

SAILING MY OWN SHIP

A GUIDE TO SELF-ADVOCACY

"I AM NOT AFRAID
OF STORMS, FOR I AM
LEARNING HOW TO
SAIL MY OWN SHIP."

LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

ALABAMA DISABILITIES

**AD
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ADVOCACY PROGRAM

What Is ADAP?

The Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program (ADAP) is part of the nationwide federally mandated protection and advocacy (P&A) system. Our mission is to provide quality, legally-based advocacy services to Alabamians with disabilities in order to protect, promote and expand their rights. We seek a society where persons with disabilities are valued, exercise self-determination and have equality of opportunity.

What services does ADAP provide?

Information & Referral

ADAP answers all calls for information on disability rights and laws.

Investigation

ADAP investigates complaints that persons with disabilities are being abused, neglected, or mistreated.

Education & Training

ADAP provides training for consumers, families, attorneys, and service providers on disability rights and laws.

Case Advocacy Assistance & Legal Representation

ADAP provides case advocacy services for persons with disabilities to secure the rights and services provided by both state and federal law. Unfortunately, ADAP cannot represent every request for individual case advocacy. For more information regarding eligibility for legal assistance, please contact our office.

Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program

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1-800-826-1675 (instate only)

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Guide To Self Advocacy

This guidebook outlines problem solving and communication skills to help you advocate for yourself.

The skills provided in this guidebook do not guarantee you will get the outcome that you seek. But, they will help you speak and act clearly and confidently - necessary first steps for any advocacy effort.

STEP ONE: Define the Problem

It is important to be clear and precise when defining the problem or issue you want resolved. The more concrete you are when you define the problem, the easier it will be to identify where you need to go to solve your problem and to brainstorm possible solutions.

Not convinced about how important this step is? Consider the difference between the following statements you might make to your doctor:

“I’m not feeling well.”

VERSUS

“I’m running a temperature of 101 degrees and have a sore throat.”

Which statement is going to get you the treatment you need faster?

STEP TWO: Identify possible solutions

Along with clearly identifying the problem or issue, it is important to identify possible solutions.

Consider many possible solutions and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Then, decide which solutions you would like to pursue. Keep your options open; don’t settle for one course of action. Keep your goal in sight but be flexible about how to get there.



STEP THREE: Determine Your Rights

Before you can advocate for your needs, you must understand your rights to particular services and protections.

Find out what laws, regulations and policies address your situation. Many advocacy agencies in Alabama, including ADAP, can help you better understand your rights.

STEP FOUR: Who has the power to get you the solution you're looking for?

Start with the person closest to the problem. Maybe that person is a classroom teacher, case manager, health professional, or social worker.

Using the communication tips found in this booklet, present your ideas to that person.

Be prepared to explain your concerns in a clear, specific manner and to document the communication.

Pay close attention to what is being said to you and take notes. Check to make sure the person you are speaking with has understood what you have said. It is ok to ask people to repeat back to you what you have told them.

It is equally important to confirm you understand what you have been told. If you can get what you are being told in written form, then ask the person to provide that for you. Do not accept vague or incomplete answers to your questions. If this occurs, ask the person to clarify or let you speak with someone who can better assist you.

If you don't get the outcome you're seeking, ask how and with whom you would appeal that person's decision. Climb the agency's chain of command to make sure a supervisor or someone else with authority has a chance to work with you on the problem and your proposed resolution.

STEP FIVE: Document everything

Create a written record of your interactions with people and agencies. This history will help you advocate better and will provide evidence of your advocacy efforts if you should need to take legal action.

Document all face-to-face conversations, letters, telephone calls and incidents concerning your situation.



A record can be made by simply writing down who you spoke with or met, where and when you talked with that person, and a brief description of your exchange - what you asked for, what you reported on, what action needs to be taken. For example:

Who: Jane Jones,
Early Intervention Coordinator
When: 6/28/2005, 11:00 a.m.
Where: Smith County School Fair
What: Asked her about programs available at my school. I was told she would need to check to let me know. I gave her my telephone number and address. She gave me her business card.

Action to be taken:

Should receive contact from Ms. Jones within a week. Call her on July 8th if I don't hear from her.

