



Thinking Ahead

Learn how to advocate for your child at school



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Available online at www.ddwa.org.au/resources

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Becoming Proactive and Tips for Talking to Teachers

Advocating for your child is an ongoing process, not a one-shot fix. You will need to become **proactive**, **knowledgeable** and at times to be **creative** in looking for solutions. Building your confidence and knowledge will help you be more effective.

Becoming Proactive

- **You are an expert.** You know your child better than anyone else. You may rely on other professionals for information or advice but **you** are the one who holds the long term picture. And **you** will have to guide your child's education, whether that is in a school or as a home educator. **You** will need to develop a plan and continue to adjust it over time. Even if you enlist the help of other professionals, **you** will be the one who has to do the day-to-day work.
- **Make the best decision you can.** It's a natural thing to worry about '**getting it right**'. Focus instead on 'doing your best'. Make the best decision you can with the knowledge and information you have available.
- **Trust your intuition.** Pay attention to what your intuition tells you, it is a strong and reliable guide. Your intuition is actually a very rapid assessment of options. If you have a niggling feeling that there is more you need to know, or something is not sitting comfortably, you are probably right. On the other hand, if you feel strongly about a course of action, or the need to make something a priority at this point in time, then it is very likely to be worth pursuing.
- **Build your confidence**
- √ **Remind yourself of what you have already achieved.**
It is important to notice and celebrate your successes.
- √ **Set a goal and work towards it.**
- √ **Watch your self-talk.** Replacing negative self-talk with more positive alternatives will help you stay on track.
- √ **Be willing to work as a Team.**
TEAM = Together Everyone Achieves More
- √ You don't have to do it all alone. *'It takes a village to raise a child'*



Building Positive Partnerships

One of the most important things you can do to smooth the advocacy paths is to build positive relationships with teachers.

- **Become known to the teacher in positive ways.** Look for opportunities to help out in the classroom.
- **Build trust.** Show an interest in the teacher as a person. Believe they have the child's best interests at heart regardless of whether you think they are doing the 'right' thing for our child.
- **Say Thank you.** Thank the teachers for the little things they do and try. Let teachers know you appreciate their efforts, even if you didn't get quite the result you hoped for.
- **Remember teachers have lives too.** Avoid overloading them with reading or requests. Highlight the important sections of anything you want them to read or notice.

Tips for Talking to Teachers

- Teachers are busy; they have a classroom full of children with a diverse range of needs.
- **Make a time to talk.** Always. That way you can have their full attention. Avoid catching the teacher in the minutes before school begins or as they are on their way to a meeting.
- **Approach meetings as willing partner.** Reassure the teacher that you support them. Look for win-win solutions. Don't be afraid to make suggestions.
- **Don't wait until a little problem becomes a big one.** Discuss issues as they come up. Small things are easier to resolve.
- **Bring a positive attitude to discussions.** Assume every position a teacher takes is a genuine attempt to address the concerns of each side and benefit the child.
- **Be diplomatic.** Be honest, open and genuine with teachers. Choose your words carefully and use positive language.
- **Remember to listen.** Communication is a two way process so pay close attention to what the teacher has to say.
- **Chocolate can work wonders.** Try the 'chocolate frog thank you', attaching a chocolate frog to a note acknowledging things that are going well. Teachers will be more willing to listen when you need to talk about problems if they feel you appreciate their efforts.



- **If things are tense, bring food that smells good.** It not only gives you something to do with your hands, it also communicates a sense of caring. And the delicious aroma can also alleviate tension.

Paperwork and Preparing a Profile of your Child

Information is Power

- **Become well informed** about which ever disability you are dealing with. Know what it means, how it looks, what to expect.
- **Build up your knowledge of what is reasonable to ask for** or expect in the way of interventions for your particular child.
- **Learn what the research says** so you can recognise the myths and misconceptions and counter those with factual information.
- **Print off copies of articles which you find interesting.** Highlight anything relevant. Use sticky notes to mark pages to come back to and make notes in the margins.
- **Keep list of books you read** and the publication details, so you can find them again later.
- **Think and clarify**, rather than simply accept what you are told or read. Parents hold special knowledge and can often see patterns that other professionals might not notice. This means parents may be the best at breaking new ground or generating research questions.

