

June

Supporting Speaking Up: Helping Your Young Adult Self-Advocate

How can parents support self-advocacy?

Decision making is hard. Making big decisions can still be a new and scary experience for young adults. Young adults might not have the right words to ask for what they need. Parents help young adults become competent in self-advocacy by creating spaces where youth feel comfortable practicing their self-advocacy skills and knowledge. Building these skills together involves a number of different steps:

Point it out

It is likely that your young adult is already making choices and regularly advocating for themselves in small ways. Has your young adult asked for explanations from a coach or teacher about something they didn't understand? Has your young adult ask for more responsibility or a new freedom and explained why this was important to them? These are all simple, daily behaviors that represent self-advocacy. Point these instances out, commend him or her for being a self-advocate and be sure to label the skills you're seeing him or her use in their efforts.

Start early

If you've ever tried to select a restaurant with a group of people, you'll probably agree that even simple decision-making can be difficult when shared. It is never too early to start *sharing* decision-making power with your young adult but be mindful of your young adult's level of maturity and the decisions that are being made.

A fun way to share decision making is by letting your young adult suggest where the next family vacation (or a family day trip) should be. Suggest that they come up with a persuasive argument for why they chose a particular destination, how it will work with other family member's interests and how they would plan to stay within a budget. Sharing "little" decisions gives young adults practice with the skills they'll need to tackle the big stuff when it happens.

Practice speaking-up

Sometimes knowing the right things to say is not enough. Speaking up for yourself can be scary, especially if a young adult is advocating to adults. Just like a muscle, advocacy needs to be exercised to grow and strengthen. Practicing advocating for an effort, goal, or need can help make the process more comfortable for young adults. Offer to *listen* to your him or her practice their pitch for something. If they want feedback, provide constructive insights into what they did well and how they can improve. Sometimes even saying the words out loud in a safe space makes it easier to say in more high-stress environments.

Ask for their opinions and allow them to participate in 'adult' conversations. Model the language of *needs* by sharing with them your own when appropriate. For example, you can tell your young adult, "I have a headache and it's making it hard to keep my cool. I need to take a walk outside until it subsides and then we can come back to this conversation." If young adults fumble in their request for something, take it as an opportunity to reflect back to them what you see as their needs or ask clarifying questions to give them an opportunity to practice forming their ideas.