STEP SIX: Evaluate and Follow Up

If you did not get what you were seeking when you started your advocacy efforts, what other steps do you need to take to be successful?

Have you followed through to find out how your request has been handled and that you have done what is required of you?

You may want to look at achieving another solution through a different plan of action. Always have a backup plan. Decide which issues you are willing to compromise on and the minimum you are willing to accept.

If you're not happy with the outcome, find out about your rights to file an official appeal or complaint. Pay attention to timelines for appeals; they can be crucial!

Advocacy Tips and Skills

Telephone Calls

- ✓ Have a pen and paper ready to document the call.
- ✓ Have with you your written summary of what you want, why you think you should get it, and any questions you may have.



- ✓ Identify yourself and the reason for your call.
- ✓ Ask the person with whom you are speaking his name and position or job title, and write it down.
- ✓ Give a brief outline of your concerns and present your questions.
- ✓ Be ready to ask to talk with someone else if you need to. The person who answers the phone may not be the best person with whom to discuss your situation.
- ✓ Jot down the essential points of the conversation, including any new questions that arise, decisions reached, or requests made of you.
- ✓ Before you hang up, make sure you know what you need to do next and follow through.

Letter Writing

- ✓ Aim for a short and simple letter that is clear, specific and to the point.
- ✓ Make sure you provide your full name, mailing address and telephone number somewhere in the letter.
- ✓ In the first paragraph, identify yourself and explain the reasons you are writing. Write what it is you want and why you believe you should get it.
- ✓ Ask for a response within a specific time frame.
- ✓ In the closing paragraph, thank the person for taking their time to read your letter and that you look forward to hearing from them.
- ✓ Keep copies of all letters sent (and all letters received).
- ✓ Send photocopies of important documents - don't send originals.
- ✓ You may handwrite letters if you don't have a typewriter or a computer, but make certain your writing is legible.
- ✓ Make sure to sign the letter!



Meetings

- ✓ If you want to talk to someone in person, don't show up unannounced; schedule a meeting ahead of time.
- ✓ Make sure you have the correct information about the time and place of the meeting.
- ✓ Have with you your written summary of what you want, why you think you should get it, and any questions you may have.
- ✓ Plan what you are going to say, then practice. Getting feedback from friends, tape recording yourself and practicing in front of a mirror can help you to improve your speaking skills.
- ✓ Before going into a meeting, find out what documents you should bring with you to support your requests (ex. Social Security card, proof of income, school or medical records, etc.). Make copies beforehand if possible. Never submit originals.
- ✓ Feel free to bring someone with you for support.
- ✓ Have your notebook and pen ready to document the meeting. In addition to taking notes of what is said to you, write down the date, time, and place of the meeting, as well as the names and titles of the persons in attendance.
- ✓ State your concerns clearly and simply.
- ✓ Before you sign any form, read it thoroughly. If you don't understand something, then ask questions. Whenever you sign something, you have the right to a copy. Keep the copy in your files, so that you can establish a record of what it is you have agreed to, and have a reference for recalling what action will be taken or that you need to take.
- ✓ If you feel that the person is unhelpful, let them know that you wish to pursue your issue with a supervisor or a manager.



Closing Thoughts on Self-Advocacy

- ✓ Be patient but remain persistent.
- ✓ Keep your message positive. Be polite, never demanding or rude.
- ✓ Focus on the problem, not the personalities of the people involved.
- ✓ Be willing to listen, because what you hear is as important as what you say.
- ✓ Don't forget to thank people for their help. You may need to call on them again.
- ✓ Show basic courtesy by being on time and dressing appropriately for any meetings.
- ✓ Follow through with instructions given to you, such as providing additional information when requested, adhering to deadlines, and attending meetings.
- ✓ Finally, give yourself a pat on the back! No matter what the outcome, always give yourself credit for the work you have done.





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ADAP Information Mail Request

- Please add my name to your mailing list.
- I need information on disability rights or on a specific problem area.
(Please specify below.)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____

Zip _____

Phone (_____) _____

E-mail _____

Information requested: _____

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E-mail: adap@adap.ua.edu

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Place
Stamp
Here

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