Managing the Paperwork

As advocacy is an ongoing process keeping good records is important. It will **save you time** in the longer term, **help you see the bigger picture** and also **build your credibility** when you are meeting with schools. Keeping records helps you see what has worked and what hasn't.

Set up 3 files

1. **Reading and Research.** Store any articles you have printed off and the list of any books you have read. Colour code articles by topic so you can find specifics again later.
2. **Paperwork relating to your child.** File copies of IQ test results, reports and recommendations from other specialists or professionals, learning styles and interest inventories in here. **Add a photograph of your child to the front of your file** to help remind everyone you are talking about a real person. Add a page where you record the **school your child attended and the name of their teacher** for each year level. Decide whether the keep copies of your child's school reports in this file, or somewhere else.
3. **Meetings and communications.** Keep copies of **all** correspondence relating to your child, even if you do not think it is significant at the time. Include records of **all meetings or discussions** about your child whether they are **face to face, over the phone or by email.** Set up email folders and keep all electronic communication about your child from school or professionals in these folders.

*** Date all documents and file in chronological order.



Preparing a profile for your child

There are four main questions which you can use to help you gather relevant information about your child.

1. What is your child capable of?

IQ test information can provide insights into your child's intellectual potential, as well as clues into the way they learn and any challenges that they might face. Ideally an IQ test should be administered individually by a psychologist with a sound knowledge of which ever condition your child presents with.

The Full Scale score provides only part of the picture, so you need to make sure you also have Factor scores and Subtest scores (if not, request them) as they provide the most useful information. Ask the psychologist for any other observations, the sort of tasks your child did particularly easily, or found difficult.

You might also find checklists helpful in putting together a picture of your child. The more comprehensive the better, especially if they provide an opportunity to include an anecdote about the way a characteristic is demonstrated in your child.

2. At what level are they currently functioning?

School tests may not really tell you this, especially if your child achieves at a high level. A high score on a test tells you your child knows **that** content, but doesn't tell you anything about what they might know at a level **beyond** that test. In this case you will need **above level testing** to find the limit of a child's current skills.¹

It is also important to consider whether other factors may interfere with your child being able to show their ability on a school test. If there are handwriting, vision, attention, processing or other difficulties, you will need to find a way to gain the information that provides a level playing field for them. Not testing well doesn't necessarily mean they can't do it, or don't know.

3. What are their learning strengths?

Copies of class tests, year level testing, NAPLAN results and school reports will help you plot out the child's **strengths**. In which subjects does your child do best? Are there any areas where their performance is at a very different level from their general achievement? Compile anecdotes that provide insight into your child's strengths or the things they do with ease, especially if these are not something they have a chance to demonstrate at school. (These strengths should be the focus of planning for your child, not just weaknesses)

Include information about any areas of **weakness** as well. Reports from an Occupational Therapist, Speech Therapist or other specialists should be included in your file. Their recommendations will help you in planning what your child needs.

Interests can provide valuable information too. Knowing what they are though can be valuable especially when there is an area of weakness. You will find a number of interest inventories online. A couple are mentioned at the end of these notes.²

4. How to they learn best?

Parents are actually better able to answer this question than schools. **You are the expert** with useful information gathered over the years from watching your child.

Think about how your child approaches learning something new, perhaps a physical skill, something technology related, or a topic they are passionate about at the present time. Does your child prefer to work the floor or a table? Do they like to become immersed in a topic or just 'sample'?

4. How to they learn best? (cont.)

Do they prefer to absorb information visually? By reading? Or by figuring it out?

If you aren't sure, try using a Learning Styles Inventory such as the Dunn and Dunn Learning Styles Inventory³ for children from 5 years of age to adult. It will give you information about your child's relative preference for visual, auditory or kinaesthetic modes of learning, along with their preference for a global or analytical approach, insights into the optimum temperature, lighting conditions, time of day and seating that suits them best, at the current time. Some of these preferences do change over time, but knowing what works best now is a good place to start.



