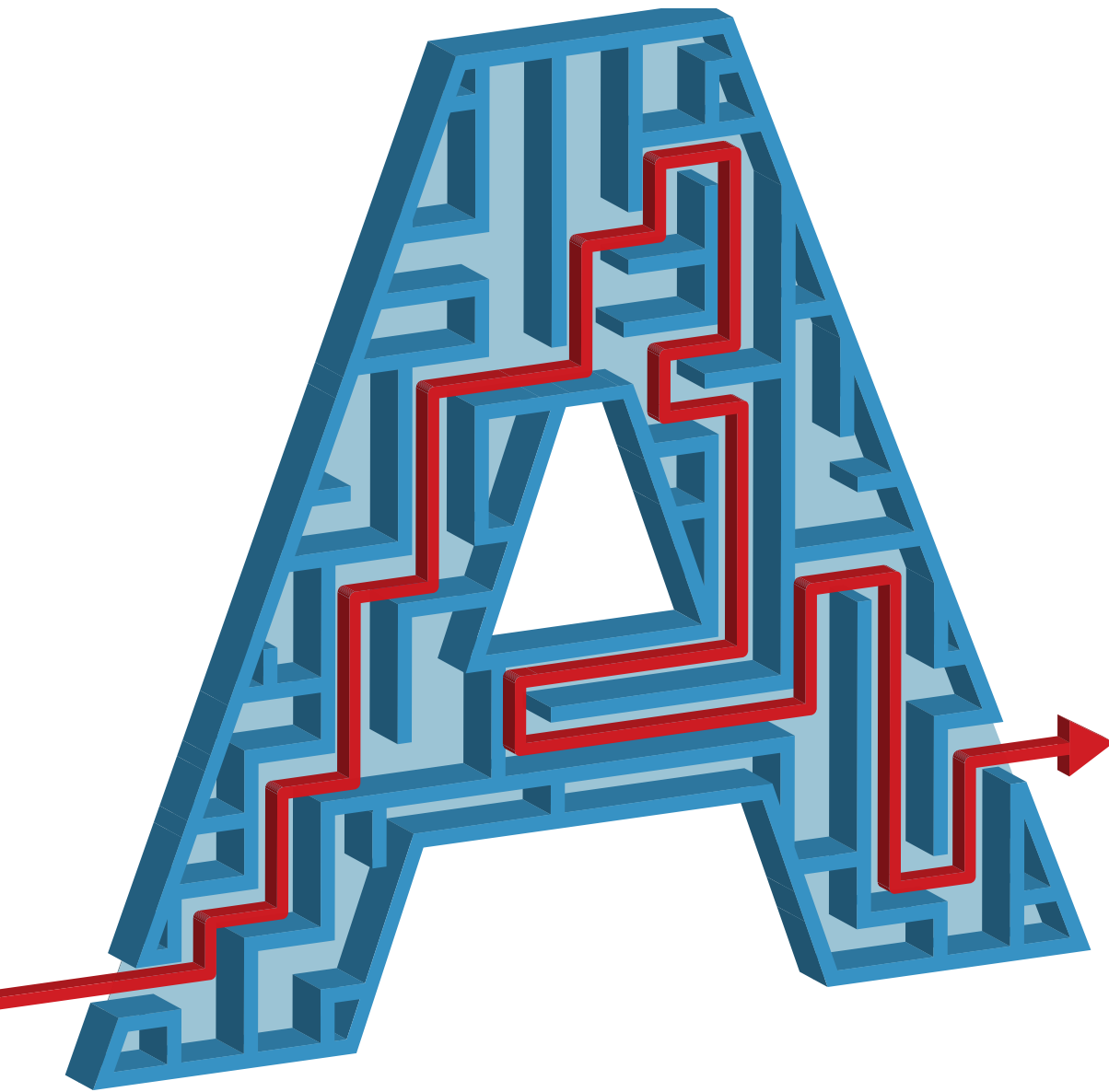


NEGOTIATING THE MAZE

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE **ADVOCACY** IN SCHOOLS



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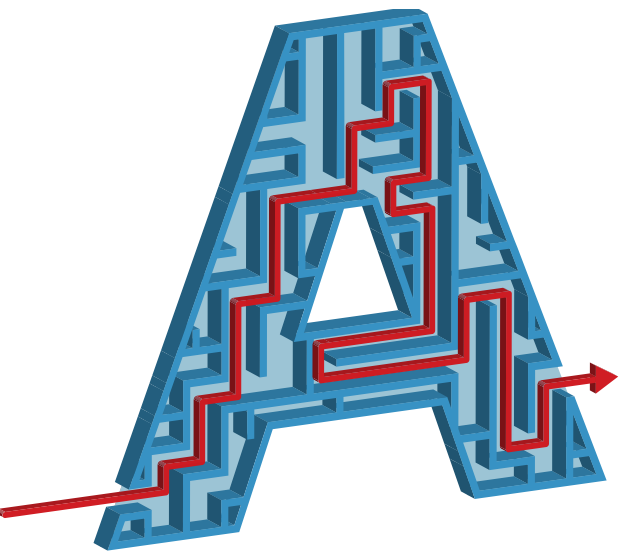
AUTISM ONTARIO

Autism Ontario has been the voice of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families since 1973, working to ensure that each individual with ASD is provided the means to achieve quality of life as a respected member of society. With thousands of members and supporters across the province, Autism Ontario is the largest collective voice for families whose teen and adult children struggle to receive necessary clinical and support services to meet their unique needs.

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“No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t seem to get my child’s teacher to understand who my daughter was...

How do I work with my child’s school?

Where can I find information about what my child has a right to?

I don’t understand why I have to go through the same process year after year.

All I want is the best for my child!”

ADVOCACY

Advocacy is about securing, protecting and advancing the rights of one’s self or others. Special education students have rights. The Ministry of Education has enacted legislation and regulations to support the education of special needs children. School boards are responsible for implementing programs in compliance with current legislation and regulations.

Parents, however, may have to strongly advocate to ensure that their child’s rights are met at school. It is the parent’s right and responsibility to see that their child has an appropriate educational program, and it is certainly acceptable for parents to advocate for their child. A parent’s relationship with the school/school board is not a social relationship. It is a business/legal relationship with the goal of getting the most appropriate education for your child.

Most effective parent advocates share a combination of important knowledge and skills:

- An understanding of special education regulations and rules
- An understanding of special education law
- A sense of *procedural advocacy*
- A realistic sense of what they want and how to work with staff to achieve their goals

TWO MAJOR THEMES TO THE ADVOCACY PROCESS

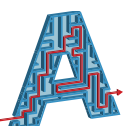
1. Parents often feel a power differential in their interactions with the education system.
2. Parents and families feel they can't voice their concerns, affecting their ability to successfully advocate for their children.

Tips for Successful Advocacy

- Always know specifically what you want
- Remember that negotiating is part of the advocacy process
- Be willing to make concessions
