THRIVE EMERGE

Self-Advocacy

One of the most important skills for a neurodiverse student to attain is the skill of articulately advocating for their own needs. Of course, this skill requires a subset of other skills first- knowing themselves well, trusting the people they are speaking to, and being able to concisely present their needs. Once this skill is learned, it can be successfully used in relationships and the work environment, as well.

Being able to accurately assess oneself is critical. As parents, we can help by sharing their psychoeducational or neuropsychological testing and reviewing it in an unbiased way. Your child is likely to hear the negative more strongly than the positive, so it is important to think about how and who shares this information. It is well worth the cost to have the person who assessed them share the data, as they will be more knowledgeable and less emotionally invested.

Take the time to make sure they are able to recognize their strengths and see how they can be used to compensate for areas of weakness. Some people have given up on their abilities, firmly believing that they can't. Others "play dumb" to avoid work. Still others believe that they are more capable than they actually are, often falling short of goals they are setting for themselves.

So, the first step of self-advocacy is for them to accurately assess their abilities- strengths and weaknesses. For those whose egos are fragile, this can be the most difficult part and may require sensitive work with a therapist, who can assist them is seeing that they are not broken, that everyone has similar patterns.

Often, there are people who know themselves well, but have been made to feel inadequate by others, so they hesitate to speak up. Speaking up requires a level of trust that sometimes takes time to attain. If a child spoke to a teacher or a parent and was just told to "try harder," they will not want to speak on their own behalf. If they ever mentioned an area of challenge to a friend and were told to "get over it," they will remain silent.

As parents and professionals, it is critical that we hear and acknowledge what the person is saying, even when we disagree. We may have a different perspective, but we cannot invalidate their experience. The more open the dialogue, and less judgmental, the more likely a person will be able to speak on their own behalf with a teacher or a boss.

The next necessary skill is to share one's needs in a clear and concise way. This may require practice or support. First, create a list of the most likely needs and make a script for when those need to be addressed. For example, "When I am overwhelmed, I struggle to get anything done at all. Can you help me prioritize?" Second, practice these with a trusted person, so that they come more easily.

Decide which needs need to be addressed immediately and which might be able to wait until a meeting can be scheduled. When preparing for a meeting, make a bulleted list of what needs to be discussed and practice, role play, etc. Eventually, the skill will get easier as it is used.