



ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

To Challenge and Nurture Academically Capable Students

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Teaching our Children to Advocate for Themselves

When I was a child, “advocating for myself” in the classroom was not something I was trained to do, nor was anyone at that time talking about learning styles or differentiated instruction. The closest I came to being encouraged to advocate for myself was when my father talked to me about “sticking up for myself” when getting in scuffles on the playground, requiring a very different skillset. Though not nearly the same thing, as a student not trained or supported to know myself as a learner or empowered to ask my teachers for support in ways that accounted for my learning style, by week’s end, I was feeling a little *scuffed!*

Because Ashbrook’s class sizes are so small, our teachers know our students very well and do a great job anticipating their needs and flexibly and nimbly adjusting to meet those needs. What this may translate to, however, is that students may not feel as much of a necessity to self advocate or may experience fewer if any opportunities to self advocate because the environment they are in is already one that is nimble enough to seamlessly differentiate instruction in real time.

That said, life won’t always be so sympathetic to the needs of those unwilling or unable to communicate their needs, and the ability to self advocate will become an increasingly vital life skill that can help students achieve academic success and prepare for their future beyond Ashbrook. Training our children to self advocate while they are in elementary and middle school, and giving them opportunities to practice this skill, will hold them in great stead in any relationship, be it socially, academically, or professionally.

In middle school, students begin to take on more responsibility for independent learning, which is developmentally normative, so it is essential that they practice how to advocate for themselves effectively, a skill encouraged and supported by our awesome teachers.

Below are some tips for how you can work with your children at home. to reinforce what is happening in school. The goal, of course, is to ensure that Ashbrook students understand the importance of self advocacy, take the time to practice these skills, and are comfortable advocating for themselves now and when they leave Ashbrook.

1. Communicate from the "I": Encourage your children to use "I" statements to express their needs and concerns. For example, instead of saying, "This assignment is too hard," they can say, "I am struggling with this assignment, and I need some help with X part." Teach them to be specific about what they need and to ask questions if they do not understand something (chances are someone else has the same question!). In cases where they are so lost that it is difficult for them to know which question to ask, it is OK to simply say to the teacher, "I am so lost, it is difficult for me to know which question to ask."
2. Teachers Want to Help: A gift that comes with being an Explorer is the relationships our students have with their teachers, which our prospective students comment on all the time, noting how friendly our teachers are. Unfortunately, students sometimes feel as though they will jeopardize that *friendliness*, out themselves as incapable, or even come off as disrespectful by asking for help in a way that may imply that the teacher is not doing a very good job teaching. As adults, we need to help students realize that their teachers are on their side and want to see them succeed. As well as their teachers know them, there is no one who knows our students as well as they know themselves, so speaking up when they have a need is the only way to help a teacher help them.
3. Insides vs.Outsides: Noticing the confident exterior presented by their peers, students often feel as if they must be the only ones needing help or that their lack of confidence must be unique because everyone else seems so together. This "apples to oranges" assessment is the result of comparing their inner voice with the public face we all like to show others: the one that says we have it so together. Encourage your children not to confuse their insides with their peers' outsides and assure them that all of their friends have the same inner doubts, anxieties, confidence gaps, and questions. In this case, they can do everyone a huge favor by being the one to have the courage to ask for support, request help, or risk posing what they might feel is "a silly question." Children who think of asking for help as performing a "public service" in this way, will also be less

inclined to feel guilty about getting something special or being selfish with the teacher's time.

4. **Set Clear Academic Goals:** Help your children to set clear academic goals for themselves, and share these with their teachers during Conferences or at the start of the year when we are just getting to know each other. In this way, teachers and parents can work as partners to facilitate establishing and meeting these goals. These goals can be short-term or long-term and can be related to grades, subjects, or personal interests. When students have a clear understanding of what they want to achieve academically, they are more likely to advocate for themselves to reach those goals.
5. **Develop self-awareness:** Help students become self-aware by inviting them to reflect openly about their strengths and weaknesses, learning styles, and interests. Modeling this for them might make it easier for them to open up in this way. When students understand their learning preferences, and have a chance to practice talking out loud about them with you, they can better advocate for themselves by requesting support that will help them learn more effectively. One way for a student to get a sense of strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and inclinations, is to complete a learning styles inventory (there are plenty online), and use this information to inform conversations with a teacher: "I tend to be more of a visual learner," or "I am a great auditory processor," or "I sometimes have trouble knowing where all my stuff is."
6. **Promote Independence:** Encourage students to take ownership of their learning by helping them to work independently. Teach them to organize their work, manage their time, and be proud of their progress. This approach can help students feel more confident and capable of advocating for themselves. If your child struggles with these aspects of learning, spend time sharing this information with their teacher and determine where the breakdowns are before they leave middle school so that by the time they get to high school, they are past masters at knowing themselves as learners, where their native skills will hold them in great stead, and what skills need shoring up before graduation.
7. **Practice, Practice, Practice:** School is not the only place for our children to advocate for themselves. When I was a child I was certain my parents used to buy outdated milk on purpose, just so I would have to return to the market and represent my interests to the manager, and although the words were never *uttered*, I was certain I'd be sleeping somewhere else that night if I did not return with a replacement gallon of milk. Opportunities to self advocate are all around us, in peer interactions, exchanges with coaches, during visits with doctors and dentists, even in encounters with strangers: use these as opportunities to

encourage your children to practice this vital life skill, and allow them to see YOU engage in self advocacy as a model for how it's done civilly, respectfully, and professionally.

Advocating for one's needs is a vital skill that can help our young Explorers achieve academic success now and prepare for their future in a world beyond Ashbrook where class sizes might be larger (and where life definitely IS larger), and where "getting your place at the table" might not be as easy as it is on campus. By working together to help our students know and communicate their needs, we can help them get what they need to be their best selves in a world that might not always be so able or willing to guess what they need.

Click on these titles for some additional information/resources.

