

SELF-ADVOCACY

Self-advocacy is learning to speak up on your behalf and ask for what you need. It is learning to take charge and be more independent. It builds self-confidence. Confident students feel better about themselves, take more risks, ask for the help and clarification they need and consequently do better in school and in life.

Studies of highly successful adults with learning difficulties have identified the ability to self-advocate as an important factor contributing to success both in post-secondary education and in the workplace.

As students enter the higher grades it becomes increasingly important that they are able to express their needs in a positive way as they are expected to be more independent as learners.

Barriers to Self-Advocacy

Students with learning disabilities and/or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) often lack the ability to articulate personal strengths and needs clearly and appropriately. This may be a result of expressive language difficulties, weak social skills or lack of practice in describing their needs. Students who are not skilled at self-advocacy often say things like:

- *“You talk too fast,” instead of, “I am finding it difficult to listen in class.”*
- *“You make the tests too hard,” instead of, “I find it hard to show what I know on tests.”*
- *“You say what’s for homework too fast and I can’t get it down,” instead of, “I have difficulty knowing what to do for homework.”*

Since they often have limited confidence in their abilities and low self-esteem, they are reluctant to ask questions in class or to request extra assistance. They don’t want to be thought of as “stupid” or “disruptive”.

Programming for students with learning disabilities and/or AD/HD must support the development of self-advocacy skills.

Three Steps to Self-Advocacy

1. Know yourself as a learner.
2. Know what supports you need to be successful.
3. Communicate your needs appropriately.

Strategies

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Below are a number of helpful classroom strategies followed by tools to build awareness, understanding and self-advocacy skills for students with learning disabilities and/or AD/HD. While this understanding and skills are critical for students with special needs, all students benefit from an increased awareness of themselves as learners.

HELP STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THEIR LEARNING STRENGTHS AND NEEDS

- Talk with students about the concept of learning disabilities and/or AD/HD in general and their own strengths and needs in particular.
- Explain to students that everyone has differences in their abilities. Everyone has strengths and needs. Their particular learning disability and/or AD/HD does not define who they are as a person.
- Provide students with resources to view or read that broaden their understanding of learning disabilities and/or AD/HD. Perhaps a research assignment could focus on these topics.
- Empathize with their difficulties. Focus on finding solutions rather than criticizing them.
- Model the vocabulary needed to describe their strengths and needs (e.g. “You seem to remember better when you get a chance to ‘see’ the information”.)
- Provide students with terminology they can use to describe their disability to others.

Terminology	Older Student	Younger Student
Learning Disability	I take in, remember or express information differently than other people my age. This can affect my ability to learn.	I learn differently from other kids. I am really good at some ways to learn and other ways give me a lot of trouble.
Reading Disability	Some people refer to this as “dyslexia”. It is a processing difficulty that affects my reading, writing, etc.	I have trouble with reading (describe....).
Processing Difficulty	I have a difficulty in the way I take in and interpret information from my senses.	I am different from other kids in how I take in and use stuff I hear, see and touch.
AD/HD	I have difficulty with paying attention, focusing, controlling my impulses or staying still when I need to.	I have a problem with paying attention, sitting still when I need to or controlling myself.
Writing Disability	I have difficulty with written work.	I have a problem with writing.

- Give students a checklist to help them identify their strengths and challenges. They may need your assistance in accurately reflecting their profile.
 - Strengths
 - I am good at expressing myself verbally.
 - I am very artistic.
 - I have good computer skills.
 - Challenges
 - I have a hard time with organization and planning bigger assignments.
 - I cannot screen out sounds and movements around me, like someone moving or a clock ticking.
 - I sometimes have a short fuse, and I often react impulsively.
 - I have a difficult time taking notes.
 - I find it difficult to remember what I heard in class.
- Have students prepare a presentation about themselves as learners. This could be particularly effective as they transition to a new school year or setting. It can provide a framework for communicating their strengths and needs (including appropriate supports) to new teachers.

HELP STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THE SUPPORTS THEY NEED

- Involve students in identifying their goals. Students' input and involvement should increase as they proceed through the grades.
- Involve students in selecting and evaluating assistive technology/strategies.
- Provide opportunities for making plans and choices. The following checklist may help students articulate what would work for them.
 - What Helps Me Learn
 - Chunk long-term assignments. I need these “chunks” on a daily and weekly basis.
 - Illustrate information with: charts, timelines and other visuals.
 - Give me a reading guide before I start.
 - Let me demonstrate my knowledge in ways that work best for me.

HELP STUDENTS COMMUNICATE THEIR NEEDS APPROPRIATELY

- Model and teach appropriate self-advocacy skills. Self-advocacy skills need to be demonstrated, role-played, practiced and evaluated. Extensive guidance needs to be provided in the middle school/junior high years with greater expectations for independence in the high school years.
- Help students to prepare for meetings, conversations with instructors, or other situations in which they may be involved in planning their educational future. Model and role-play appropriate interactions.
- Start with small goals (e.g., asking a teacher for an accommodation) and gradually increase student responsibility as they gain experience (e.g., being involved in setting goals and identifying support).
- A very important part of educational decision making for students with learning disabilities and/or AD/HD is setting appropriate goals. Students themselves should be actively involved in this process and taught ways to make goals tangible and realistic.

