# Chapter 10: Empowering Your Child

**Introduction:** Empowering your child to have self-advocacy skills will allow them to have a say in their services and supports and be as independent as possible. You can empower your child by making sure they know themselves, know their needs, and know how to get what they need. Empowered children are confident children who are able to make sure their needs are met. It’s never too early to start working on self-advocacy skills.

**Definitions:**

**Empowerment** is the process of a person becoming more confident in making decisions about their life, knowing and using their rights, and getting the support that is right for them.

**Self-advocacy** means a person canspeak up for themselves, describe their strengths, needs, and disability, find out about their rights, and get help or know who to ask if they have a question. Self-advocacy for children also means getting help from parents, teachers, and other adults.

## What Families Should Expect:

* You can help your child become empowered and be a self-advocate by learning how you can support your child’s decision-making and advocacy. There are many ways to encourage confidence in children including having them participate in clubs, sports, and other activities where they can build self-esteem. Listening to and taking your child’s opinion into account in the decisions you make for your child is another good way to encourage your child’s self-advocacy. You can help your child understand their disability and feel empowered to speak up about what they want and need by having them join a support group or other disability related organization. You can ask that your child’s school includes self-advocacy as a goal on your child’s IEP. If your child’s disability impacts their communication skills, make sure that they receive support to help them effectively communicate for themselves. There are many good resources available to both teach you and your child self-advocacy skills. See the resources in this chapter for more information on empowering your child.

## What Families Want Their Team Members to Know:

* Ableism and low expectations for my child are barriers to my child learning self-advocacy skills. My child’s confidence and the belief in their abilities is diminished if you think my child is incapable of expressing an opinion or participating in their own programming. Making my child feel valued and capable will help my child learn to speak up and communicate what works for them. This will lead to better outcomes for all.
* My child might be afraid to speak up in meetings. Meetings can be intimidating for parents and children because we are often outnumbered by professionals and have not been adequately prepared for the meeting. My child might be worried that speaking up will upset others. You can support my child’s participation and self-advocacy by making the meeting space a safe place for open discussion, ensuring we know the purpose of the meeting, and specifically making space to ask my child for input in the decision-making.
* My child may not have formally been taught self-advocacy skills. Consider including goals, education, and training on self-advocacy in any plan you develop when you are working with my child. When you are meeting with my child, make sure you have prepared them for the meeting by explaining ahead of time the purpose of the meeting and how their participation is important. Have a plan for how you will support my child’s ability to speak up about their thoughts and wishes.

## What Team Members Want Families to Know:

* Learning self-advocacy skills is important to ensure that children with disabilities are as independent as possible. If children learn self-advocacy skills, they are more likely to be successful in school, work, and life. We know it can sometimes be scary to speak up, but you can support your child by letting them know they can tell a teacher or other school staff what does and does not work for them.
* Supporting self-advocacy in children with disabilities requires a good partnership between families and schools and other agencies that support your child’s education and development. Both you and professionals have a role to play in supporting your child’s self-advocacy. It is important that your child feels supported to speak up in many different environments. We can work together to ensure that your child has opportunities for supported self-advocacy at home, in the community, and at school.
* Learning to speak up and becoming a good self-advocate is a life-long goal. As your child moves through school and becomes involved in new opportunities, the need for self-advocacy will change. Self-advocacy in elementary school, where your child is supported by many adults, is different than self-advocacy in college or a work setting where your child is expected to be mostly independent. You can support your child’s lifetime self-advocacy by learning about the expectations for self-advocacy in different settings.

## Family Checklist:

* Do I encourage my child to participate in clubs, sports, and other events?
* Do I ask my child’s opinions on the decisions I am making for them?
* Do I support my child’s efforts to speak up?
* Do I help my child understand their disability?
* Have I made sure my child has an effective way to communicate?
* Have I learned how to be a good advocate?
* Have I worked with my team to make sure we are on the same page in supporting my child’s self-advocacy?

## Team Member Checklist:

* Do we include the teaching of self-advocacy skills in the child’s program?
* Do we have high expectations for the child?
* Do we value the child’s opinions?
* Do we specifically encourage self-advocacy and opinion sharing?
* Do we tell the child they can speak up to a teacher or other staff?
* Do we coordinate the support of self-advocacy between home and school/program?
* Do we talk about the child’s strengths as well as needs?
* Do we balance positive and negative information?
* Do we invite children to their meetings?

## Resources:

[Children](https://www.pta.org/home/run-your-pta/Diversity-Equity-Inclusion/supporting-multicultural-membership-growth/Children-With-Special-Needs) with Special Needs

[Disability Rights Ohio](https://www.disabilityrightsohio.org/)

[PACER: Advocating for myself (youth)](https://www.pacer.org/students/transition-to-life/advocating-for-myself.asp)

[CPIR: Best Practices in Self-Advocacy Skill Building](https://www.parentcenterhub.org/priority-selfadvocacy/)

[OCECD: Youth Self-Advocacy and Empowerment](https://www.ocecd.org/youthportal.aspx)