

A guide to self-advocacy for young people with a vision impairment.

How can the Specialist Education Support Service at Guide Dogs' Children and Young People's Services help and support you?

A Specialist Education Support Officer can offer you independent and impartial information, advice and guidance to help you navigate your journey through the education system. If, at any stage, you need guidance and support, please don't hesitate to call our advice line number on 0800 781 1444.

What is meant by self-advocacy?

Note for parents: Please share this guide with your child as it includes tips for self-advocacy when you're not around.

Self-advocacy is an important skill. It involves being able to represent yourself so that you can describe a difficulty to someone who can help in order to get the support you need to thrive.

Self-advocacy is a skill which takes time to develop and you will improve with practice.

It's important that you recognise when it's appropriate to use this skill and below are some examples of situations where self-advocacy skills may be required.

Sensory & Communication Support Service in partnership with:

When will I need to self-advocate?

If, in the classroom I find it difficult to:

- keep up with my peers/friends
- read my learning materials fast enough to keep up with the teacher/class
- access pictures/display boards on the walls when the teacher refers to them
- follow visual directions such as “over there” “look at this” “I’ll leave it here”
- interpret body language and facial expressions e.g. smiles, frowns
- record and read my answers fast enough
- have enough time to “see” pictures/tactile drawings
- feel part of a group
- complete tasks on time
- be able to ask or answer questions as there is too much going on
- record homework
- get to lessons on time
- prepare myself for the next lesson

If, outside of the classroom I find it difficult to:

- find my form room and subject rooms
- find my friends when the lessons are over
- read the signs around the school/college
- have enough time to drop equipment off before meeting friends
- have the time to print my work off to hand in for marking
- get to key areas of the school/college e.g. dining hall, library
- read the menu or know what I can choose to eat for lunch
- find my way around the library and locate relevant books
- carry all my bags
- organise myself for lessons

What can I do? Think ‘high five!’

The following ‘high five’ provides a strategy for practising self-help and advocacy skills. It may help you to find positive solutions to any situation that may arise.

Think “High Five” they are:

- Who?
- When?
- Where?
- What?
- How?

Who do I talk to?

Ask yourself the question: who are the people who help me already?

You may need to talk to one or all of these people. Don't forget the people who support you may include people in school, such as your Teaching Assistant, class teacher or Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator (SENDCo) or ALNCo (Additional Learning and Needs Coordinator) but also those people out of school such as your parents, carers, or family members..

Top tip

These people can help you think about what you want to say, but remember, it's more powerful if you explain the situation yourself, plus it will help you to develop your independence for the future.

When do I self-advocate?

It's best to explain problems as soon as you recognise them to avoid them escalating.

If your first attempt to explain your situation is tricky, don't give up. Choose your moment wisely e.g. arrange a mutually convenient time to talk through your concerns with the person who can best help you.

Where do I discuss the situation?

It's usually best to address your concerns as and when they arise. In a busy school it may not always be possible or the best place to start a conversation. It's sometimes better to talk about your concerns away from the place where they happen, for example away from the classroom.

A one-on-one quiet place may be a better environment where you can explain your situation and how you feel.

What do I say?

You might like to practise the following:

"Sir, have you got a moment please?"

"I am having trouble keeping up with you (my teacher) and the lesson, can you help me?"

Or

"Miss, can I speak to you later today about some concerns I have?"

This may sound obvious, but finding an opening sentence can sometimes be a positive starting point. Hopefully, the adult you're speaking to will recognise that you're asking for space to talk and will be able to make some suggestions about when you can discuss this in more detail, as well as offering practical steps you can take to get the help you need.

How do I self-advocate?

The 'high five' example provided above, is one strategy you may wish to try in order to improve your self-advocacy skills.

Top tips

When you are trying to get your feelings over to the other person, always try to be:

- **Confident** when you talk, but not aggressive
- **Calm and polite**
- **Prepared** i.e. before you meet, write down your concerns along with a possible solution, if you have one
- **Balanced**, i.e. show you're aware that not everything is going wrong. Instead; try creating a list of "what is working well" alongside "what is not working well"

Try to remember, if you have more than one concern, prioritise and talk about each one separately.

Self-advocacy is a skill; some of us are better at it than others and that's okay, but remember - the more you practice it the easier it will become, just keep trying.

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