

## Key Components of Programming for Students with Learning Disabilities



# Self-advocacy

Self-advocacy refers to taking action on one's own behalf. Studies of highly successful adults with learning disabilities have identified the ability to self-advocate as an important factor contributing to success. Acts of self-advocacy can lead to self-determination, which contributes to positive outcomes for adults with learning disabilities. Self-determination can be defined as the ability to consider options and make choices that affect one's future.

Students with learning disabilities need to advocate effectively for themselves. They need to learn strategies for problem solving and setting goals. They need to recognize, accept and understand their learning disabilities, and take responsibility for themselves. The process needs to begin early in students' school careers and be practised actively in the adolescent years.

## Barriers to Self-advocacy

Students with learning disabilities may not self-advocate effectively for many reasons, including the following.

- They may lack knowledge of themselves as learners, and be unable to clearly describe their abilities, needs and the conditions that best promote their learning.
- They may not know who to contact to obtain the necessary assistance or accommodations, what to ask for or how to best utilize supports.
- They may lack the ability to articulate personal strengths and needs clearly and appropriately. This may be a result of expressive language difficulties, weak social skills or lack of practice in describing their needs.
- They may not have been directly taught appropriate self-advocacy skills and/or do not have someone to coach them through situations where they might need to self-advocate.
- They may have limited confidence in their abilities and low self-esteem. As a result, they may be reluctant to ask questions in class or request extra assistance.
- They are often passive in their approach to their education, feeling that their educational future is beyond their control. This includes relying on their parents and teachers to advocate for them.
- They often encounter people who do not understand learning disabilities and why accommodations or assistance may be appropriate.

## Facilitating Self-advocacy

Given the many barriers to self-advocacy, students with learning disabilities need support to learn and practise self-advocacy. The following strategies contribute to the development of self-advocacy.

► **Involve students in making decisions about their education.**

- Involve students in planning and implementing their IPPs. Student input and involvement should increase as they proceed through school.
- Provide opportunities for making plans and choices.
- Involve students in evaluating their performance, and increase self-monitoring and personal responsibility for learning.

► **Help students understand their learning strengths and needs.**

- Talk with students about the concept of learning disabilities, and their particular strengths and needs. (See Appendix 3, page 77.)
- Provide specific feedback that helps students understand how they learn best; e.g., “You seem to remember better when you get a chance to see the information.”
- Assist students in learning to describe their thinking. Describe your own thinking and encourage students to talk about their thinking. Rephrase their ideas to highlight their learning strengths and needs.
- Explain assessment results so students understand their abilities and needs, and the implications for their schooling and lives.

► **Model and teach appropriate self-advocacy skills.**

- Younger students first learn self-advocacy skills by observing how parents, teachers and others advocate on their behalf. Begin early by discussing learning strengths and needs with students, as well as observations on how they learn best. Involve them in conversations about program planning. Even if they just listen, they are learning about collaboration and problem solving.
- Steps for self-advocacy for teens can be found in several resources. (See Bibliography, pages 107–117.) These skills need to be demonstrated, role-played, practised and evaluated. Provide extensive guidance in the middle school/junior high years with greater expectations for independence in the high school years.

- Help students prepare for meetings, conversations with instructors or other situations in which they may be involved in planning their educational futures. Model and role-play appropriate interactions.
- Self-advocates need to be informed and organized in order to be effective. Help students prepare and organize themselves. (For more on putting self-advocacy into action, see Appendices 11 and 12, pages 89–92.)
- Students can also learn a great deal from others who have gone through similar experiences. Provide students with opportunities to meet others with learning disabilities so they can learn from the experiences of these individuals. Videotapes of successful individuals are also available for this purpose.

► **Help students set appropriate and realistic goals for their learning.**

- An important part of educational decision making for students with learning disabilities is setting appropriate goals. Students should be actively involved in this process and taught ways to make goals tangible and realistic. One strategy is to make goals SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely.
- Follow up with students to review their success in achieving their goals. Self-monitoring and evaluation are important for developing realistic goals.

## Outcomes

The outcomes below describe potential results from implementing the strategies, activities and practices in this section.

- Students are able to appropriately describe their abilities and needs, and the accommodations and assistance that support their learning.
- Students are actively involved in setting realistic goals for their learning.
- Students stay in school longer.

- More students go on to post-secondary education.
- Students are successful in the workplace.

## **Connections** to other Alberta Learning Resources

- See the following pages in *Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities* (Alberta Education, 1996), Book 6 of the *Programming for Students with Special Needs* series:
  - Goal Setting, pages LD.109–LD.110
  - Enhance Personal Responsibility, page LD.204
  - Help Students Set Reasonable Goals, page LD.205.
- See the following chapters in *Make School Work for You: A Resource for Junior and Senior High Students who Want to be More Successful Learners* (Alberta Learning, 2001):
  - Chapter 1: Know Yourself, pages 1–11
  - Chapter 7: Get People on Your Side, pages 69–74.
- See the following pages in *The Parent Advantage: Helping Children Become More Successful Learners at Home and School, Grades 1–9* (Alberta Education, 1998):
  - Set Goals for School Success, page 5
  - Appendix 2: Homework Contract, page 53.

