

Effective Advocates

by Dr. Julia Link Roberts and Tracy Ford Inman



Communicate Effectively

Make the year 2006 a year for advocacy! In each edition of Parenting for High Potential, a new column, "Effective Advocates," will focus on a specific advocacy issue: Find Kindred Spirits, Craft Messages, Communicate Effectively, and Be Involved for the Long Run. We thank Dr. Julia Link Roberts, Chair of the NAGC legislative committee, and Tracy Ford Inman, both of Western Kentucky University, for preparing this series.

You've found kindred spirits who share your interest in advocating for gifted children. You've even crafted the message that explains what you are advocating for. Now you are ready to communicate that message – but you must be careful in how you communicate. You have to keep your goal in mind as well as your audience. Effective communication, critical in advocacy, doesn't just happen; you must plan well.

Identify Goal

The first step in effective communication is establishing your goal. What exactly are you trying to accomplish? Yes, of course, you want to share your message that you've so carefully crafted – but if you want decision-makers to act on it, you must consider the nuances of the communication itself. Maybe your purpose is persuasion; if so, then you must be prepared with details and data that support your message. Perhaps you're trying to build rapport and trust. This indicates a sharing, a give and take, in communication. If your intent is to promote an exchange of ideas or possible solutions to issues, then you need to emphasize your open mind as you bring multiple possibilities to the table. In short, the purpose of your communication should be woven throughout the discussion as you carefully select words, examples, and details to further your goal. If you plan this before you begin the discussions, you're on your way to success.

In the last column we mentioned the importance of a positive message. That positive approach is also vital in communication. Although it is easy to slip into the mode of telling horror stories about what hasn't happened for your child, you will be more effective if you concentrate on what you want to occur and why – if you focus on your message and the reason for it. If you can tie what you are advocating for to something the decision-maker also wants, or the school espouses in its mission statement, you are a step ahead.

Identify Audience

Another aspect of effective communication is consideration of your audience. Who do you want to listen to your message? Who can make a difference if they "catch on" to your advocacy? Who will make the decision or determine whether what you want to happen

for children will occur? It is important to educate the listeners who make the decisions and who determine if your advocacy message will be implemented. For example, are you advocating for change at the classroom, school, district, state, or national level? Targeting your message to the appropriate audience allows advocates to focus their time and energies on decision-makers who can make your goals become reality. Be sure to communicate with those individuals or groups using the most effective skills that you have.

Practice Listening Skills

One of the most effective skills in communication is listening. Effective communication is two-way communication that includes talking and listening, not just talking to someone. You like to talk with people who listen to you; they don't just tell you what they want you to know. Likewise your advocacy will be more successful if you listen as well as talk. If your audience knows that you are truly listening to their points, the chance of their truly listening to you increases. What behaviors indicate that you are truly listening? You can start by taking notes and asking questions to clarify what's being discussed. Don't hesitate to restate what's been said to make sure that you understand. Be sure to maintain eye contact and be sure to send out nonverbal signals that indicate attention and openness (such as nodding). There must be an exchange of information for anything substantial to occur. Establish the tone of two-way communication early in the conversation.

Ongoing Contact

Preferably this important discussion won't be your first (or only!) with the decision-makers. Hopefully you have ongoing communication with individuals who make decisions that determine appropriate services for your child or determine policy or law that will make a difference in gifted education. "Ongoing" is a very important concept in advocacy. Waiting until you have a problem isn't the best idea. An already-established relationship with decision-makers makes trouble shooting easier. You have a greater chance of success if you talk with decision-makers on an ongoing basis.

Stay Informed

As an advocate for gifted education, it is important to stay informed. The state gifted association is a ready source of information about state policies on issues related to gifted children and about opportunities for gifted children in the state. Various websites on gifted education provide a wealth of information on

a variety of topics of interest to parents and educators. For good sources of information on issues and policies, you may check out websites for the National Association for Gifted Children [www.nagc.org] and the Davidson Institute [www.gt-cybersource.org]. Another good source for state policies in gifted education is *Designing Services and Programs for High-Ability Learners: A Guidebook for Gifted Education*, especially the chapter on state policy in gifted education. Another book that provides information comparing state requirements and funding is the *2004-2005 State of the States*; both books are available through the NAGC online bookstore. Knowing where to find answers that decision-makers ask about is every bit as important as knowing the answer. Once you have found the information requested, then you need to get it right back to the individuals who asked the question. You have learned, and so have they.

Timeliness

Communication needs to be timely and show consideration. Advocates need to stay tuned in to what is going on; and, of course, that is more likely with regular communication. Waiting until there is a crisis complicates the possibility of educating the individuals making the decision. Being timely is vital in advocacy because there are limited opportunities to provide input on key decisions. Timeliness also applies to when you communicate your messages and to when you thank the individual(s) after the decision is made. Thanks are in order if you got what you requested, but a note of appreciation for the opportunity

to discuss the issue is appropriate even when the decision wasn't exactly what you had hoped for. Acknowledging their consideration of your request in a note will be the next step in your communication. Since advocacy is ongoing, you will want and need to keep the communication channels open; and timeliness and consideration are key ingredients to do just that.

Remember to maintain your communication with decision-makers as you would with a good friend. Communicate often, sharing your thoughts regularly. Really listen to what the person has to say asking questions and giving feedback; you also share your ideas. Make certain that he or she knows what you are saying. Be interested in what he or she thinks about your thoughts. Keep two-way communication ongoing throughout the relationship. This is effective communication, and effective advocates must be effective communicators.

For more information about communication and advocacy, check out these resources:

- Sandra L. Berger's *Supporting Gifted Education Through Advocacy*. (ERIC #E494) (<http://www.nagc.org/CMS400Min/index.aspx?id=201>)
- The National Association for Gifted Children's *Communication Tools for Advocacy*. (<http://www.nagc.org/CMS400Min/index.aspx?id=594>)
- Joyce Van Tassel-Baska's chapter State Policies in Gifted Education in J.H. Purcell & R.D. Eckert (Eds.). (2006) *Designing Services and Programs for High-Ability Learners: A Guidebook for Gifted Education*. Corwin Press.