



adoptive
parents AS
advocates

A PRIMER



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Are you an adoptive parent whose son's teacher has called numerous times to complain about his disruptive behaviour in class?

Are you worried that your family doctor isn't prescribing the right medication for your daughter's condition? Has your son recently been detained by the police due to theft?

Being the parent of an adopted child is not always easy. Issues may come up that are the result of your son's or daughter's life history. Others may not always understand or know how to handle these behavioural or health challenges. Perhaps your adopted child suffers from Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and, as a result, has difficulty interacting with other children or taking direction from adults. Perhaps she has been diagnosed with attachment issues or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Whatever your child's condition, you, as his or her caregiver, want to make certain that your child has all the opportunities and supports available to live life to his or her fullest potential.

WHY SHOULD I BECOME A PARENT ADVOCATE?

Although you may not realize it, you are probably already an advocate for your child because of you've taken on the challenge of being a parent. Think about it: No one knows as much about your child as you do. It is obviously important to solicit the help of professionals when needed; after all, that is why they are called professionals! However, do not forget that you possess a great deal of knowledge

on your own about your child that can't be gleaned from reading a textbook. You've observed your son for most of his life, you've seen him struggle, given him his medications, helped him with his homework. You know what foods your daughter should stay away from and what possible scenarios might set her off.

If you don't speak out on behalf of your child, who will?

The only way that others are going to understand what you know about your child and his or her condition is for you to tell them. If you don't discuss your challenges with the people who have the authority to make decisions about your child's situation, they will assume that everything is all right. By speaking out, you may find out that you are not alone. By refusing to be silent, you may lead the way to positive changes that affect many people, most of all your son or daughter.

WHAT IF THEY LABEL ME A TROUBLEMAKER?

Some parents shy away from speaking up because they fear other adults will think less of them. No one can make promises about labels, but when your child's welfare is at stake, whatever label you are given needs to be relegated to the bottom of the list of important issues. One of the greatest barriers that parents face in trying to get what their child needs is the lack of effective assertiveness. Most of us have not been taught these skills, which are simple but take a great deal of courage, support, and belief in our own control of our lives. Worrying less about labels and focusing more on how best to advocate for your child is a step in the right direction.

HOW DO I BECOME MORE ASSERTIVE?

Stomping into the principal's office to tell him how upset you are about the way a teacher is dealing with your child is not an effective way to be assertive. Effective assertiveness means thinking and deciding for yourself what your child needs, and making a commitment to do whatever it takes to see that they get the necessary attention, support and treatments. Instead of showing how angry you are about a doctor's or educator's perceived attitude toward your son, express your needs clearly and directly without feeling guilty.

Prepare a list of questions ahead of time and convey your feelings with confidence and self-reliance. If it seems that the person listening does not want to hear what you have to say, keep stating your arguments and asking questions in a calm manner until you feel you've made some headway. Effective communication is the key to seeing that your son or daughter's needs are met.

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

The challenge

Liam's father has just been told by the school principal that his son has been caught punching another boy in the school hallway. The principal tells his father that his punishment is suspension for one week from school. Liam has Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) and this is not the first time he has acted out.

The response

The father apologizes to the principal on behalf of his son and requests a meeting with the school's administration and his son's teachers to discuss inappropriate behaviour. When the father meets with the educators, he explains that his son has ODD, which means that he often loses his temper, can be very argumentative and often deliberately misbehaves for attention. Liam's father asks the educators if together they can come up with a consistent set of rules around discipline, tailored to his son's condition and circumstances. He passes out a sheet listing the warning signs that often precede Liam's troubling behaviours and the interventions that he has used effectively in the past to diffuse these situations. He encourages the teachers and administrators to consult this list whenever his son acts out. Later, he requests a follow-up meeting, this time bringing along with him recent medical reports from a child psychologist and family doctor.

The challenge

Julie is in grade one and has been lagging behind in school. She has trouble concentrating and is always butting in when the teacher is talking. It is hard for her to make friends because she bosses her peers around.

The response

Julie's mother takes her to see a child psychologist and after some standard tests finds out that Julie suffers from Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Her mother arranges a meeting with her teacher to discuss appropriate discipline measures for Julie when she acts out in class. The two create a homework book in which the teacher and Julie record when assignments have been completed to the best of the child's ability. Julie earns stickers when she finishes a task and when she raises her hand without butting in. At the end of the month, depending on how many stars she has accumulated, she might be asked to help the teacher prepare the big class calendar through drawing colourful pictures, and by writing in the months and days.

The challenge

The police have caught Tyler stealing a car in broad daylight. He has been taken to the community police station for questioning. When his mother arrives, he tells her that he was only borrowing the car so that he could go and visit his brother who lives about one hour away and is attending college. Tyler was diagnosed at the age of four with FAS, one of the conditions that is grouped under the umbrella term of FASD. He is now 17 years old and has been caught by police twice before this, once for stealing and once for breaking and entering.

