The term advocacy has roots in the legal system, but is used today by individuals and groups working for social change. **Anyone can be an advocate.** When you hear this word, someone who attends your IEP meetings with you on your behalf may jump to mind. Most likely you have been advocating for your child, but never associated this term with your caring efforts. An advocate is simply someone who: is committed to change; is willing and able to publicly share their commitment; and is open to increasing their knowledge and understanding of the issue.

**Different titles sharing common goals**

**Professional Advocates** work in the field, including psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists, and education advocates to name a few. **Lay Advocates** are not employed by the systems that are the target of the advocacy, which allows them the opportunity to voice their opinions freely. They can monitor the system from the outside looking in. Lay Advocates can get involved by joining advisory councils and boards of directors; seeking public speaking and education opportunities; participating in letter writing campaigns; and supporting activism.

**Advocacy begins at home**

You can begin practicing your advocacy skills right at home with your own family. When family members find out about a child’s diagnosis, the reaction can be mixed, and sadly might include disbelief, disapproval, criticism, misunderstanding and judgment. Remember, your job as an advocate is to help people understand issues. Share your child’s diagnosis and provide your family with good factual information about the diagnosis to help dispel myths or incorrect perceptions. Encourage reasonable expectations. Provide the same positive reinforcement tactics you use for your children on your family members. And set good boundaries. If a family member cannot accept your child, you may need to pull your strongest advocacy skills and limit the relationship that family member has with your child.

**Advocate by modeling**

When you stand up for your child’s rights, you are unwittingly standing up for the rights of all children with autism. The service you get for your child may then be made available for the next family that comes behind you. And be aware of how you speak to your child in public as others will follow your lead. Are you asking your child to make choices, or are you making all of his decisions for him? If you want others to treat your child with respect, then you must demonstrate by your actions how you want your child treated.

**Advocating at school**

There are some things to keep in mind before you enter those hallowed hallways. Maintain good records and request everything in writing. Verbal agreements and understandings won’t carry any weight when it comes down to implementing the services your child needs. When you attend IEP meetings, do not go alone. Even if you have a great working relationship with the school, take a friend, a family member, a paid advocate – anyone that can take notes for you and be there for support if things get heated. Speak up with assertiveness, but don’t be aggressive. Even if you disagree with what the teachers and administrators are saying, aim to build strong relationships with them. Keep in mind that you want them to have an open line of communication with you.

**Advocating for social change in your own back yard**

Sometimes advocacy can happen in unexpected places. Communities and groups that you already participate in can become a vehicle for activism. In your community reach out to local support groups, advocacy agencies, faith communities, community associations, and local events. Search our online provider database or scroll through our online calendar of events to get connected. Facebook and other online social networks are another great way to invite “friends” to become fans of Pathfinders and advocacy groups.

**Advocating for systems change**

Don’t be intimidated – this is more doable than you may imagine. There are opportunities for you to impact change at the legislature, county council, state agencies, and advisory councils. And you can become involved as much or as little as you like. You could attend bill hearings, attend rallies, go to town hall meetings, attend a public meeting of the Maryland Commission on Autism, provide testimony, or write letters and emails to elected officials. For more information on how you can become involved, visit The Arc of Maryland, a statewide public policy advocacy organization committed to dignity, civil rights, quality supports, community inclusion, and the empowerment of individuals with cognitive and developmental disabilities and their families.

So the next time your child is melting down at Target and you stand up to the staring and judgmental eyes of strangers, put that giant “S” on your chest and remember you are Super Advocate.

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Read the full article, “How to Become an Advocate (You May Already Be One)!

http://www.pathfindersforautism.org/articles/view/how-to-become-an-advocate-you-may-already-be-one

**Pathfinders for Autism Online Provider Database**

www.pathfindersforautism.org/providers

**Pathfinders for Autism Online Calendar**

www.pathfindersforautism.org/calendar

Maryland Commission on Autism

www.dhmh.maryland.gov/autism/

**The Arc of Maryland**


**Mental Health Association of Maryland**

www.mhamd.org/networks/