Appendix B3

ADVOCACY IN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES WORKSHOP

WORKSHOP GOALS

- To provide some background information on advocacy for parents and teachers
- To provide material for educators to prepare a fact sheet for parents on the topic
- To provide methods for addressing advocacy issues that are respectful of parents as adult learners
- To help parents go beyond the mere receiving of this new information to a filtering of the information through their own values and belief systems to arrive at an action plan with which they are comfortable and committed. For this, we use the caring process of decision making described in Chapter 6.

The section titled “Being Your Child’s Advocate” includes information that might be used in a newsletter for parents. The section titled “Advocacy Activity” is the format for problem solving advocacy-related issues.

BACKGROUND

This is from earlier materials originally written after some parents at a K–12 school were devastated by a meeting with an administrator who seemed to feel parents should remain uninvolved in students’ academic lives after elementary school. *Advocate* seems to be a dirty word at many schools, where it is feared that advocacy becomes a zero-sum game, with winners and losers. I scheduled a “contemporary issues in parenting” meeting on the topic at this school so we could confront it rather

than avoid it. This was a time when we discussed issues brewing, new helpful information for parents, or any other issue facing families at the time. Teachers and parents were invited to this breakfast meeting. I provided some references and some handouts on the topic of advocacy from educators in the field and had a definition available if asked. After the meeting, I used the parent and teacher concerns and suggestions to shape a brief parent resource sheet that I was asked to prepare for an independent school journal. Several parents and teachers provided feedback afterward that this meeting cleared the air and helped them feel more comfortable talking with each other later.

BEING YOUR CHILD'S ADVOCATE

Introduction: Defining Advocacy

The term *advocate* has been defined as "anyone acting on behalf of another person." Our goal is the best interests of the child or person for whom we advocate. Often we have the idea that when one advocates for someone, it becomes a win-lose situation. This does not have to be the case. We as adults frequently need the help of an advocate when we do not have the expertise, means, or energy to best represent our perspective to others on our own. We call upon attorneys, counselors, doctors, work supervisors, union leaders, religious and political leaders, or personal friends to help us in meeting our needs. We, along with a classroom teacher, a special education teacher, a principal, a coach, a fellow classmate, or a friend, might be advocates for our children. Here is an example:

Some Experiences Help Us Understand Advocacy

Rose (not her real name) spent some time in a children's hospital when her youngest child had severe asthma.

Although she was a college professor, she still felt inadequate and frightened as the mother of a severely asthmatic child. At first she listened and watched and deferred to staff. Over time, she gained a good deal of knowledge about the illness and especially about her own child's experience and symptoms. She also had experience watching staff help her son recover. Gradually, they gave her more and more information as to what was happening. They also taught her how to help her own child with a stethoscope, physical therapy techniques, and the nebulizer. Her pediatrician gave her encouragement and confidence in her own ability to advocate for her child to the hospital staff. Once she felt more comfortable at the hospital, she was more likely to ask questions and advocate for her son.

Across the room from Rose and her son in the hospital was an asthmatic child whose parents came in and out at all hours. She felt staff did not share information or empower them as much due to language difficulties. With her knowledge of Spanish, she learned this was a good mom with six children under 8 years old. Two of her children had asthma and were placed in two different hospitals. The dad worked odd hours but was in late at night feeding and comforting his child. As Rose gained confidence, she tried to point out the excellent caring of these two parents and asked if someone could get them a nebulizer and teach them how to use it. That did not happen, though it would now, hopefully, in 2006. She felt that if she had lived in a non-English-speaking country, she would not have been able to help her child as much as she did. When her son with asthma volunteered, as a teen, to build homes with and for the homeless, he found that his illiterate building partner, who worked harder than anyone else on the team, was cheated out of some of his wages. Because of this man's lack of self-confidence and literacy, he could not advocate for himself. He ended up throwing all the money back at the employer. Rose's son tried to help him and will never forget the experience. As he had learned to advocate for himself as a chronically ill child, he used his skills to help this man.

A few months after Rose's hospital experience, Rose's friend had to take her daughter, who had cerebral palsy, to the same hospital. The friend, who was exceptionally talented and confident at work, was tentative in the hospital and did not ask the staff why they were dragging out the visit by giving only one test per day. On a visit, Rose saw what was happening and, because of her own newfound confidence, managed to get more tests done. Her friend over time became a more confident advocate and continues to be a champion for her daughter and other children at her daughter's school. She works with teachers, helps with the school parent newsletter, and keeps looking until she finds the resources her daughter needs to succeed. Her role has changed over the years, and her daughter is now better able to speak for herself. This is because the daughter is growing and maturing and because her mother has modeled advocacy in a positive manner. Her mother, in her changing role of advocacy for an older child, helps her plan, explore options, and rehearse how she might deal with stressful situations when on her own.