The response

When his mother arrives at the police station, she speaks to a police officer who has had a lot of experience dealing with men and women who have FASD. As soon as she begins to tell him about her son's history, he softens and says, "I thought as much." Because Tyler's mother is prepared, she brings along copies of documentation of her son's FASD diagnosis and asks the police officer to communicate this to the judge as a consideration. Later, she presents these same documents to her son's Legal Aid lawyer, who admits them into evidence. Based on Tyler's condition and his difficulties with impulse control, judgement and abstract concepts, the Crown prosecutor and judge agree to structured course of probation, which limits Tyler's movements and gives him clear guidelines for where he can go and whom he can spend time with.

DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT

Start documenting everything that is said to you by professionals. Put all requests in writing and ask for a written response. Keep a notebook by your phone for all relevant conversations. Follow up meetings with a letter stating your understanding of what was said and agreed to. Keep these letters focused on the facts and try to leave emotions out of it. Be sure to state clearly what you are asking and make sure you request a deadline for response. Always end these discussions with "If I have misunderstood anything, please contact me in writing within 10 working days," and perhaps a polite statement about how you want to work cooperatively. Be prepared—people may find this hostile and adversarial. In reality, you are simply being organized and up front.

Remember to document every attempt to resolve disagreements regarding what your child needs. Make the commitment to go all the way to the top if you have to, and let others know your intentions. Let them off the hook—tell them you understand they might not be prepared to support you. This is something you, as a parent, must do without their assistance.

NAVIGATING MEETINGS

Meet with whom you perceive to be the supportive persons on the team beforehand, preferably in a neutral location such as a coffee shop. Share with them everything that you feel needs to be addressed and try to come to an agreement. You will feel much better in the meeting if you know that somebody understands your side of things, and they will hopefully communicate to the team that what you're asking for is within reach.

Request the meeting in writing and ask for confirmation in writing (this includes email). Give three dates and times when you will be available. State whom you would like to be present and let them know whom you will be bringing along. Be sure to ask them to schedule at least one or one and a half hours for the meeting.

Before going into a meeting with the intent to advocate on behalf of your child, bring any supporting documents you will need to back up your arguments. Try to stay calm and let others express themselves without interruption. There may be some incorrect assumptions that are made about your child's choices or intentions that you need to be prepared to relate to his or her abilities (if appropriate). Remain calm when you answer any questions about your son or daughter and try to remember that a little bit of patience often yields results.

Know your bottom line for what your child must have to succeed. Ask for more and be prepared to negotiate. Knowing your rights is crucial—you may be able to get what you really need by leveraging against what you have a right to demand but are willing to give up. Be vocal to the team that you are your child's voice.

If the members of the team do not seem to be aware of your child's history, diagnosed difficulties, or are recommending things that have already been tried and failed, think about reading at least parts of your child's file with them during the meetings. Don't assume they're dismissing years of professional documentation. Perhaps they haven't had time to read what you've sent them. Remember that these are busy people who need you to set them straight, gently, of course. If you read these documents together at the meeting, at least you will know that further denial of these facts are indeed intentional.

Make sure you tell them everything that you are doing for your child. Leave nothing out that relates to school—if you do not tell them, they might assume that you are doing nothing and asking them to do it all.

If those you are meeting with aren't able to help you, perhaps you should consider going further up the ladder. Where your child's health and well-being are concerned, never accept "no" until you have exhausted all possible avenues. Remind yourself of what your child's future may look like if you give up.

After these meetings, admit to yourself what frustrates you the most. There is no need to share this with others except those who are close to you such as a partner, mother or best friend. Maybe you are feeling down about how long it takes to convince people to do what for you is obvious. Tell yourself that it's all right to feel this way and that, in time, you'll be able to see that progress has been made as others come to an understanding of your child's needs.

PARENT ADVOCACY CHECKLIST

- ✓ Obtain copies of your child's school files.
- ✓ Know your rights. Get copies of relevant legislation and other materials that help explain them.
- ✓ Prepare a written plan of what you want and need for your child. Organize documentation that supports your opinion.
- ✓ Approach each new person as if you believe he or she is there to help you. Give him or her the chance to try to make things right.
- ✓ If you are not getting satisfaction, go up the chain of command, in the correct order, unless it is an emergency.

ON THAT NOTE

Change does not happen overnight. Remember to stay positive and count the little steps made along the way toward helping your son or daughter. Look back at how things were just a year ago or two years ago to measure the progress that has been made. Sometimes when it seems there is so much to do to reach our goals, we just see the pile of laundry and miss all the clean clothes! Perhaps a teacher who didn't understand your daughter's learning difficulties is now working with a special education teacher at the school to make sure your daughter is learning alongside her peers. Maybe your family doctor has recommended you see a speech-language pathologist to evaluate your child's speech and language skills due to possible hearing loss. When you add up all those little steps, you will see how close you are to achieving results for your child.



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