Other things to include

- **Social interactions** – how does your child interact one on one? In small groups? In large groups? With children of the same age? Older or younger children?
- **Sensitivities and Over-excitabilities.** Some nervous systems respond more strongly than usual to stimuli and these 'over excitabilities' can show up as increased sensitivity, awareness and intensities in one of five areas: **psychomotor** (physical), **sensual**, **imaginational**, **intellectual** and **emotional**. Lesley Sword from Gifted Creative Services has an *Over-excitabilities Checklist* on her website⁴ (link at the end of this Fact Sheet) which is a good place to start. If you feel this applies to your child, include information about this in the notes about your child.
- A list of the **books** your child likes to read (with notes about how often they read)

¹You can learn more about IQ testing and what the results tell you in *The Beginner's Guide to Life on the Bright Side* by Derrin Cramer, where a whole section is devoted to understanding IQ testing. *The Beginner's Guide to Life on the Bright Side* is available from Thinking Ahead www.thinkingahead.com.au/Resources/purchase_resources.htm

²*Interest Inventories:* Renzulli Learning incorporate an "Interest-a-lyzer" into their program which can be accessed at home or through school. For more information go to www.renzullilearning.com. Professor Karen Rogers includes a very good Interest Inventory in book *Re-forming Gifted Education*, published by Great Potential Press in 2002. You can find out more about this book at www.greatpotentialpress.com/re-forming-gifted-education

³Dunn and Dunn "*Learning Styles Inventories*" are available for students aged 5 years to adult. At the end of the assessment you can access a comprehensive report along with examples of what each preference means and further information about each of the aspects covered in the test, for around US\$5 per child. More information is available from their website www.learningstyles.net.

⁴Lesley Sword's "*Over-Excitability Checklist*" can be found on the Gifted Services website at www.giftedservices.com.au/handouts/Over-Excitability%20Checklist.doc

Problem Solving Styles and Persuasion

A 'problem' isn't necessarily something to be avoided. Thinking in terms of a **concern** helps you act before a little 'problem' becomes a big one. A 'problem' can be an opportunity for change, or for learning.

Everyone has a unique problem solving style in the same way we have a preferred hand. Understanding your preferences helps you to draw on your strengths and recognise where another person is coming.

Research at the Centre for Creative Learning¹ has identified three Problem Solving Dimensions, each of which is a **continuum** between two opposite styles. Your problem solving style is the result of where you fall on each of the three dimensions

- Orientation to Change – Explorer to Discoverer
- Manner of Processing – External to Internal
- Ways of Deciding – Person to Task.

There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to approach problem solving and there are risks and benefits associated with each style.



Orientation to Change

The **Explorer** seeks to break new ground, thriving on venturing into uncharted territory. Efforts to generate new and unique options can open up new directions, but structure and rules may feel confining.

The **Developer** considers the diverse elements or ideas in a situation and organises, synthesises, refines and enhances them, shaping them towards a useful outcome. Developers are comfortable working in well-structured situations and within rules, they may hold tight to ideas, finding it difficult to let them go in favour of new possibilities.

Manner of processing

If you have an **External style** of processing you gain energy from talking and sharing ideas, so you work best with others where you can readily share, refine and build on ideas on the go. You prefer to move around when working and prefer a quick pace, pressing for action.

Someone with an **Internal** style on the other hand prefers to consider ideas thoroughly before sharing them with others, and prefers action that follows careful thought.

Ways of Deciding

If you have a **Person** style you will give greatest weight to judgements about the impact on people, their feelings and harmony in relationships.

Someone with a **Task** style looks first at choices and decisions that are logical and that they can justify. Standards, quality issues, results and outcomes are important to them.

Being Assertive

Being proactive requires a degree of assertiveness. This does not mean being pushy and insistent. It does mean communicating directly, in a thoughtful way that takes into account the needs and feelings of others.

Assertiveness has both short and long term advantages. You are more likely to build respect, maintain a good relationship **and** get the results you want if this is your primary mode of communication.

An assertive person:

- Speaks clearly and without guilt
- Is self-confident
- Is well informed and well prepared for meetings
- Communicates effectively
- Keeps good records
- Is positive and strong
- Persists

You are **not being assertive** if you beat around the bush, feel guilty for speaking up, apologise, agree just to keep the peace, act too hastily or leave it all to others.

