

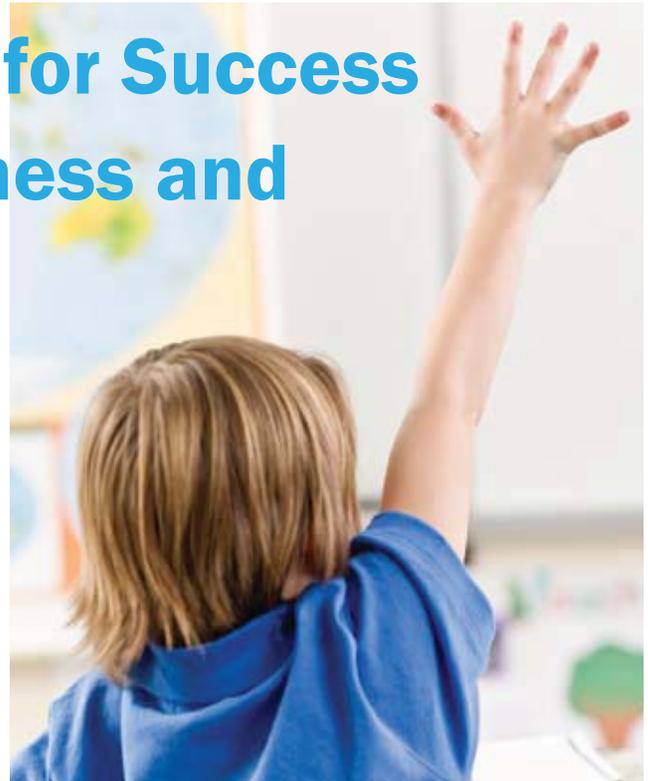
# Setting Students up for Success Through Self-Awareness and Self-Advocacy

By Melanie Reader, Registered Psychologist

As students with learning disabilities and associated disorders begin the school year, many parents are likely asking themselves “How can I best help my child?” One of the top ways to provide support is to teach students how to advocate for themselves. Parents cannot be with their child at every moment of the day - the students have to learn how to ask for help on their own.

Self-advocacy has a number of definitions. However, it essentially refers to a student’s ability to understand their disability (including both strengths and weaknesses) and to effectively communicate their needs in order to garner assistance to meet their goals. It also includes an awareness of their rights. Research has shown that the development of self-advocacy skills, which is related to self-determination, is of utmost importance to the successful transition of students with disabilities from school into adult life. When students rely too much on others to advocate for them (e.g., parents), their development of independence is impacted. Despite the importance of self-advocacy skills and the fact that research suggests that students require direct instruction in these skills, they are not always included in the instruction for students. Therefore, it often falls upon parents to assist in this development. Although it may at first glance seem important only for students transitioning to post-secondary education to acquire self-advocacy skills, research supports that such skills should be developed at all grade levels. Developing self-advocacy skills at younger ages assists with transitions later in their schooling.

Self-awareness is the first step in becoming a self-advocate and is positively related to life success. Students must know and understand themselves before they can tell others what they want or need. For students with learning disabilities,



this should involve a general self-awareness (e.g., awareness of their feelings, opinions, and values) as well as an awareness of their learning disability. In particular, students should:

- Understand their specific learning disability and how it affects their life. It is important to understand how their learning disability impacts their academic performance as well as the other aspects of their life including social, psychological/emotional, and physical aspects.
- Be aware of the strategies that help them compensate for their learning disability. This includes knowing the appropriate terminology related to the accommodations required to assist in their schooling.
- Learn to accept their learning disability.

Before students can advocate for themselves, they must have an understanding of their learning disability (or other challenge). Some parents, particularly those of younger students, are hesitant to discuss the diagnosis with the student. For some, it is because they feel that the student will use the diagnosis as an excuse for inappropriate behaviours or for not putting in effort. For others, it is because they feel that the student will feel “different.” However, explaining the diagnosis can provide a sense of relief for the student. Students are often the first to know that something is wrong or that they are different and often feel isolated as

**“Self-knowledge must precede self-advocacy.”**

**Dr. Mel Levine**

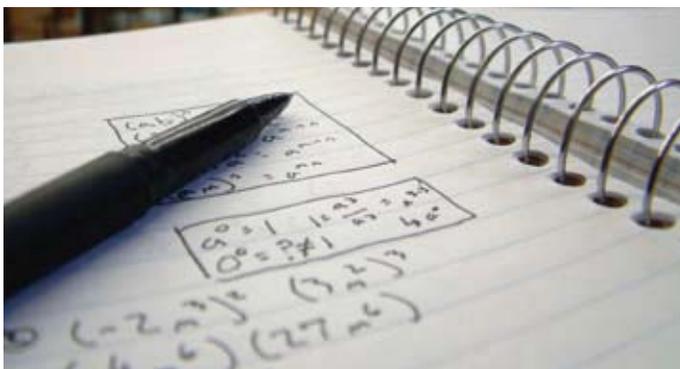
**“The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names.”**

**Chinese proverb**

a consequence. Without accurate information, students will likely meet with much frustration. Many students with learning disabilities come to believe that their problems are bigger than they really are and come to the misconception that they are “dumb” or “stupid.” These terms are much more negative than any actual diagnostic term. Often times, if the diagnosis is not discussed with the child, he is given the impression that the problem is too terrible to talk about which can foster a sense of shame. By talking about it openly, anxieties and guilt about being a disappointment can be alleviated and students can feel supported. Furthermore, acknowledging that they are indeed bright provides motivation for learning.

