

Parents

AREA TITLE

ADVOCACY

About...

All children and young people have the right to have their views, wishes and feelings taken into account when decisions are made about their lives. This right is enshrined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and in the Children Act 1989, and reinforced by subsequent legislation such as the Human Rights Act 1998.

There is a particular need for young disabled people to get advocacy support as they are going through changes and making choices about what they want in their life. Despite the emphasis of legislation, policy and practice guidance, there is evidence to suggest that disabled children and young people are frequently excluded from any meaningful involvement in decision making about their lives.

The use of advocacy is an important way to support a disabled child's right to participate in decision-making.

Advocacy is about speaking up for children and young people. It is about empowering children and young people to make sure that their rights are respected and their views and wishes are heard at all times. Advocacy is about representing the views, wishes and needs of children and young people to decision-makers, and helping them to navigate the system.

Many different people and agencies can act as advocates for a child on the autism spectrum:

- Parent or family member
- Independent advocate or children's rights officer (for looked after children)
- Foster carer or residential worker
- Social worker, teacher, teaching assistant, mentor, youth worker or personal advisor
- Friends or other young people

Most advocacy services for children are for looked after children and young people, those in care, and those at risk or in need. Children with communication impairments or other disabilities have been identified as having particular difficulties in gaining access to advocacy. Some generic community based advocacy schemes work with young disabled people in transition.

Because for parents advocating for their child is often second nature it is sometimes hard to take a step back and recognise that as with any child or young person sometimes their views and wishes may differ from those of their parents. It is important to think about when an advocate external to the family may be able to bring something extra to a negotiation, discussion or feedback process.

The Government has developed national standards for advocacy practice in order to make sure that looked after children and young people get the same support, as far as possible, as other young people living at home and leaving home.

Literature and research on those on the autism spectrum has shown the importance of including the perspective of those on the autism spectrum when developing services and designing provision to meet their needs. Many procedures for assessment, programme planning and review now have sections to be completed by the children themselves.

Professionals are developing ways of obtaining the views and opinions of children on all aspects of school life and their future plans, and are continuing to develop ways for non-verbal and less able children to indicate their choices. Hopefully this will lead to an increase in the number of children involved in making decisions which affect their everyday lives.

Local authorities should give guidance to schools and other professionals on enabling pupil participation, including those pupils on the autism spectrum, who may need alternative forms of communication. This will enable children to be involved in setting and evaluating learning and social targets.

Get help from...

- [Children's Rights Officers and Advocates](#) (CROA) 020 7833 2100
The CROA database includes one of the most complete records of advocacy services operating in England. It contains contact details of independent advocacy providers and children's rights services
 - [Voice for the child in care](#) 0808 800 5792 Providing advocacy for looked after children
 - [National Youth Advocacy Service](#) 0800 616 101 NYAS A UK charity providing children's rights and socio-legal services
 - [Action for Advocacy](#) 020 7820 7868 A central information resource for all independent advocacy
 - [Children's Rights Alliance for England](#) (CRAE) protect children's rights by lobbying government, bringing or supporting test cases and by using regional and international human rights mechanisms. They offer free legal information and advice, raise awareness and do research. Each year they publish a review of the state of children's rights in England.
 - [Children's Commissioner for England](#) The Children's Commissioner for England, Sir Al Aynsley-Green leads an organisation called 11 MILLION which works to make sure that adults in charge listen to the views of the 11 million children across England.
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- [Teachernet](#). Includes pointers and good practice examples for advocacy in the context of education.

Links

[National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services](#)

Published by the Department of Health, 2002

Information - A standards framework to plan, develop and review advocacy practice for children at all levels.

[Your Voice Your Choice: A Guide for Children and Young People about the National Advocacy Standards](#)

Author - Nicola Wyld, Published by Voice for the Child in Care, 2002

Information: A guide aimed at children and young people explaining about their rights, the role of an advocate and the National Children's Advocacy Standards.

[Get it Sorted](#)

Published by the Department for Education and Skills, 2004

Information - Guidance for providing effective advocacy services for Children and Young People making a complaint under the Children Act 1989

[Advocacy for Looked After Children and Children in Need](#)

Author - Christine Oliver, Abigail Knight and Mano Candappa

Published by - Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London, 2006

Information - A summary of the key findings of the first national study of children's advocacy in England. The study was prepared for the Department of Health and the DfEs.

[Growing Up Speaking Out](#)

Author: Sounds Good Project, December 2005

Information: A guide about community-based advocacy for young learning disabled people in transition (14 - 25 years). Sections within the guide go into detail on most aspects of providing advocacy for this age group.

[When Will We Be Heard?](#)

Published by The Children's Society, 2007

Information: The survey that is reported here was commissioned to further an understanding of how advocacy services respond to disabled children.

Case Studies

Transition and advocacy

There is a particular need for young disabled people to get advocacy support as they are going through changes and making choices about

what they want in their life. Transition is a particularly difficult time for young people on the autistic spectrum. It is a time of change and choices, dealing with what will happen after school, where to live, what social life, and what chance for work or other training? Transition planning is a formal process which begins in Year 9 when young people are around 14 years old and is designed to plan ahead for the young person's future, with formal meetings each year.

- **A young woman on the autism spectrum was leaving school, but did not want to move on to the Further Education Unit that was offered to her other classmates. The School, Social Services and Connexions were involved and did not understand her resistance. With advocacy support, it was established that the young woman had been in an all male class for years and did not want to continue to be the only female. She wanted to move on and have some female company. So she left school and starts college in September.**

Advocacy for Children placed away from home

Some children on the autism spectrum may be placed away from home in residential care, health settings, residential schooling or foster care. Many disabled children in residential placements receive funding from social services authorities. Some local authorities treat such children as 'looked after' because they are providing accommodation for them. Other authorities do not see such children as looked after, perhaps because of the stigma and perhaps because parents have not asked social services to provide accommodation. For those children who are looked after by a local authority, the full protections of the Children Act 1989 apply.

Advocacy can provide an important means of independent support for children in these circumstances to enable them to take part in decision making about their own lives.

- **A young man on the autism spectrum was placed out of county in a specialist 52 week education placement and was given looked after child status. The young man's advocate identified that his SEN annual review had not been carried out and alerted the local authority who duly brought together the key people to review his educational achievement and needs. The advocate helped represent the young man in the process.**

At a specialist residential school in Worcestershire (Sunfield), all students have access to an independent visitor through "Voice for the Child in Care". The independent visitor has knowledge of young people on the autism spectrum and visits the school on a fortnightly basis. The welfare needs of individual students are addressed through their appointed focus worker and key team.

The school also has a Student's council where all students are given a forum to comment on the running of the school and events that have happened over the past week. The student council report is completed in

symbols, and pupils operate a democratic voting system to be elected onto the council. Each department has three councillors and every student has a vote. A digital camera is used to provide photos of nominees to ensure that everyone takes part in the process.

Advocacy in Education

This specialist outreach service in the London Borough of Redbridge ensures that the pupils supported by team members have the opportunity to express their views in a number of ways, including annual reviews. The team also works alongside teachers within Hatton School in Redbridge, which has a specialist provision for primary children on the autistic spectrum. All the children at the school are encouraged to participate in the reviewing process and contribute in some written form. Older children attend reviews where possible. The school has developed a variety of methods to encourage children to express their views using visual materials and practical activity. This ranges from drawings and paintings to use of symbol and making written comments. The specialist curriculum gives opportunities for the development of communication skills, self awareness, social interaction and social understanding which all aid self-advocacy skills.

Author: AA