Being passive might avoid unpleasantness in the short term but ultimately it leads to frustration, disappointment or anger and does not achieve your goals.

Effective Communication

The way you communicate will have a big impact on your success. Different situations will require different approaches, however, whether communication is face to face, via letter or email, the same basic rules apply.

- √ Keep calm and avoid being too emotional
- √ Be assertive, taking into account the needs and feelings of others. Use a friendly tone, be respectful.
- √ Avoid the blame game at all costs, and be aware that blame could be hidden in what you say.
- √ Be as specific as possible. Refer to behaviours but avoid referring to personal characteristics or personalities.
- √ Remember to listen, communication is a two-way process
- √ Choose the time for the meeting carefully. Choose a time that suits **you** as well as the teacher.
- √ Practice what you want to say, make sure you are convinced. Then take on the role of Devil's Advocate and consider arguments that might be put forward. Prepare how you will counter those.



Instead of saying:

This is how it should be

You make me feel.....

You don't understand

You're wrong!

Try saying:

I would like, or I want...

When you did..... I felt...

Let me explain

Permit me to clarify

Use the Research about Persuasion

'Let's look at it this way'

Word your point so that it leads people to think about the issues in a way that is advantageous to you. Be aware though that negative information often has a more powerful influence than positive messages so use it carefully. Use anecdotes to tell your child's story where you can.

Less is more

Research has shown that the more reasons someone is asked to think of in support of an idea, the less value each of those ideas has. This means asking someone to come up with all the reasons why something is a **good** idea could backfire. On the other hand, if the school is not very receptive, ask them to come up with as many reasons as they can in support of their position and they may not appear to be such a barrier after all.

Style matters as much as substance

How you say it matters as much as **what** you say. Using hesitant phrases including: 'I mean', 'you know' or 'ummmm' too often, will reduce the power and credibility of what you have to say and you will be seen as less convincing.

Tap the Emotional Connection

We need to feel that something is relevant to us or affects us or someone important to us in order to be convinced. If you can find a way to engage the teacher's emotions, you will be a more effective advocate. Once you have aroused their emotions you need to emphasise what is not working in the current situation **and** offer them a way to remedy the situation for the message to be most persuasive.

Agree with them first

Nothing makes us feel better than someone telling us we are right. Be prepared to let the other person know that you respect their opinion and reassure them that what you are asking will benefit **both** parties. You are aiming for a win-win situation so pointing out how it will benefit them is a step in the right direction.



¹If you would like to read a little more about Problem Solving Styles developed at the Centre for Creative Learning, you will find some information at www.creativelearning.com/problem-solving-styles/about-problem-solving-styles

Planning and Prioritising

Planning

This is perhaps the most difficult part of the process of advocating for your child. While it is tempting to hand over responsibility to teachers at this point, figuring they are the experts, remember **you** are an expert regarding your child.



- **What is your overall goal?** This should act as your reference point for all the decisions you will make.
 - **What are your specific shorter term goals?** What do you want your child to gain during the year?
 - **Think broadly** - thriving encompasses social and emotional aspects as well as academics and the physical domain (and probably spiritual too) and happens involves home as well as school.
- **Do you have enough information** or need help from other professionals?
 - **Focus on strengths.** It is often easier to see weaknesses and it is tempting to focus on fixing these before attending to strengths but the reality is that the opposite may actually be more effective.
 - **What is reasonable in your school setting?** Ask yourself *'What can reasonably be done, given the resources, knowledge and willingness of those involved?'* Not everything you read or learn about in books or resources will be 'reasonable' within your school setting, although sometimes it only requires a shift of attitude for it to be.
 - **Will it work for your child?** Consider how well recommended interventions might work for **your** child. Their sensitivities, weaknesses, personality or your own personal and family priorities may mean a suggested option might not be right in your situation.

