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The Importance of Self-Advocacy

Cindy Lopez:
W*elcome. My name is Cindy Lopez, the host of this CHC podcast, Voices of Compassion. We hope you find a little courage, feel connected and experience compassion every time you listen.* Self-advocacy is more than speaking up for yourself. It's about self-awareness and understanding your needs and clear communication. It's about asking for what you want and need and not demanding it. Self-advocacy is an integral part of becoming independent and confident, and it's a critical part of our kids' growth. So listen to today's episode as we talk with CHC experts, Dr. Joan Baran, Licensed Clinical Psychologist and Meghan Collins, Doctoral Psychology Intern at CHC as they share their insights, expertise and strategies to help you teach your kids about self-advocacy. Welcome Joan and Meghan.

Meghan Collins, MS, MPhil:
It's great to be here today. My name is Meghan Collins. I am a Doctoral Psychology Intern at Children's Health Council, and I'm really excited to be talking with you and with podcast listeners about self-advocacy. Full disclosure, when I was growing up I was a very timid child, and I would say that self-advocacy was about 11/10 difficult for me. So I very much empathize with listeners who might feel that that is a really hard skill. It's also a learned skill and something that has truly changed my personal and professional life.

Joan Baran, PhD:
Cindy and Meghan, it's so great to be with you uh to talk about this important topic. As a parent myself, I can really see how advocacy leads youth as well as adults to be empowered to articulate their needs and to feel successful. Thanks so much. We're grateful to both of you for being with us today. So let's start by defining it: what is self-advocacy, what are the main components of it?

Meghan Collins, MS, MPhil:
Yeah, great question, Cindy. So, in my mind, self-advocacy is communicating what you need and want in a respectful, but clear and direct manner. Self-advocacy can be really challenging, especially for people like childhood me who experience, uh, nervousness or intimidation. It can be really challenging in a hierarchical relationship, like an employee self-advocating with a boss or a child self-advocating with a parent or a teacher. It's also very much a learned skill, which we'll be talking about a little bit more today. I also think it's important to note that, you know, there are certain groups in society that can receive implicit or explicit messages that they should be quiet or

easygoing or not express their needs if those are inconvenient for other people. Joan, did you wanna say anything more about that, about times when self-advocacy can be challenging?

Joan Baran, PhD:
Well, I really think it can be challenging when you think of a student, for example, having to go talk with a teacher and just like you were saying, Meghan, a student can feel, um, very intimidated because that teacher can give them a bad grade or can believe that they are coming across as impertinent. And so it is important that youth learn very early on in their childhood direct, respectful communication and you learn it at an early age and then you continue to practice it so that when it comes to the point when the youth has to talk to the teacher, even though they might still feel nervous and anxious, they will be much more likely to be successful, and I think the other area I was thinking about Meghan, when you were talking is about individuals where English, for example, is not their first language. And so there are barriers other than hierarchy that can lead one to feel less confident and less able to advocate for themselves.

Cindy Lopez:
So, you've both kind of referenced this in a way, like when you're communicating your needs to be respectful, clear, direct. So when is it reasonable to advocate?

Meghan Collins, MS, MPhil:
Yeah, I think that's a question a lot of people struggle with. I think a lot of people can invalidate themselves and really second guess themselves on whether or not, you know, what they wanna advocate for is an okay thing to be asking. In my mind, whenever somebody wants to advocate for something, there is some kernel of that need or want that is important and is valid. An example I can think of, uh, I've worked with a lot of little kiddos and teenagers for that matter who really don't wanna take tests in school. So in their mind, in their ideal world, they might wanna advocate that they will never again take a test in school. You know, most of us will think, okay, that's probably not a reasonable ask, but there's a kernel of that, an anxiety and a difficulty with taking tests in school that it's causing distress. That's important to talk about and important to advocate for, and there might be a middle path there. There might be a way for that child to get extra time on tests, for that child to get an individualized education plan, to give them even more accommodations. So, you know, our brains give us important information, and when we think something is important and needs to be talked about, advocated for, it is almost certainly worth listening to that.

It's interesting too because Meghan, you referenced implicit kinds of understandings that people have where you're like, "oh, I shouldn't talk now or I shouldn't say what I

need now," and I think that hierarchical kind of structure where the people in power, whoever that might be, boss, teacher, parent, they may not really want you to know that you can advocate for things. You're right. Cindy, you know, people in power often don't tell you that you have the right to advocate for things. It's not always convenient for them to highlight that.

Joan Baran, PhD:
You know, Meghan, one of the thoughts that I had while you were talking is even young children have a right to advocate, and sometimes parents and or teachers may not appreciate when a child is advocating for themselves. And that's when the teaching comes in that you can stand up for yourself and you can advocate, but there is a way to do it that is direct and respectful. And so, it's really kind of massaging and instructing the child how to do it so that they can reach their goal of getting what they need and doing it in a respectful way. And so honestly when to advocate can actually start when kids are very, very young.

Cindy Lopez:
Yeah. Wow. So as long as we're talking about teaching self-advocacy, I'm wondering what that looks like at different ages.

