

Self-Advocacy — The Gift That Keeps on Giving

It's Never Too Late to Learn

I have been stressing the importance of self-advocacy throughout this book, particularly in college. In Chapter Two, I discussed the importance of deciphering psychoeducational evaluations, understanding what the law does and doesn't allow for, and using disability support services. Self-advocacy is where the rubber meets the road. Understanding one's strengths, weaknesses, needs, abilities, and personal style provides a great deal of personal satisfaction. This knowledge also has far wider implications, as it's the basis for effective self-advocacy. Self-advocacy is more than asking for or about accommodations and services; it's about asking for the specific accommodations and services that the individual needs, whether in the classroom or the workplace. In the world beyond college, a clear understanding of the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA) may become even more important.

How do people with learning disabilities become effective self-advocates in their lives beyond college? We all know some people who are natural self-advocates. They exude confidence; they stick up for themselves; they have no problem telling others what they want and need. In reality, most of us don't feel so self-assured. But we can learn how to take better care of ourselves. To begin, let's acknowledge that self-advocacy is often uncomfortable. Quite honestly, I don't like confrontation. I'm not always good about asking for help (my wife calls this "male-itis"). Although these feelings are natural, they are not generally productive.

A college graduate with learning disabilities who has

had a successful experience with DS should have acquired knowledge and skills beyond those learned from books and classes. If DS has done its job, the graduating student will have a repertoire of survival skills to use in the world beyond college. Self-advocacy is the engine that drives successful adaptation to adult life and responsibilities.

The prognosis for individuals with learning disabilities who are not effective self-advocates is bleak. Adult life tends to be much more satisfying for individuals who have a sense of themselves as independent and autonomous. A lack of self-advocacy skills may lead to feelings of dependence and insufficiency.

What can young adults with learning disabilities do if they need to improve their self-advocacy skills outside of school? A number of training programs, many of them residential, exist to help young adults with learning disabilities adjust to the demands of independent adulthood. Learning Disabilities Research and Training Center (LDR&TC) has a website full of resources for adults with learning disabilities (<http://www.rit.edu/~easi/pubs/ldnoelbw.htm>), which includes descriptions of many of these programs. College graduates with learning disabilities who need a boost more typically get involved with adult support groups. The LDR&TC website lists a number of these groups. Marin Puzzle People in Mill Valley, CA is one of the oldest support groups for adults with learning disabilities, founded by Joanne Hazelton more than 20 years ago. This agency explicitly addresses self-advocacy as a goal. Mark Titus, a former student of mine, founded the Fun Bunch in 1999. This group, for adults with learning disabilities in the Washington, D.C. area, meets once or twice a month and provides so-

cial activities and a supportive environment of peers who've "been there and done that."

Individual counseling offers the most personal approach for improving self-advocacy skills. Specially trained counselors who work on helping clients develop specific behavioral life skills are very effective. Sometimes, adults with learning disabilities are able to connect with this kind of counseling and training through their local department of vocational rehabilitation or rehabilitative services. Others use private providers, whose services are sometimes covered by health insurance. To find counseling that focuses on developing skills such as self-advocacy, you might start by going back to local school psychologists, particularly those who conduct evaluations for learning disabilities; they usually know counselors and therapists who specialize in working with older adolescents and adults with learning disabilities. Many high schools have transition specialists or coordinators; these teachers generally have a great sense of all kinds of community resources including counseling.



Stand Up for Your Right(s) — Again!

When students leave high school and get to college, everything changes. When students leave college and enter the workplace, everything changes again. As in college, individuals with learning disabilities have rights, but not entitlements, in the workplace. Unlike college, however, there is no DS office waiting or actively seeking to help out adults with learning disabilities.