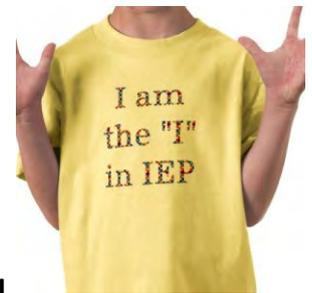
Prioritise

- **Decide on your main priority, and why.** Choose just **one or two things** that you think are **most important** at this time. Leave further priorities for a later discussion. The teacher will (hopefully) see the difference these initial changes can make and be willing to build on this success with further modifications a little later.
- **Be realistic.** You are looking for a sustainable, win-win situation, rather than simply asking the teacher to feel they are doing more work.
- **Be prepared to be flexible** if necessary to reach your goal
- **Pick your battles wisely.** Some may not be worth fighting (just now)

Effective Education Plans

An Individual Education Plan should be a **living document** recording **what** has been tried, **when** and **by whom**. Each new entry should add to what has been recorded before so it documents **all** the various accommodations or interventions indicating how successful they were, or were not, over a period of time.

- ✓ It should be handed on from class to class as the child moves through the school system. Having a written record avoids time wasted at the start of the year, provides continuity and allows the child to continue from where they left off, with successful strategies already in place.
- ✓ An IEP should be developed in conjunction **with** you and **you** should contribute to the current priorities on which it focuses.
- ✓ You should **sign it** and **keep your copy on file**. If a copy isn't offered, **ask for one**.
- ✓ The IEP should be reviewed at least every term. Feedback should be shared between home and school during the time the Education Plan is in place.



To be effective an Individual Education Plan should

- ✓ **Modify** by indicating **what** is to happen, **how often** and **with whom**. The modifications should be specific strategies or tasks **tied to the priority goal** which has been decided upon by the teachers **and** parents. The modifications should primarily address the child's **strengths** but can also focus on weaknesses. It is **not** appropriate to focus solely on weaknesses, leaving the strengths out of an Education Plan until such time as the weaknesses are 'fixed'.
- ✓ **Measure**. In order to review progress you need to be able to measure how successful a specific task or strategy has been. If you can't measure something, it is difficult to determine progress when the Education Plan is reviewed. Entries in an IEP need to include some quantitative information, either a level of expected achievement, or the frequency with which something is to happen. Assessing how well something worked helps you identify areas still to be developed, and work out what needs to be included in the next version of the Education Plan.
- ✓ **Be Manageable**. The IEP should document organisational and timetable needs. Will the child be in the regular classroom with the class teacher; with a particular group of students in a withdrawal setting; or in another classroom with a different teacher?

Keep it manageable by avoiding making too many changes all at once. One or two modifications in line with the priority goal initially with more put in place over time is more manageable and sustainable than a lot of change all at once.
- ✓ **Be Monitored**. Make sure the Plan documents who will take overall responsibility for the IEP. Is it the classroom teacher, the SAER or support co-ordinator, or another staff member? The IEP should also indicate who will be responsible for reporting in any areas where the child spends some time with another teacher.

Mastering Meetings

Once you have gathered all your information together, have a clear goal in mind and have prioritised what you believe is most important at this point, you will need to meet with the school to discuss your child, the information you have gathered and the various options.

Before a meeting

- Check your short and long term goals and plan suggestions are in your child's file.
- Make an appointment.
- Find someone to come to the meeting with you.
- Find out who else will be at the meeting. You will probably have to ask.
- Write down any questions or concerns you have and take them to the meeting. Think through what you want to say **before** you go to the meeting.
- Make copies of anything you want people to read or look at.
- Decide if you are going to provide documents ahead of time or whether you will bring them to the meeting with you.

During the meeting

- Introduce yourself and make a note of who else is at the meeting and their position.
- Communicate what you want to discuss early in the meeting.
- Clarify terminology that is used to make sure you all mean the same thing.
- Question anything you do not agree with.
- Be persuasive.
- Listen and take notes, or get your support person to take them.
- Bring something to the discussion, you will have ideas that teachers may not.
- Recap at the end of the meeting to make sure you have understood what was discussed.
- Set a date for the next meeting.

After meeting

- Debrief with your support person. Make a note of positives and concerns and file a copy.
- Write to the school thanking them and outlining your understanding of what was discussed and decided, including who agreed to do what.
- Send a sincere thank you note to the teacher and others who attended the meeting, even if it did not go well.
- Contact the school a week or so before the next meeting is scheduled

