

# Who Gets To Be An Advocate?

By Carla K. Binswanger

**advocate** (ad've-kat) v. **-cated, -cating**. To recommend. -n. (ad've-kit, -kat'). **1.** One who supports or defends a cause. **2.** One who pleads on behalf of another.

— Webster's Dictionary

In the dictionary, there are just two definitions for the word advocate. But in the world of special needs parenting, the number of definitions runs into the hundreds.

In my personal experience alone, I can count a dozen individuals with widely differing knowledge and expertise—all of whom have all acted as advocates for our son: the speech therapist who has helped us draft IEP goals; the child psychologist who helps us choose our battles with the school; the behavioral therapist who attends IEP meetings with us; the mom I met at the playground last year who has helped me understand the politics of our school district.

Each of them, in their own way, is a

special education advocate. But not one of them has a business card that says so. Does it matter?

That depends who you ask.

In the tiny universe of my son's special education needs, we were lucky enough never to have needed a more "official" advocate – someone, for example, who was trained by one of the many Parent Training and Information Centers across the country, to help parents understand their rights under state and federal law, help them navigate the maze of special

## A GOOD ADVOCATE:

### IS WELL TRAINED AND KNOWS THE LAW

- Ask what kind of training the advocate has received. When? From what organization(s)? How much experience does he/she have? • Consider asking the advocate specific questions about special education laws and regulations. Does the advocate give clear explanations?

**Finding the right advocate for your family means asking the right questions. Try to interview at least three advocates before hiring one.**

### UNDERSTANDS SCHOOLS

- Discuss what the advocate knows about teaching methods. Ask the advocate to explain how to measure your child's progress in school, and to show how this information can be helpful in developing the IEP. • Find out how the advocate plans to obtain positive results for your child, while maintaining a productive working relationship with your child's school.

### TAKES TIME TO KNOW YOUR CHILD

- If possible, arrange for the advocate to meet and spend time with your child. Your child's education must be individualized to meet his unique needs; an advocate should get to know your child as an individual. • Make sure the advocate understand the facts of your child's situation. If you would like the advocate to see your child's school records, the school will require you to sign a release form.

### EMPOWERS YOU

- Find out how the advocate will try to educate and empower you to become a better advocate for your child. • Find out when the advocate is available, and how much time he or she will be able to spend with you. Is the advocate willing to attend meetings at your child's school?

### UNDERSTANDS DISABILITIES

- Find out what the advocate knows about your child's specific disability. • Ask if the advocate has experience with other children who have the same type of disability, and consider if that is important to you in obtaining an advocate.

### ACTS PROFESSIONALLY

- Ask the advocate to explain how he or she was able to work out a solution with and for other families in the past. • Consider asking for references from the advocate's previous clients. • Consider drawing up a written agreement of what the advocate will do for you. • If the advocate charges a fee, make sure you know what the advocate's fee and/or the retainer amount will be. Agree to these specifics up front and in writing. • Decide when or if the advocate can speak to the school without your permission. • Ask that the advocate return all materials when you are finished working together. • **It's important to know that there is no formal certification or licensing process for advocates. Most advocates are not trained as lawyers. A well-trained advocate will help you know when you need advice from a lawyer.**

**SOURCE:** *A Parent's Guide to Selecting a Special Education Advocate in Massachusetts*, by The Federation for Children with Special Needs ([www.fcsn.org](http://www.fcsn.org)).

education, and, ultimately, help them become better advocates for their children. Yet even advocates with good training vary widely, and so does their training. To date, there is no clear set of standards that advocates have to meet in order to hang out a shingle that says "Special Education Advocate."

"There is a wide range of individuals who practice special education advocacy in a wide range of circumstances," says Denise Marshall, Executive Director of the Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA), a non-profit group based in Towson, Md. "For a very long time, special education advocacy has been an undefined and unregulated practice. We're working to change that."

In its ongoing efforts to define and regulate the practice, COPAA has collaborated with the University of Southern California and Children's Hospital of Los Angeles University Center for Excellence

in Developmental Disabilities. Together, they've developed a core curriculum for special education advocates, called Special Education Advocates Training (SEAT), which they piloted in California, New York, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. Now that the pilot programs are complete, says Marshall, the SEAT team is examining when to roll out the full program.

Though the program creators are quick to point out that its training program is not a certifying entity, it's clear that many in the industry see it as a critical first step toward certifying advocates. "It's an attempt to move the practice forward," says Marshall. "It will clarify expectations and roles, and will help elevate the practice into a recognized profession."

Until there is an established certification process—and, someday, regulations and oversight—governing special educa-

tion advocates, there are two excellent sources for common-sense advice on how to choose an experienced, well-trained advocate: The COPAA web site ([www.copaa.org](http://www.copaa.org)) offers "Guidelines for Choosing a Special Education Advocate". And the Federation for Children with Special Needs ([www.fcsn.org](http://www.fcsn.org)) publishes "A Parent's Guide to Selecting a Special Education Advocate in Massachusetts" which offers advice (see sidebar) applicable to parents and guardians everywhere. •

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