

Speak Up.

*Self-
advocacy;*
a valuable life
skill for parents
to encourage

BY MICHELLE KELLEY, LCSW

There is an old saying: “Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish, feed him for a lifetime.” Learning to self-advocate is a key step in becoming an adult and an important life skill for your teen. Parents play an important role in helping children acquire this skill set; no one is born with this ability, yet everyone needs it.

One day your teen will be grown and out of your home, and you will want them to speak up for themselves, ask for their needs to be met, and pursue their own goals with confidence. Our job as parents is crucial in helping teens become resilient and capable young adults.

What is self-advocacy?

Self-advocacy skills can mean many things but, in general, it refers to speaking up for yourself and taking appropriate action. It is equally important young adults know how to identify and appropriately express their emotional needs (disappointments, frustrations, anger, etc). Individuals may take charge of their lives by learning to assist themselves, maximize their strengths, and minimize their weaknesses.

How self-advocacy benefits teens

Juveniles with the ability to self-advocate will have improved self-image, stronger confidence, greater social connections, stronger communication skills, and a greater ability to plan and problem solve.

Tips for parents

More is caught than taught in the parenting world. Role modeling this skill is key. Do not expect them to figure out these skills independently. So if self-advocating is something you struggle with, it would behoove you to get some support in developing this skill set. I always recommend parents are honest with their teens in discussing their own strengths and weaknesses, as the children benefit from knowing their parents are human also. As always, remember patience is

a virtue; some adolescents are more shy or resistant, depending on their personality type. In these cases partnering with your teen is highly recommended.

Participating in basic decisions provides the youth an opportunity to practice skills they will need as they approach adulthood. Teens with a greater ability to communicate and negotiate within their friend groups are well on their way to becoming confident, mature young adults.

Think about the last time you tried to select a movie with a group of like-minded people. Even for adults, it's not quick and easy. Next time involve your teen in the decision-making; have them suggest where the next family vacation or family outing should be. Have your child compose a persuasive argument for why a specific destination was chosen, how it will work with the family budget, and if others in the household will comply.

While your youngster is still at home, encourage practice; have them speak up in doctor's appointments, or when ordering at a restaurant. Giving them full permission to make mistakes is crucial, as this will allow them space to experiment and will ultimately increase confidence.

Look for opportunities to ask your teen open-ended questions about our society, such as: "Why do you believe in (girls' education, climate

change, increasing the minimum wage, etc)?" Such conversations allow teens to formulate ideas and respectfully explain their thoughts.

Being independent doesn't mean tackling every challenge alone; teens must learn to know when to ask for assistance. If there is a specific issue which your adolescent must handle, they need to be able to

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effectively communicate their needs, questions, or confusion about the issue.

Where can teens practice skills respectfully?

HOME. Encourage your teen to speak up, share their ideas and opinions, and yes, even disagree with their parents. This can and should be done with respect. I hear many of my teen clients say they cannot speak up to a parent or a teacher. I explain to them the difference between speaking up and talking back. Speaking up is a good thing and we want our teens to do this. Talking back implies disrespect.

SCHOOL. Teach your child to self-advocate with their teacher, coach, or guidance counselor. For example, you may need to role play with them on how they would ask their teacher for homework clarification or extra credit. Talking with coaches can be particularly challenging in high school. Suggest your teen seek out another adult (teacher

or counselor) with whom they can discuss their concerns.

FRIENDS. I work with many teens who do not know how to self-advocate with their friends. Girls struggle with this more than boys. Generally, girls are more conflict avoidant and tend more toward people-pleasing. Children should be able to assert their needs with their friends. This starts early with a child speaking up as to what they want to do or talk about. We especially want our teens to be able to self-advocate in their personal relationships; they need to be able to say NO and to know where to draw the line, especially while dealing with another individual's emotions (anger, disappointment, frustrations).

Research indicates there is a great benefit for individuals when they know how to initiate face-to-face communication, rather than rely solely on technology based communication. This generation faces a greater challenge with interpersonal communication because they are being raised in a technology saturated world. This can be a deficit in their skill set as they enter college, begin their careers, and experience personal relationships. Those with strong interpersonal communication skills will have an advantage.

As with all important life lessons, self-advocacy starts in the home. Remember this is a journey which will have its ups and downs. There is no better feeling to a parent than to successfully launch your teen into their future. Blast off! ❖

About the **AUTHOR**

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