- Do not blame and do not get angry
- Focus on issues and not on personalities
- Be persistent – don't give up at the first sign of opposition
- Listen carefully to what the others are saying
- Give and listen for effective feedback
- Acknowledge points of agreement
- Plan and Prepare - establish a strategy based on definite goals
- Keep Records - establish a paper trail

To Advocate Effectively You Must Be Knowledgeable about Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

- Understand your child's strengths and weaknesses/areas of need.
- What are your child's emotional, intellectual, social, and physical needs?
- What kind of supports, accommodations, and services does your child need to successfully participate in school?
- Help the school understand your child's communication skills, social interaction style and behaviours in relation to the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.



- Help the school understand the differences in learning styles between children with ASD and typically-developing children
- What kinds of teaching strategies are generally used with children like your child? What teaching strategies does your child benefit from?

To Advocate Effectively you must be Knowledgeable about Educational Programs and Supports in Your School Board

- Go online to access your school board’s special education plans, including programs, services, policies and procedures.
- What kinds of placements, programs, and support services are available to your child in your board of education?
- Talk to other parents of children with special needs. You may learn of services the school board has not told you about.
- Find out the school board guidelines for assigning teaching assistants to students.
- What community services and support groups are available to your child? How can these be accessed?
- Professionals and their knowledge and expertise are valuable members of a collaborative team. Build a team of support for your child.

ESTABLISHING A GOOD WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILD’S SCHOOL

There are no “perfect” programs and a child’s needs may change over time. It is helpful to recognize and acknowledge that students may experience periods of consolidation of skills as well as periods when they are able to learn at a much faster rate. Be proactive in monitoring your child’s learning habits, their program and behaviour at school.

Begin by assuming that everyone in your child’s circle, both at home and at school, wants the best for your child. The most important relationship you have in the educational system is with your child’s teacher.

Go online for more helpful resources including *Teachers: What to Expect and Understanding the Role of the Educational Assistant*.