Mrs. Edwards, mother of a child with special needs, reflected, "I looked inwardly and said: 'What are you all about?' I was brought up as a southern female, you go along to get along . . . You don't stand up for yourself . . . whereas now I feel so much more solid. And I do my own evaluation and I have my own input, and if I don't agree, I do have a right to say 'hold it.' I feel much more complete as a person where I am now than I saw myself then. We were the 'perfect' family. Then you get that reality check. But you want that reality. It's not a bad thing. We don't want to be the perfect family . . . We're connected to human kind and that's good and bad" (Snell & Rosen, 1997, p. 437). Advocacy for her child eventually

became a transformative experience for her as well. One sees this happening in many Individual Education Plan sessions for students with special needs. However, one also sees too many meetings in which parents feel powerless and “ganged up on” before they do what Mrs. Edwards did.

What Experts Say About Advocacy and Parent Engagement

Dr. Lillian Katz and her colleagues have written a great deal on the topic of advocacy as it relates to parents of preschoolers and elementary school children. They suggest that it may often be likely that parents get caught up in their child’s emotional recounting of a stressful school experience. The parent’s goal should be to listen empathetically while encouraging the child to examine the problem and consider other points of view as well as possible remedies. Parents need to think mindfully about the situation. How might the teacher have seen this event? With this strategy, parents also get time to reflect and calm down rather than make a hasty call to school. Parents can call schools to get more facts, but the goal is to solve the problem, not to just place blame.

Schools often have policies for resolving conflicts. Knowing about the school’s rules is important for an effective advocate. Usually schools suggest that children talk to the teacher first. If they are unable to articulate their needs effectively, a parent or designated parent partner may feel the need to provide more information or ask for more clarification. It is very helpful to request a time when both teacher and parent are not rushed or tired. It is also important not to argue in front of the child as it can be confusing to younger children and encourage disrespect in older children.

There may be times that parents or teachers decide it would benefit everyone if the principal is brought in as well. The principal sets the tone and can act as an advocate for everyone involved. The goal is to leave with an identified plan and an agreed-upon time to see some results. In the case of many students, a team approach of teacher, principal, counselor, and parent (or parent partner or both) is in the best interests of the child.

Steinberg and Levine (1997) assert that even middle and high school parents have many important roles in school settings, including advocacy. In elementary and middle school, they believe, parents are involved if they gather enough information about the school by going to open house presentations, reading course syllabi or objectives carefully, monitoring children’s homework to at least know they are doing what is asked, attending all parent programs and parent teacher conferences, and attending sports and all extracurricular information events and activities in which their children are interested or involved. If parents are new to the United States, it would be essential that another person help them transition into an advocate role that is comfortable for them. Advocacy may never be comfortable

for them, and they may advocate by finding a person to help their children if needed. It is very important for a school to provide language support so that all parents will have every chance to succeed. Sometimes this may mean partnering new parents with a veteran school parent with a similar background or culture. Adapting to a school culture different from their own experiences just so their child will succeed can be very difficult for parents.

Steinberg and Levine (1997) believe that parents, and I would add parent advocate partners, should learn about their child's abilities and aptitude, what is expected in certain assignments in general, and how long students should be doing homework at a certain age. If the parent reports that the student needs a great deal more time than average to get the work done, teachers can provide more assistance in helping the child understand the work. Teachers can give parents an idea of their child's progress and what the parent and their co-advocates can do that will help but not undermine the student's self-confidence. Parents or co-advocates might ask about whether the child is making good use of time, participating in classroom discussions, and getting along with peers. Then parents can combine that information with their own experience in order to try to make sure their child is progressing in all areas of development. Even the questions parents ask can demonstrate to the teacher what they value (e.g., social development). When do parents go over the line in terms of involvement?

It is not helpful to take over each time our children struggle. Nor is it helpful to step in immediately when our children have disagreements with classmates. If we always step in, children may avoid challenges because they have not had opportunities to test themselves and develop confidence in their own abilities. It would help greatly if schools and parents had discussions prior to the start of school about the attributes they see as important for children to develop, such as being able to express safety or social needs to others. Then parents and professionals can work together on these attributes.

