Becoming a Young Self-Advocate

Independence is a goal of childhood. However, in communities such as early childhood classrooms, people rely on each other. Everyone can learn to help others while advocating for themselves. Self-advocacy skill building is important for children with and without disabilities. This tip sheet describes three self-advocacy skills: speaking up, asking for help, and setting boundaries.

Speaking Up

Every child has a way of speaking up. That might be with their voice, with an augmentative or alternative communication (AAC) device, or with sign language. Children should be encouraged to voice their opinions and respond to questions. During classroom group time, teachers might include time to ask how everyone is feeling that morning. This provides an opportunity for children to pipe up and share what is important to them.

Asking for Help

Before reaching a level of frustration, children should be taught to ask for help. This may involve programming a child's AAC device with the word "help", teaching a child the sign for "help", or encouraging a child to say, "I need help".

Adults can model asking for help in the classroom. For example, a teacher might spill milk at the table, and then ask, "Could anyone please help me clean up my spill?" Summarizing what happened is also helpful, "Oh, I spilled and then I asked for some help. Annie came to help me. Thanks, Annie!"

By responding quickly, adults can show children that asking for help is effective. Peers can also be a source of help. Teachers can encourage children to respond to requests for help from one another.

Setting Boundaries

It's ok to say no. Children can learn to say no to peers who touch them or take their toys and materials. Sentences like, "I don't want a hug," or "I want to do the puzzle by myself" are useful.

Adults can help children assert their message by encouraging them to be firmer, louder, and more confident in their approach. A soft, quiet voice might not be what is needed in the social situation. Practicing in a mirror can also help children rehearse their message. Teachers can use role-play to demonstrate setting boundaries. "I'm going to build a big tower, but I want to do it alone, ok Maria? We can play next to each other but build different things".

Even when young children feel confident advocating for themselves, they need to know that teachers are still there to support them in speaking up, asking for help, and setting boundaries.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois Department of Early Childhood (IDEC).

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