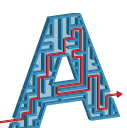
There are some positive steps you can take to ensure that the relationship with your school gets off to a good start and stays on course:

- If the teacher has not had experience with children who have Autism Spectrum Disorder, provide information about autism and about your child in particular. Your Autism Ontario Chapter has many videos, articles and other resources that provide opportunities for teachers and teaching assistants to quickly gather information about Autism Spectrum Disorder.
- Be part of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process. At the beginning of the year, tell the teacher that you are looking forward to having input into the creation of the IEP. You may even wish to prepare a preliminary list of skills you would like to see your child work towards.
- Autism Ontario invites schools across the province to participate in our annual Raise the Flag awareness campaign. Teachers have access to helpful resources and activities to help make their schools more inclusive places for their students with ASD.
- Inform the teacher about activities in which your child is involved both at home and in the community.
- Be a partner in the home/school communication process. Early in the school year, work with the teacher (and teaching assistant) to design and implement a home/school communication plan.
- Ask how you can support your child's program at home. Students with ASD need to generalize skills to a variety of settings. See Strategies for Effective Home/School Communication on Autism Ontario's Knowledge Base
- Inform the school of any new information regarding your child that may impact her/his performance at school, e.g. medication, sleep patterns, etc. It is critical that the teacher be aware of any medications that your child is taking. In the event of an accident at school, paramedics must be informed of medications and dosages.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

Occasionally a situation may arise that may be difficult to handle. In frustration, do not fall into the trap of becoming overly confrontational and aggressive. Aggression will produce defensive responses. Calm assertiveness yields mutual respect.

- Always contact the teacher first. Concerns around your child's program or the implementation of the program should be addressed to the teacher. Parents should deal with the teacher rather than the teacher assistant unless there is an agreement to the contrary. Also, don't call the principal to complain about a teacher without first addressing the concern with the teacher.
- Outline the issues/concerns related to your situation.



- If the teacher cannot resolve the problem, then go up the chain - contact the principal, other board staff, including the superintendent of special education and then the director of education. You can also contact your school trustee.
- If you are not satisfied at the school board level, you can contact the Ministry of Education – first contact your District Special Education Officer and then other people in the Ministry of Education.
- If the problem is about **placement or identification**, ask the principal to arrange for an Identification, Placement and Review Committee meeting (IPRC).
- You may wish to share information about Autism Spectrum Disorder with your child's classmates. Autism Ontario has several valuable resources including a powerful awareness campaign called **Raise the Flag** where students and educators can work to make their school communities more inclusive. Information and knowledge breed understanding and acceptance.
- Be persistent – there is always someone else you can contact to assist you.

Advice for Effective Parent Advocates

- Know your long-term goals
- Focus on these goals
- Place your efforts on what will help your family achieve what you want to happen
- Develop an image, a vision of your child that is reasonable, sustainable and achievable

Plan

- Consider all the options for solutions
- Consider the pros and cons of each solution
- Identify preferred solutions
- Consider short and long term outcomes
- Consider obstacles to solutions

Develop an Action Plan

- Know what it is that you want
- Consider all the options for action on your part
- Choose the best strategy
- Sequence the steps in your strategy

Act – Stay in Contact With the School

- Make phone calls
- Write letters
- Attend meetings
- Provide resource material/assistance to the school

Evaluate

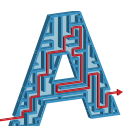
- Check indicators of success – Are changes being made to your child’s program, placement, and support? Are you getting some of the important things that you want?
- Return to earlier stages if necessary.
- Implement new advocacy plans if necessary – consult people at a higher level, take your issues to a higher level (appeal, tribunal, Ministry of Education), alter your requests.

Keep Records and Establish a Paper Trail

- It is essential to document all your contacts with the school and school board.
- If you have a disagreement with the school, your documentation will provide a record of events.
- At some point you may be dealing with people outside your school. You may be dealing with people in school board administration, at an IPRC appeal or a Tribunal, or with people from the Ministry of Education. Your documentation will help them to understand the history of your discussions with the school or school board and what has led to your current situation.

Making Telephone Contacts Successful

- Ask for the appropriate person. Always know the name and position of the person you are talking with and record this information.
- Give your name and clearly state the reason for your call.
- Know what you want from this person. Focus on your objective and do not get sidetracked.
- Have records and relevant information available to you as you speak.
- Keep in mind that you are always negotiating. You are always looking for a win-win situation. Be direct and be polite.
- If you are not satisfied, ask for someone else to speak with. State that you will not be dropping the matter but will continue to look for solutions.



