

Getting Involved

**What is advocacy? ■ Why advocate for children?
 ■ Which type of advocate are you? ■ What can
 you do? ■ Action Agenda: Getting to know your
 elected officials ■ Action Agenda: Plan ahead**

What is advocacy?

Advocacy can be as simple as speaking on behalf of a friend in need or as complex as leading a march on Capitol Hill. We advocate for our children when we ask teachers or administrators about the state of the school system. We advocate for ourselves when we negotiate with an employer for time off to be with our families. We advocate on a community level when we attend a city or county hearing and ask about the future of a neighborhood center.

As child advocates, we work to ensure that the children in our communities have a voice and that their needs are met. We can do this by voting, talking to legislators about our concerns, speaking up at community meetings or writing letters. Our advocacy may take many forms, but anyone who cares about an issue and is willing to make a difference can be an advocate. Promoting what works and challenging what doesn't are the hallmarks of effective advocacy.

Most important, advocacy is a frame of mind - not just a job title, occupation, or role in life. Advocates see opportunities where others see

obstacles. The only qualifications for being an effective advocate are concern, compassion, commitment and action.

Why advocate for children?

Advocates provide a voice for those who are either unable to speak for themselves or who have difficulty being heard. Children and families who are struggling in one way or another are among those most in need of our advocacy and support.

Most of us simply care about the children in our neighborhoods. We want them to be safe, healthy and happy. And we want our local, state, and federal policy-makers to act in ways that support children and families. To do this effectively, it is important to have a sustained and vocal presence at all levels of decision-making. We can all be part of that presence and part of the effort to protect our nation's children and families.

Which type of advocate are you?

Advocates play many roles based on their skills, personality, interests and experiences. Which of these roles

come naturally for you? By using our strengths, we become more effective advocates.

Defender—fights for the rights of others

Protector—works to keep others from physical or psychological harm

Promoter—works to cause something to happen

Enabler—provides others with the resources they need to achieve their goals

Investigator—searches for facts and information

Mediator—listens to and understands all points of view and remain objective

Supporter—listens and gives acknowledgment to feelings, and needs without passing judgment or giving advice

Monitor—checks periodically to see if things are going according to the plan

Teacher—assists in trying to decide the best possible approach to the situation; provides guidance and instruction as needed

serve you and they depend on you (the constituent) to identify concerns in the community. Develop a relationship with key policymakers BEFORE you need something from them.

Advocacy roles:

Defender

Protector

Promoter

Enabler

Investigator

Supporter

Monitor

Teacher

What can you do?

Everyone can work to promote child welfare and each part of the community, whether medical, civic, educational, legal, religious or social service, has an important role to play. Here are some ways you can be an advocate in your community.

- **Register to vote and VOTE.** This is your most basic right as a citizen and an advocate! Hold a voter registration drive at your organization or work site.
- **Get to know your elected officials.** These are the people elected to

ACTION AGENDA:

Getting to know your elected officials

- Meet one-on-one with your elected officials. Let them know which issues are important to you.
- Invite legislators to visit and learn more about your program or organization.
- Write letters. Explain your position briefly and persuasively.
- Call your elected officials and tell them your opinion on issues important to you. Don't hesitate to talk to an aide or leave a message. Every call counts!

- **Create or join a children's coalition.** Network! Network! Network! The more people know you and your group, the more effective you will be. Work to continuously expand your network. The goal is to be "spider-webbed" throughout the community, so you are not simply "preaching to the choir."
- **Hold an event.** Town meetings, rallies or marches are effective ways to bring people together and get the word out about an issue. Invite elected officials and the

press. Coordinate with other groups (remember your network!) and share the work.

- **Host a “reality tour”.** Invite public officials and the press on a “reality tour.” Ask them to visit your program and see “how it really is” or “shadow” a child care worker. Let them interact with staff, children and parents wherever possible. Host an open house and invite the public, the press and community leaders.
- **Attend Candidate Forums and Legislative Workshops in your community.** Ask candidates how they stand on your issue and state your position. Always be clear about whether you are speaking individually or on behalf of a larger group.
- **Create a newsletter or web site.** Spread the word about your issue or provide articles to existing newsletters in your area.
- **Create a letter writing, phone or email campaign.** Develop a phone tree to activate when needed. Make sure your callers know who to call and what to say. Be creative. Sending an E-mail or writing a letter is something that many people who do not have a lot of time can do to help. Consider stopping meetings five minutes early so everyone can write a letter.
- **Write a letter to the editor or an opinion-editorial piece for the local newspaper about your program.** This is a great way to increase awareness of your issue and get others involved.
- **Establish volunteer networks in your community to assist advocacy efforts.** Don’t overlook faith-based and business organizations.

- **Say Thanks!** Remember it is just as important (if not more so) to thank elected officials and community leaders when they support your efforts as it is to request something or complain.

ACTION AGENDA:

Plan ahead

Planning is key to any successful advocacy effort. Here are some tips for developing your own action plan:

- **Be prepared.** Research your issue thoroughly and frame the issue carefully. Keep in mind that not everyone has the same background or understanding. Keep the message simple, direct and positive. Know who your target audience is and how they operate, whether it is a state legislature or city council.
- **Get organized.** Develop a strategy using an array of advocacy tools. Understand both your supporters and opponents. Sometimes, the best advocate is a convert. Know your target audience and focus your efforts there.
- **Get into action. Monitor your progress.** Keep track of how you are doing in terms of communicating effectively and making a difference. Adjust the strategy as necessary.
- **Follow-up.** Evaluate how effective you were. Identify weaknesses and work to improve. Thank everyone who got involved and helped in your efforts.

Success basics:

- Be prepared.
- Get organized.
- Get into action.
- Monitor your progress.
- Follow-up.