Meghan Collins, MS, MPhil:
Honestly, as a parent, you know, your children are always watching you, and they're learning from you even before they are learning to talk. And so self-advocacy honestly starts with modeling. So a parent can model when they are at the grocery store and the item that they are purchasing was rung up at the wrong amount or somebody cut in front of them while they were in line at Disneyland, and so there's these examples where parents can be showing their children this is how you can advocate in a direct, respectful way and kids learn by modeling.

The second thing a parent can do is that from an early age, and we all do this, we as parents sometimes jump in too quickly when there is an issue. And so the idea is stepping back and helping and/or coaching your young child how to advocate. For example, somebody takes their toy. So as an adult, we tend to jump in saying, "give the toy back to the child" and instead what we can say is, "it looks like Johnny just took your toy. What can you say or how does that make you feel?" And so then you're coaching your child, even as a young child how to advocate for themselves. Yes, Joan, I really appreciate that point, and one thing I often will work on with parents too, adults can sometimes not appreciate when children do advocate for themselves, and I think it's important for parents to recognize that sometimes their child advocating for themselves might mean that they need to make an adjustment or give their child something that is

inconvenient for them but still seeing that as a skillful behavior and still reinforcing that and praising that self-advocacy. Right. I think you're really hitting on something, Meghan, and that is there can be a fine line between being direct and respectful and being direct and demanding, and I think sometimes the message gets lost in the delivery, and so I think that's why you and I are really talking about being direct and respectful, because then the listener is gonna be much more likely to hear your message, and I think you're much more likely to get what you need. Absolutely, and actually glad you said that. Some of my favorite uh skills and strategies for advocating respectfully and effectively that I would love to share with listeners. These are skills I use probably every day. So Dialectical Behavior Therapy, which is known as DBT, has a whole module on interpersonal effectiveness and has really a wealth of resources for helping people ask for what they want or say "no" effectively and also maintaining their self-respect. So, to get into all of that would take too long, but I'm gonna give us a quick example here. Uh, remember the word DEARMAN and this is dear, like D-E-A-R as opposed to the animal deer. So this is a skill for self-advocating, for asking for what you want or need. We've been talking about the example of in school. So let's apply this to an example of a teenager asking for more time on tests. So the D in DEARMAN is for describe, so describing the situation, and then expressing how they're feeling, E. Asserting what they need. And R is reinforcing the other person. So I'll apply it to that example. So that might be on the last five tests I haven't been getting the score that I want, or the score that I think really shows how much I know in your class, that's describing. E, express, that makes me feel really frustrated and discouraged because I'm working really hard in your class, and I just need a little bit more time for everything to click on paper. Then A is assert. I'm wondering if you could give me an extra 10 minutes on the upcoming tests to help with my ability to really show what I know. And then R for reinforcing the teacher. That would be, I really enjoy your class and I'm learning a lot from you, and I wanna be able to show you how much I'm learning and to really succeed in this class. So that's the what part of it. That's the D-E-A-R and then the man is how to do it. So M is for mindfully. Uh, that is avoiding getting derailed. So if the teacher tries to make this about something else, like the student's behavior, they might say, "I know you're talking about how I've been acting in class, and I get that that's important too. Happy to talk about that, but can we finish talking about this first," or mindfully can also be reading the room. If it's not a good time to be having this conversation saying, "I don't think we're able to communicate effectively right now. Can we try again tomorrow?" The A in man is for Appearing confident, uh, which hopefully I did over audio here and then the N is for Negotiate. So for this example, the teacher might say, "I can't do that unless you have formal accommodations, or unless you take the test in another room, cause that's not fair to other students." Something like that where there can be some negotiation of, "okay, well then what are the next steps to make this happen?"

Meghan, thank you so much for sharing that strategy and for referencing DBT. To our listeners, we have a couple of different episodes on dialectical behavioral therapy if you're interested in finding out more, you can access those previous episodes through your favorite podcast platform. Also if you want to learn more about DBT to get some skills please feel free to reach out to us at CHC at chconline.org. You can reach out to our care team and find out how to access those kinds of services and that would be careteam@chconline.org.

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Joan Baran, PhD:
You know, there's not really a time when children should not be encouraged to advocate for themselves. So even toddlers, for example, they're not necessarily gonna use the DEARMAN skill, and what you might do is you might start with the D for a toddler, let's describe the situation, and then the parent says, "and I can see your emotion, see the E, you know, you're really frustrated." And so as we were talking about before, it can really help for the parent to be modeling and showing how one can advocate. When we're trying to learn a skill, it's so helpful to start as we were just talking about in small steps, right? For example, if a child wants to advocate for being upset because somebody hurt their feelings or they, uh, were not allowed or able to do something, they can role play with a parent honestly, they can even role play with a sibling how to do what Meghan was talking about, which is describe how I'm feeling, and young children can say it as well… "I really wanted to go to that party, and I'm so sad that I can't go."

Meghan Collins, MS, MPhil:
Yeah. DEARMAN, does not need to be as long as what I did. A baby DEARMAN, for little kids could be, "you tripped me. I don't like that. Don't do that, right." Describing, expressing, asking somebody to stop. These principles can really be diluted down based on developmental age.