For Further Learning

Alberta Learning. (2002). *Unlocking potential: key components of programming for students with learning disabilities*. Edmonton: Alberta Learning. Retrieved February 12, 2013, from <http://education.alberta.ca/media/511999/unlocking.pdf>

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LearningLinks Resource Centre. (n.d.). *LearningLinks Resource Centre*. Retrieved February 12, 2013, from <http://www.learninglinkslibrary.ca>

Youth to Youth. (n.d.). *Youth to Youth*. Retrieved February 12, 2013, from <http://www.youth2youth.ca/>

Tools

The following templates can be used by students to help them identify and communicate their needs:

- High School Student Checklist
- Elementary/Middle School Student Checklist
- Keys to My Success – Student Checklist
- Request for Help
- Action Plan

High School Student Checklist

- I have spoken to all my teachers about my LD and/or AD/HD.
- I am using a daily/weekly/monthly planner to keep well organized.
- I attend, and speak up at meetings with my parents and teachers.
- I am asking questions in class and after school.
- I have developed good friendships.
- I know how to use the library, resource room and computer lab at my school.
- My binders and notebooks are well organized.
- I have learned strategies to improve my study skills.
- I know my strengths as a learner and use them when I am in the classroom and when I study.
- I know that I have many talents and I see the positive side of having a LD and/or AD/HD.
- I have a tutor for the subject(s) that I find difficult.
- I have access to the technology I need.

Eaton, H., Coull, L., & Group, L. (2000). *Transitions to high school: self-advocacy handbook for students with learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorder*. Vancouver, B.C.: Eaton Coull Learning Group, Ltd..

Junior High School Student Checklist

STRENGTHS

- I am good at expressing myself verbally.
- I am very artistic.
- I have good computer skills.
- Other _____

LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

- Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD).
- Language: Phonetic Memory (spelling).
- Written expression.
- Reading.
- Other _____

WHAT HAPPENS TO ME IN THE CLASSROOM

- I have a hard time with the organization and pacing of long-term assignments.
- I cannot screen out sounds and movements around me like someone moving or a clock ticking.
- I sometimes have a short fuse, and I often react impulsively.
- I have a difficult time taking notes.
- Other _____

WHAT WOULD HELP ME IN THE CLASSROOM

- Chunk long-term assignments. I need these “chunks” on a daily and weekly basis.
- Balance lectures with visual delivery: charts, timelines, mind maps, etc.
- Give me a reading guide before I start.
- Let me demonstrate my knowledge and show what I know.
- I do my best when I have more time.
- I do better with oral tests.
- I need more time to complete tests.
- Other _____

Developed by CanLearn Society, 2012.

Elementary/Middle School Student Checklist

- I know what kind of LD and/or AD/HD I have.
- I can describe my LD and/or AD/HD to my teacher.
- I ask for help when I need it.
- I am asking questions in class.
- I have started to take on more difficult tasks in school.
- I hand in all my homework on time.
- I am proud of myself and don't let others tease me.
- My calendar, binder and notebooks are organized.
- I have learned new ways to study for tests.
- I make an effort to build good friendships.
- I have a tutor for the subject(s) that I find difficult.
- I have gone to my new school and talked to my teachers.
- I am learning new strategies and using accommodations.

Eaton, H., Coull, L., & Group, L. (2000). *Transitions to high school: self-advocacy handbook for students with learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorder*. Vancouver, B.C.: Eaton Coull Learning Group, Ltd..

Keys to My Success – Student Checklist

Name _____ Date _____

Read each statement and place a checkmark in the first column if you already do this (I do this well) or place a checkmark in the second column if it is something that you would like to work on (My Goal).

Key strategies that help me to be successful in school	I do this well	My Goal
I can describe my strengths or what I can do well.		
I know what some of my weaknesses are or what I have difficulty with.		
I set goals about what areas I want to work on and improve.		
When I am stuck or not sure what to do, I ask for help.		
I try to contribute my ideas and ask questions during class discussions.		
I hand in my homework and assignments on time.		
I try to challenge myself.		
I work hard in class to complete my assignments.		
I focus my attention when the teacher is giving instructions.		
I am proud of my accomplishments.		
I keep my desk organized.		
I keep my notebooks and duotangs organized.		
I bring my agenda to school every day.		
I use my agenda to keep track of homework.		

Developed by Karen Vavra, Calgary Learning Centre, 2003.

Request for Help

Dear _____

(Teacher's Name)

These are the things that I am having trouble with:

Understanding new concepts and skills

Knowing what my homework is

Getting my homework done

Taking notes

Showing what I know on tests

Completing assignments and projects

Other _____

Could we please meet to discuss possible strategies?

Date of Meeting: _____

Student Signature: _____

Agreed upon strategies: _____

Teacher Signature: _____ Student Signature: _____

Action Plan

Subject: _____

Student: _____

Teacher: _____

Target/Goal: _____

Strategies I will try: _____

CHECKING MY PROGRESS

What has worked: _____

What I will try next: _____