CALL AND MEETING LOGS

Keep a record of all communications. Your notes are an important part of your documentation. Note key words/ideas rather than long sentences.

Calls

- Who you spoke with, including voice messages left
- The date of the call, including voice messages
- What was said (you and the person you spoke to)

Meetings

- Date of the meeting, time and length of meeting
- Name and position of people attending
- Key issues discussed-questions and answers given by different individuals-who said what.
- Action plans and people responsible for different aspects of it
- Date of follow up meeting, as appropriate
- Ask for clarification when necessary.
- If you retype your notes, keep the rough draft in case clarification is needed.
- It is acceptable to bring a note-taker with you to important meetings-this will allow you to focus on the discussion and not on your notes.

Meeting Minutes

- The school may record minutes of the meeting.
- Always ask for a copy of the minutes.
- If you have concerns about the accuracy of the minutes, contact the chair of the meeting to discuss them.
- Take your own notes even if the school is taking minutes.

Writing Letters

- Letters you write to the school and letters the school writes to you are an important part of your documentation.

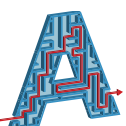
- Get in the habit of putting it in writing. This is how you establish a “paper trail”. This paper trail will be valuable in demonstrating how you have worked with the school or school board to find satisfactory solutions to special education concerns.
- Letters can illustrate how you worked with the local school to resolve concerns, and then whom you contacted outside the school if you were not satisfied at the school level.
- Letters provide evidence about who said what and when it was said.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL LETTER WRITING

- Put events in a chronological order, so that someone not familiar with your child / situation who is reading the letter can understand the history of events.
- Clearly state facts, and give dates – **do not blame or make judgements** about events or people – let the facts speak for themselves.
- Make the point of your letter clear – you are doing one or more of the following:
 - Requesting information,
 - Requesting action,
 - Declining a request from the school board, and
 - Providing information.
- Keep in mind that you are always negotiating- **DO NOT WRITE ANGRY LETTERS.** You want to leave a positive impression on the reader.

Write Letters as Follow Up Strategy for Meetings and Telephone Conversations

- Write letters to the school after important telephone conversations and meetings and summarize the discussion.
- At the end of your letter, ask for a written reply to confirm receipt of the letter and to clarify if you have misunderstood anything.
- This provides documentation should your dispute take you to discussions with people outside the school, as in an appeal or tribunal.
- Summarizing a discussion in a letter does not prove that what you said is correct. However, if the school does not reply back to you there is the suggestion that your letter is correct. Ask for a written reply to confirm receipt of the letter and to clarify if you have misunderstood anything.



Ask the School for Written Documentation

- It is helpful to get the school to put their responses to your requests in writing. If the school has stated that they will provide a particular special education service/take a specific course of action, ask for that in writing.
- If the school has stated it will not provide a specific service, it is useful to get a letter stating that the service will not be provided/ action will not be taken and why the service will not be provided/action will not be taken. Having a letter from the school is helpful for when you to move on to the next step.
- Often the school will not put their response in writing. This is when it is important for you to write a follow up letter summarizing the meeting. You clearly state what you were told and the reasons given.
- This letter writing action on your part provides written documentation of the meeting/ conversation. If the school wants to dispute what is in your letter you are more likely to get a written response from the school if you have put in writing your recollection of the discussion.

Template for a Meaningful IPRC*:

Dear,

Thank you for the getting back to me with the details for the upcoming IPRC.

I thought I would write you a note so that we are on the same page regarding my son/daughter's upcoming IPRC. My understanding of the IPRC is the product of research into the IPRC as it is described in Bill 181/98 of the Ontario Education Act.

First, I plan to consult with you to develop the needs list that captures my child's needs based on written documentation. This includes medical reports, psychological assessment information, report cards, etc. I plan to advocate for language with sufficient clarity to capture my child's needs.

I also request that we discuss programs and services my child requires to accommodate for and meet his needs as described on the needs list. Though I am aware that discussions about programs and services are often held at IEP development meetings, the need to discuss programs and services at an IPRC at the request of parents is noted in section 181/98 of the Education Act.

In order to have a meaningful IPRC that addresses these concerns, I am making myself available for a meeting of at least 30 minutes in length.

I must stress that to a great extent our discussion of my child's needs and of programs and services will be merely an acknowledgement and celebration of the good work that school staff does with my son/daughter.

