**Teaching children to be their own self-advocate** Kylie Rymanowicz - November 01, 2018

We teach children [problem-solving](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/problem_solving_skills_are_an_important_factor_in_academic_success) skills and [conflict resolution skills](http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/young_children_can_learn_how_to_resolve_conflicts_with_adult_guidance_and_s) so they can manage in a world where they are bound to face struggles and conflict. To truly prepare children to deal with dilemmas, it’s also important we teach them skills for self-advocacy. Oxford Dictionary defines [self-advocacy](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/self-advocacy) as the action of representing oneself or one's views or interests. When you are your own self-advocate, you can stand up to make your issues known and heard, and work to create change.

How do you teach children skills to advocate for themselves?

**Give them ownership of problems**. Resist the urge to jump in and save the day when your child experiences a problem. Instead, listen intently and give them ownership of the problem. “You were really hoping to be put in the advanced reading group at school, but you weren’t on the list and you are confused and disappointed.”

**Give them ownership of feelings**. In order to advocate for themselves, children need the ability to recognize and understand their emotions and then they need strategies to express those emotions in ways that are constructive and appropriate. Avoid telling your child how you think they feel or how they should feel (like saying, “There’s no reason to cry, it didn’t hurt that bad”). Instead, allow them to define and express their feelings and let them know they are heard, like saying, “It sounds to me like you are feeling really worried about this situation at school. You are feeling like your concerns are not being heard by your teacher, and it’s making you feel really hurt.”

**Nurture independence.** Create opportunities for your child to be independent and advocate for themselves. Ask them to order for themselves in a restaurant, ask a store clerk for assistance or share a concern with their teacher. Get your child into the habit of speaking up for themselves and asking for what they need.

**Be their best backup.** When you help your child learn to speak up for themselves you give them opportunities to be independent, but it doesn’t mean they have to do it all alone. Your child can approach tough tasks with confidence when they know they have you as backup. Let them take the lead and lean on you only if they need to. You can be their cheerleader, supporter and sounding board, but let them sit in the driver’s seat.

**Show them the value of speaking up.** Teach them “the squeaky wheel gets the grease!” Sometimes we are afraid to speak up and advocate for ourselves because we don’t want to be a bother or make trouble, or we are concerned about how other people will respond. Tell your child about a time when you spoke up or advocated for yourself and how it turned out. Speaking up won’t always solve a problem quickly and easily, but it is so important to show children the value of being brave and speaking out.

**Get involved in public advocacy.** Think about your child’s interests and what they are passionate about. What causes can they stand behind? Help your child get involved in an organization that stands for something your child believes in. Help them participate in something bigger than themselves and realize that through advocacy, real change is possible.

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