

As parents of children with special needs, we have to advocate for them, right? If we don't, who will? I've heard this and repeated it many times in my 16 years of being a parent. But...what if it's not always true? What if there is a way to help our kids eventually become their own advocate?

It can be hard to imagine, particularly in the exhausting, physically demanding toddler years – but the goal of parenting is to raise adults. How is this possible? Even with a 16 year old, it's hard for me to wrap my head around the idea that this amazing, challenging, sweet boy will one day soon be an adult. So how do I make sure he not only knows what he needs but is also able to communicate that to the people around him?

It was only in the past few years that I started to think seriously about teaching my son self-advocacy. As an autistic teenager, my son doesn't always understand that other people aren't able to intuitively know what he needs. As I started to explore how to teach him this skill, I realized that we had already started – all the way back in the early elementary school years. When my son would come home and talk about a problem he was having in school, it was hard for us to know if we were getting the whole story – not that he wouldn't be truthful, but the way he understands the world around him can make it easy for him to miss key details during social interactions. Honestly, what I now know was the first step in teaching independence was born out of my own insecurity. I felt awkward emailing the teachers and saying “my son said so and so did xyz...”, knowing there had to be more to the story. So instead I would email and say “my son has something he needs to talk to you about, can you please remind him tomorrow to tell you about it?”. By removing myself from the equation, he became responsible for sharing the details with the people in his life who could help him – his teachers. At the same time, asking the teacher to approach him removed the anxiety of him needing to remember to broach the subject – this was very successful for his younger years.

As my son moved through the grades into middle and high school, we started to focus on him initiating the communication. Instead of me reaching out to the teacher and asking them to speak with my son, he and I would sit down together and I would help him compose an email asking for their help. It was always easier for him to express himself over email as opposed to the pressure of finding the right words at the right moment, so this worked well. Eventually he became comfortable enough that now when an issue arises, he knows to reach out on his own. It's not a perfect process, but it has certainly helped him gain confidence and learn how to speak for himself. I'm hoping my journey of learning how to help my son find his own voice will inspire you to help your children find theirs!



[Information for parents on the early stages of teaching self-advocacy](#)