Some people think better out loud. If that describes you, try recording what you're thinking on a smartphone or talk to a friend or family member who can take notes. Knowing what you want to say ahead of time can make the conversation easier.

### 4. Start by speaking with someone you trust.

If you've [built a good relationship](#) with your child's teacher, start the conversation there. [Send an email](#), a note, or a text, or make a call to find out when would be a good time to talk.

If talking to the teacher doesn't feel comfortable, look for someone else you trust to help you think through what to do. That could be an administrator, a counselor, or a librarian. You can also speak to another parent who has been through a similar situation. Just keep in mind that

other parents may have had an emotional or stressful experience, too.

Remember it's better to start with someone you trust, rather than not speak up at all. It'll also help you feel more confident when you do talk to the teacher or other school staff.

## **5. Ask as many questions as you need to.**

Make sure you understand what's happening at school, too. Ask about what kids this age are learning and if your child is learning it as easily as other kids. If you're worried about specific things, ask about them.

For instance, you can say, "My child seems to be really struggling with math. Every time there's math homework, he cries and says he's dumb. Is that typical?" Or, you could say, "I'm worried that reading takes too long for my child and she doesn't recognize simple words. Do you see that, too?"

## **6. Don't be afraid to show emotion—but be respectful.**

Speaking up about your child is emotional. It's hard to talk about what worries you, especially in front of strangers. It's OK to get emotional. It's even OK to cry. But try not to make things personal or lash out. It makes it harder for people to help you when they're feeling attacked.

Most teachers and school staff are trying their best and want to help, even if you don't all always agree. Practice phrases you can use to defuse tense situations. And

consider bringing a friend or relative who can take notes for you and help you stay organized and on track.

## 7. Ask about extra help for your child.

Find out what to do if your child is falling behind. Don't be afraid to ask about what help is available. You can also ask for a free school evaluation to get a better sense of your child's skills and needs. The results will be used to see what kind of support and help your child needs in school.

It's a good idea to put any requests in writing. Keep copies of them and use a communication log to keep track of who you spoke to and when.

If your child has an IEP, learn about the school's legal obligations to you and your child. You can also speak with your local Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) if you need help better understanding these rights. The PTI also has parent advocates who can help you in speaking up for your child.

## 8. Keep speaking up.

Advocating for your child isn't a one-time thing. You'll probably need to keep doing it. But it's a good idea to learn how often is too often to contact your child's teacher.

There are also other times and ways to get updates. For example, PTA meetings can provide insight into what's happening in the school and about other resources that could affect your child.

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