If our children underachieve, do we have a role? We can start by getting them a physical examination to rule out easily correctible problems. We can make sure the students have had the proper tests to identify learning challenges. We also need to determine if our expectations for our children are realistic. We need to examine our own attitudes and behaviors. We need to ask our children what they think is happening. If we communicate concern, not anger and hurt, eventually our children will solve their problems with a little help from us. If things still don't work out, we might consider psychological testing or counseling for our children. Of course, asking a child or seeing a counselor may go against cultural traditions. They are seen by most educators in the United States as appropriate, however.

Regarding homework, parents are not advocating for children if the parents do homework they think is too hard or unnecessary. How will a teacher know it is too hard? By protecting children from failure, parents prevent children from learning

from their mistakes. Parents and the student's adviser will be in a position to notice if a child is failing many subjects. This may be the time that parents share that the child is experiencing stress at home, on the playground, or in the classroom or whatever additional information will help teachers sort out the causes of the slide. Why would parents do a child's homework? They might feel guilty for their own workload and limited time to help their child, or they may have placed their child in a highly competitive school, and because they do not have time or power to change the system, they try to minimize some of the pressures.

Regarding grades and report cards, it is advised that parents approach teachers primarily to learn how to help children in the future. Some students stressed by bad grades might tend to exaggerate the external causes of low grades in order to keep parent approval or to avoid responsibility. As an advocate, a parent can be a "guide on the side," helping their children clarify teacher expectations or speak on their own behalf if they feel a grade is questionable. If we turn grades into a battle between parents and teachers, we risk conveying to the child that we cannot accept the grade and therefore the child or that we disrespect the teacher. Our goals should be to know as much along the way as we can so as not to be surprised and to help the child learn from mistakes. Some may think that asking children about their schoolwork in the later grades is intrusive. If we talk about what we are reading or doing, how we deal with evaluations at work, successes and failures in our lives, and how we tackle difficult problems from day to day, it will not be so unusual for our children to have us ask them about their schoolwork, among other topics.

When students are in high school, we believe that parental apathy or non-involvement can be very damaging. Steinberg and Levine (1997) cite research that has shown that parent involvement in school programs, in student course selection, and in extracurricular activities is just as important in high school as it was earlier. As a rule, high schools do not reach out to parents but respond to concerned parents. I have met Asian American students whose parents never heard from the school because the children never had an academic or behavioral problem, but the students dearly missed their parents' sharing in their successes at school. The schools failed to connect with their parents.

If high school students get jobs, it is advised that parents visit the sites. It is a parent's responsibility to make sure the workplace is appropriate and safe. Parents can help students by rehearsing how they might approach a problem at work. So advocacy would imply making the employer know parents are aware of and interested in their child's well-being. Also, parents can provide their children with information on job rights and responsibilities.

Simpson (2001), in "Raising Teens," describes several important roles for parents of teens and suggests that when it comes to advocacy, many barriers external to the parent must be overcome:

> The challenge for parents is to accomplish this task in the face of barriers such as family poverty, racism, lack of child support, unemployment, and underemployment, overwork, limited formal education, lack of familiarity with American systems and customs, domestic violence, neighborhood poverty and violence, parental incarceration, homelessness, and parent's physical and mental illness, including disability, chronic illness, and substance abuse. (p. 62)

She, like others, refers to parental social capital. That is, when parents cannot supply all a child needs, they are successful in getting the help (be it added guidance, resources, mentoring, the best school available, afterschool programs, etc.) needed from within the community.

> This parental function, sometimes called "family management," "advocacy," "sponsorship," or "community bridging," is observed in parenting across ethnic and socioeconomic groups, particularly in adolescence, as the child prepares for and enters a widening world and spends more and more time in unstructured and unsupervised settings. (Simpson, 2001, p. 62)

Finally, Simpson (2001) suggests that society should help teens with job training, service learning opportunities, and so forth, so that they might develop the competencies and self-confidence needed, including advocating for themselves, to succeed as adults (p. 63).