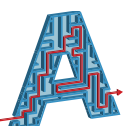
I am mindful that my requests, though mandated by regulation and substantially listed in your school board's Guide to Special Education, might not fit with how traditionally IPRCs are carried out in the board. If you have any questions and/or want to discuss my thoughts please contact me.

Mindful Parent

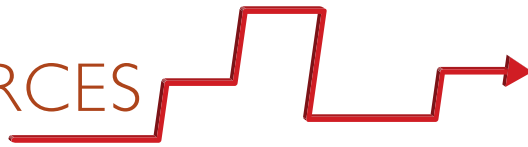
*Ed Mahony. Positive Advocacy Strategies for Parents, 2015

COMPILE A FILE ON YOUR CHILD

- Your child's file is an important part of your documentation.
- Obtain reports from medical consultants, speech therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists, and hospitals. It may be necessary to request these reports in writing.
- Obtain copies of any assessments, including educational and psychological assessments the school does on your child. Often the school does not give parents a copy unless they specifically request it. Ask for your copy.
- Keep copies of all your child's Individual Education Plans (IEPs).
- Keep report cards.
- Keep notes/ letters from the school on your child's behaviour or progress.
- Keep the home/school communication book. Photocopy pages from this when necessary.



RESOURCES



Special Education: The Basics – What You Need to Know

The Education Act or Bill 82 stands as a landmark on Special Education

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/edact.html>

Shared Solutions - A Guide to Preventing and Resolving Conflicts Regarding Programs and Services for Students with Special Education Needs

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/shared.pdf>

Regulation 181/98

<https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/980181>

Identification Placement and Review Committee (IRPC) – Identifying the needs of exceptional pupils

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/identifi.html>

The Individual Education Plan (IEP), A Resource Guide (2004)

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/identifi.html>

Special Education Funding Guidelines Special Equipment Amount (SEA)

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/identifi.html>

Special Education Funding Guidelines Special Incidence Portion (SIP)

http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/1516/2015_16SIP_GuidelinesEN.pdf

Special Education: A Guide for Educators

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/funding.html>

Suspension: What You Need to Know

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/funding.html>

Parent Concern Protocol

<http://www2.tdsb.on.ca/ppf/uploads/files/live/97/169.pdf>

Appeals

<http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/faq/if-i-dont-agree-with-the-decision-made-at-the-irrc-what-can-i-do/>

Ontario Human Rights Code

<http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/ontario-human-rights-code>

Autism Ontario Resources

Webinar: Positive Advocacy Strategies presented by Ed Mahony

<https://vimeo.com/132976779>

Webinar: Individual Education Plans – The Basics and Transition and Safety Plans presented by Patricia O'Connor

<https://vimeo.com/134345907>

Webinar: ABA in Educational Settings – Home to School and School to Home presented by Tracie Lindblad

<https://vimeo.com/134349790>

Autism Ontario KnowledgeBase

<http://autismontario.novosolutions.net/homekb.asp>

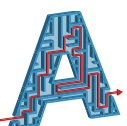
SAMPLE FORMS

Contact Log

Who I Spoke With	Date	Meeting	Phone	What I Said	What I was Told
Name Position					
Name Position					
Name Position					
Name Position					

School Personnel Information Sheet

Classroom Teacher Name: _____ Phone: _____ Email: _____	Speech/Language Pathologist Name: _____ Phone: _____ Email: _____
Resource Teacher Name: _____ Phone: _____ Email: _____	Social Worker Name: _____ Phone: _____ Email: _____
Principal Name: _____ Phone: _____ Email: _____	Behavioural Consultant Name: _____ Phone: _____ Email: _____
Psychologist/Psychoeducation Consultant Name: _____ Phone: _____ Email: _____	



School Board Personnel Information Sheet

Superintendent of Special Education

Name: _____
Address: _____
Phone: _____
Email: _____

My Trustee

Name: _____
Address: _____
Phone: _____
Email: _____

Director of Education

Name: _____
Address: _____
Phone: _____
Email: _____

Board Staff

Name: _____
Address: _____
Phone: _____
Email: _____

Name: _____
Address: _____
Phone: _____
Email: _____

Ministry of Education Contacts

Special Education District Office

District Manager

Name: _____
Address: _____
Phone: _____
Email: _____

Education Officer

Name: _____
Address: _____
Phone: _____
Email: _____

Ministry of Education Contacts

Name: _____
Title: _____
Address: _____
Phone: _____
Email: _____

Name: _____
Title: _____
Address: _____
Phone: _____
Email: _____

