

Advocate? –or– Diplomat?

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

Advocate: To speak in favor of; one who supports or defends a cause; one who pleads in another's behalf, esp. a lawyer (*Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary*)

Diplomacy: The art or practice of conducting international relations, as in negotiating alliances, treaties, and agreements; tact and skill in dealing with people (*Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary*)

You and I—along with millions of others—may consider ourselves as advocates for disability issues. We speak out, take actions, and seek to positively influence disability affairs, in general, or the life of someone we care about, in particular. This is a good thing, right? I think so.

Advocacy means different things to different people, and we each have our own unique ways of doing things. It seems, however, that many of us are not as successful as we'd like: I continue to hear too many horror stories from coast-to-coast.

When we're initially unsuccessful, we may move from advocacy to full-fledged battles, and even if we then "win," we lose, too. While the "official loser" may be forced to meet our demands, we've made a lifelong enemy in the process. Since we have enough adversaries as it is, it seems prudent to spend the time and energy necessary to develop as many *allies* as possible! So perhaps we should consider moving beyond advocacy to *diplomacy*.

The definitions above show the difference between the two. While we won't be "conducting international relations," we *can* achieve success by "negotiating alliances, treaties, and agreements." But perhaps the most important part of the definition is "tact and skill in dealing with people." This is what may be missing in our usual advocacy efforts.

The most common example that comes to mind is the advocacy practiced by many parents in the public school arena, specifically during IEP (Individualized Education Program) meetings. When advocating during the IEP process, parents may make a huge, and often fatal, error: they forget that educators are people. Instead, parents (and/or other advocates) often see the IEP team as one unified body, rather than a collection of distinct and unique individuals, each of whom has his own set of experiences, attitudes, beliefs, as well as his own personality, separate and distinct from others.

Granted, parents are members of the IEP team, and everyone on the team is supposed to be "on the same side." As many parents know, however, the first disagreement between the parents and the group of educators may fracture the "team mentality," creating an "us/them" atmosphere, which can lead to World War III. In the end, and regardless of who "wins," the child ultimately pays the price for the actions of adults.

If we practice diplomacy, however, using "tact and skill in dealing with people," and if we develop allies and negotiate agreements, we'll achieve different and better outcomes. The following suggestions pertain to parental advocacy in education, but they can be adapted to any situation.

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If, at this moment, you're so mad at the school you can't see straight, think about this: would you run into the path of a speeding car to save your child's life? The answer (I hope) is, "Yes!" So if you're willing to risk your own life for your child's, aren't you willing to risk doing things differently with educators (or others) on behalf of your child? *How much is your child's present and future worth?*

If you've already been at war with educators (or others), the first diplomatic step is to make amends. This can be as simple and painless as saying, "I know we've had difficulties in the past, but I'm willing to do what it takes to have a good working relationship with you." (If you're gnashing your teeth at this, just remember: you're doing this for your child! *Get your ego out of the way!*)

The second diplomatic step (or the first if you haven't yet been at war) is to *maintain* positive relationships with others, by using your common sense (and remembering what your mama and your kindergarten teacher taught you): be nice, play fair, treat others the way you want to be treated, and so forth. While these may sound trite, they work. And if others get down in the muck, let 'em, but don't go down there yourself—you'll just get dirty, too. Don't take things personally and don't retaliate.

Go the extra mile (*remember, this is all about your child*) and do what it takes to change the dynamics of tension-filled situations, *and* develop

relationships with educators *outside* of the IEP process. Bring yummy food to the IEP meeting, take a teacher to lunch, become president of the PTA or an active volunteer (educators seldom say "no" to parents who are valuable allies of the school), thank people for their past efforts, and/or do whatever will improve/maintain positive relationships.



**Focus on remedies,
not faults.**

Jack Nicklaus

Third, be willing to negotiate. (*Don't forget: this is all about your child.*) Eliminate the "win/lose" mentality and practice a "win/win" attitude. There's no better way to turn an adversary into an ally. Be aware and respectful of another's need to "save face." Exchange rigidity for flexibility. Get rid of the "all or nothing" mentality. If you're only offered half of what you want, take it, knowing you can go back later and negotiate

for the other half. Isn't half better than none? Instead of demanding or arguing, ask, "What will it take to...?" (Learn more about this particular technique in the "What Will It Take?" article.)

With advocacy, we "speak in favor of" or "plead in another's behalf." With diplomacy, we use "tact and skill in dealing with people" and practice the "art" of "negotiating." Which strategy will increase the number of your allies and decrease the number of adversaries? Which will lead to the outcomes you want? In the big drama of life, which role—advocate or diplomat—are you ready to play?