Conclusions

Advocacy is important for parents and teachers to discuss even if it is a word that makes people uncomfortable. I believe it is more about seeking information, understanding and articulating multiple viewpoints and perspectives, understanding everyone's long-term goals and needs, and then doing what is in the best interest of the child. I realize that for some cultures, the concept is truly foreign to the way of doing things. At least they deserve to know how it works and whether they can engage someone to help them decide how to deal with this phenomenon from their own cultural perspective. Involving the child in this process in an age-appropriate manner is also important. Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, and Chatman (2005) provide examples of parents and teachers all advocating for the same child. "A Special Education Plan for Anabela," by Peggy Vaughan, is one example of the complexity of advocacy situations, especially when culturally diverse parents might feel it appropriate to go to a principal first and not the teacher. Another story in Weiss et al., "Bilingual Voices and Parent Classroom Choices," by Margaret Caspe, is informative of the struggle parents and teachers go through to sort out what is best for a particular child. The Family Involvement Network of Educators

(finenetwork.org) provides numerous case studies and other information to help teachers and parents understand each other's perspective and possible solutions. One example I have found informative is "Suspension at Aurora Middle School," by Sylvia Sensiper. Here, an Asian mother who is unable to advocate for her child is helped by a Pan-Asian Cultural Service Center. The way those professionals meet with resistance and interact with the principal provides insights into the challenges of advocating for parents and students in school.

I have described some issues pertaining to schools. Parents also have a huge responsibility to advocate for children in hospitals, in communities, and with profit-making enterprises such as the media, establishments selling illegal goods to minors, and many more. Parents have a responsibility to represent a nonvoting population that is often not represented in Washington. This is a huge but important task. Any visible effort they, along with communities and others, make for children will provide the children with the hope and optimism they need to feel confident and succeed.

ADVOCACY ACTIVITY

Today we are going to think about the word *advocacy.* I have a definition of the word on the paper you received. For many, it means acting on behalf of others when they do not have the time, energy, confidence, or expertise to do so for themselves.

When you read or hear the word *advocate,* what is the first thought that comes to your mind? What words, pictures, and memories do you think of? (This can be of you or of someone advocating for you.) Jot down your thoughts, draw a picture, or hold the image in your minds. Now I ask you to join a circle of one or two others and share your thoughts. I hope your group can share some examples with the larger group. Those of you who do not want to share can in this way have an opportunity to describe someone else's example or be part of the group reporting. When the list is drawn up, we will identify child advocacy situations.

If the group does not come up with a lot of examples, I ask, "Now that we have some issues on the board, do these call to mind any other issues you might like to add?" If I still need more, I would add, "Allow me to share some other advocacy situations I have heard from other parent groups."

Some I have heard of previously:

- Trying to get a child tested or serviced for learning disabilities
- Trying to help a child solve a bullying situation, which parents or teachers did not see
- Trying to get a coach not to use harsh language or methods to motivate a child
- Trying to get a spouse or an in-law to stop favoring one child over another

- Asking your father-in-law to call upon your spouse to help you out more at home
- Trying to get a school district to fund an afterschool program

I would ask the group if there is one situation that they would like to look at in more depth. Once there is consensus, I suggest a person in the group describe the situation in which they need to advocate and think about it using a decision-making method (see Chapter 6 of *Developing Caring Relationships Among Parents, Children, Schools, and Communities*) that takes everyone's feelings, needs, and situations into consideration.

Then we begin by asking someone to describe an advocacy situation in detail.

- What happened first, next, then, and so on?
- What are 10 *possible options* you might consider in this situation? Put down the first thoughts that come to your mind.
- What *goals* do you as an advocate have in mind for the person for whom you are advocating? Short-term goals? Long-term goals?
- What *beliefs* do you hold about this situation?
- How might you be *feeling* when you have to advocate? How do you think all others in the situation might be feeling?
- What does the child or other person in question *need*? What do you need? What do you think the others in the situation need?
- What about the child's or other person's characteristics—age, gender, temperament, learning style, previous experience, energy, physical characteristics, cultural traditions—that might figure into your decision on how to advocate?
- What about your *own situation*—your time, resources, self-confidence, cultural traditions, previous experiences—that might figure into your decision?
- Which *option* of those listed might be best, taking everyone's situations into consideration?
- If they are planning a solution to an actual problem, parents or teachers would *do* the option chosen. They would then *reflect* on how it worked and either repeat it, if successful, or think of (*plan*) another option.

Conclusions

Being a successful advocate takes time and planning. Once done, we need to evaluate our effectiveness. Did this behavior work for this particular situation? How might it have worked better? What other information or resources might have helped? Thinking mindfully, what is another way we could look at this situation?

RESOURCES

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