Parents are often unsure how to explain the diagnosis to their child. Here are some suggestions:

- First of all, parents need to ensure that they have a clear understanding of their child’s disability. This understanding is a process and will not happen after one debrief in the psychologist’s office. Seek out information from professionals, other parents, and reputable books and websites until you feel comfortable explaining the diagnosis. It is sometimes helpful for the student to have the initial discussion with a professional who is objective and perhaps appears more credible to the student. The parent should be present to know what has been said in order to refer back to it in further discussions.



**The development of self-advocacy skills is of utmost importance to the successful transition of students with disabilities from school into adult life.**

## **Before students can advocate for themselves, they must have an understanding of their learning disability (or other challenge).**

- “Demystify” the diagnosis by clarifying and correcting any misinformation (i.e., that they are “stupid”). It is important to not just use the diagnostic terms (i.e., “You have AD/HD”; “You have a learning disability”) but to also explain what the disability entails.
  - Emphasize strengths so that the weaknesses/challenges do not become the prime focus. Be sure to let the student know that she can learn; she will just learn differently.
- When discussing strengths, give concrete examples and avoid false praise. When discussing weaknesses, provide a specific number to prevent the child from feeling overwhelmed.
- Normalize the diagnosis. Make it clear that everyone has strengths and weaknesses. It is often suggested that it can be comforting for the student if parents discuss their own learning struggles.
- Discuss at the student’s pace. It does not all have to be discussed in one sitting but rather may come up spontaneously in response to situations that occur at home or at school. It will be a continuing process for the child to learn to internalize her new identity. For students who may struggle to accept their difficulties, professional counselling may need to be accessed.
- Use language that is at the student’s developmental level. Words used to discuss a learning disability with a younger student will be different than that used with an adolescent. Be sure to use words the student can understand and pronounce and have the student repeat it back to ensure understanding. Only give as much information as you believe the student can handle.
- Provide this information in an upbeat, positive and open way. Be sure the student knows that she has a support system available to help her succeed, including being willing to listen to questions about her diagnosis without fear of judgment.

After assisting the student in understanding his learning disability, it is then time to set him up to advocate for himself. Here are a few suggestions to do this:

- Give the student the words to explain his disability to others. No matter the age of the student, it is important that he can describe his disability in easy-to-understand language (e.g., “I have a reading disability and it will take me longer to learn to read, but I will”).



## Giving students the tools to self-advocate will allow them to better let others know what they need to be successful.

- Work with the student to develop a list of strengths and weaknesses along with special talents or interests (not just related to academics).
- Discuss with the student the accommodations and modifications that will be put into place for her and the reason for each (e.g., “You will be given extra time to complete tests to help with your slower processing speed”).
- If the student struggles in understanding why others are not receiving the same assistance or accommodations, the use of analogies may be helpful (e.g., “Just like Billy needs glasses to help his eyes see better, your brain needs medication to help it focus better.”).
- Involve the student in meetings between teachers and parents regarding the development of his Individual Program Plan (IPP) as well as for transition planning.
- For older students attending post-secondary education institutions, prepare them for meeting with the Disability/Accessibility Resource Centre.
- For students of all ages, practice communication skills. This includes teaching about providing appropriate eye contact when speaking, how to ask for help, and how to be properly assertive in making a request.
- It is important not to downplay the fact that the student will still likely experience frustration in his schooling. However, reassure him that he can experience success with the right accommodations and can continue to have hopes for the future.

The provision of accommodations allows students with learning disabilities to play on a more level playing field.

Although some parents may not wish to have their child “labelled” or “treated differently,” it is important to keep in mind that treating everyone fairly does not necessarily mean treating everyone equally. Rather, it means ensuring that everyone gets what they need. Giving students the tools to self-advocate will allow them to better let others know what they need to be successful.

*Melanie Reader is a Registered Psychologist and Manager of Assessment and Intervention with Estelle Siebens Community Services – Foothills Academy. Foothills Academy Society has a dual purpose: to offer a fulltime School Program for students with learning disabilities and to provide to the greater community through a Community Services component. The mandate of Estelle Siebens Community Services is to assist students, youth, and adults who are experiencing difficulties in their school, work, and/or home environments as a result of learning disabilities, AD/HD, and/or social/emotional challenges. We offer assistance to these individuals as well as parents and professionals through the provision of assessments; social skills programming; counseling services; presentations and workshops; and intensive remedial instruction for reading, writing, and mathematics. Our goal is to provide quality services within a supportive environment and to advocate in our global community for better understanding, acceptance, and respect for individuals and their families who have encountered difficulties. Please call (403)270-9400 or visit [www.foothillsacademy.org](http://www.foothillsacademy.org) for more information.*

### **Additional resources (for students):**

- All Kinds of Minds (for elementary students) by Dr. Mel Levine
- Keeping A Head in School (for secondary school students) by Dr. Mel Levine
- Learning to Slow Down and Pay Attention: A Book for Kids about ADHD by Dr. Kathleen G. Nadeau & Dr. Ellen B. Dixon
- Attention, Girls! A Guide to Learn All About Your ADHD by Dr. Patricia O. Quinn

### **Additional resources (for parents):**

- The Motivation Breakthrough: 6 Secrets to Turning on the Tuned-Out Student by Richard Lavoie
- A Mind at a Time by Dr. Mel Levine
- Educational Care: A System for Understanding and Helping Children with Learning Differences at Home and in School by Dr. Mel Levine
- [www.ldsuccess.org](http://www.ldsuccess.org)