Joan Baran, PhD:
And language. Yep. And language that's very appropriate and is gonna get a point across in a way that that's effective for a peer or caregiver to know.

My education background working with a lot of kids with learning differences, ADHD, dyslexia, autism have an IEP or an individual education plan. So I think also another piece for parents and educators is helping kids understand their diagnosis, the strengths

and challenges that come with that, and how teaching them those self-advocacy skills is really important. And you noted that at the beginning of our conversation, Meghan, where you said, “it’s a learned skill.” Don’t expect that a child, a student, even an adult is gonna be able to advocatevery effectively. So if your child has an IEP, if they have a diagnosis, it’s important for them to understand it and to be able to advocate for the accommodations that they can get because of those things. I love what you said too because it’s all about self-advocacy can be something that the youth takes with them when they go on to community college or to college or onto a job, right? And so a person can say, “I do so much better when I see written instructions, or if I do it and you coach me through it or if I can read through this on my own and follow up and ask you questions.” And so when a youth learns what their style is for learning information that goes a long way in them being able to advocate for what they need.

Meghan Collins, MS, MPhil:
Definitely. I’d also say for kids because of anxiety disorders or other conditions, self-advocacy is really challenging. The nice thing is there’s some great evidence-based therapeutic approaches to help with that. So exposure therapy based out of cognitive behavioral therapy is the gold standard treatment for anxiety with a very strong evidence basis. That treatment basically boils down to practicing the thing you’re afraid of in manageable steps that build upon each other. So I’ve worked with lots of kids in making what we call a fear ladder for self-advocacy situations. So the bottom rung of that ladder might be advocating for something that they’re pretty sure they’re gonna get with a friend or a parent then that might go to advocating for something they’re pretty sure they’re gonna get with a teacher or it might be advocating for something with a parent present, but you’re leading the conversation and coming up with situations that feel challenging but manageable, mastering that situation and then moving on to next level of challenge so that it doesn’t feel so hard. Self-advocacy, like anything, is an example of practice makes perfect.

Joan Baran, PhD:
Actually, I like the phrase, “practice makes permanent” because then it becomes something where you don’t even have to think about it that much when you do it. You know, Meghan, one of the things that you were talking about that I think is so important is that with these small steps, you start feeling a sense of mastery and a sense of success and a sense of confidence. And in some ways, they can really build on each other. I’d love it though if you talk a little bit about resilience because self-advocacy doesn’t necessarily always mean that you’re gonna get what you want. And so, I think as parents we can do a really important modeling because as an adult, if I ask my boss for a raise, and I don’t get it, even though I use the DEARMAN skill, uh, it’s all about how do you show that resiliency. Do you have any thoughts about that Meghan?

Meghan Collins, MS, MPhil:
That's a great point, right? There's only so much that we can control in any situation. And again, in DBT we have a phrase that sometimes the environment is just stronger than your skills. So sometimes you can be as skillful as possible and advocating for something and the environment is just stronger and isn't gonna be able to give it to you or isn't willing to give it to you. So that can be challenging for sure. What I would say there is, I think self-advocacy brings a great deal of self-respect, you know, you're standing up for something that is important to you and in line with your values. And for a lot of people asking for what they want or need and knowing that they did everything that they can to get that really changes how they feel about themselves. And like you said, Joan, practice makes permanent, makes it that much easier the next time around to advocate again and to recognize other situations where advocacy is needed. So even when a person doesn't get what they want, I would say it's really not for nothing. And a lot of good can still come from trying.

Joan Baran, PhD:
Yeah, I really like that cause you're talking more about the effort that you put into it rather than necessarily the outcome. And so that can be the focus is on look at what you were able to do and how you were able to communicate respectfully, and then you can talk about resilience. How can we bounce back from this?

Cindy Lopez:
Yeah.

Joan Baran, PhD:
I thought that was a great example, Meghan.

Cindy Lopez:
I think that parents, especially parents of kids with more special needs learn early to advocate for their child. I'm just wondering when the child is ready to take on that self-advocating piece on their own, how does a parent go from advocating for their child to letting their child advocate for themselves?

Meghan Collins, MS, MPhil:
I think that's hard for a lot of parents, navigating those transitions from doing it for a child to helping a child do it, to reminding a child or encouraging a child to do it on their own. I think it can be challenging on both sides of that. I think for some parents, they might feel that their child is ready to take on a self-advocacy role before the child themselves feels that, or sometimes parents, uh, out of love and a desire to protect their child might not quite be ready to hand over that task to the child. I think that can be an

open conversation with a child of, “do you feel like you could do this? And okay, how would you do this? Can we practice it? How about you try and if it doesn’t go well, let me know and I can help.” That’s often guidance that I give to parents of, let your child try because either way that’s gonna build a sense of self-respect and autonomy. And then of course, you’re still there to help your child if they need you. It doesn’t have to be either or, it can really be let them lead and then you follow and help out where needed.

Joan Baran, PhD:
I love what you said, Meghan, where you talk about it kind of happening in phases, right? Where there’s a slow evolution to where the parent might be more in the advocacy position and then with age and experience and success, then it starts shifting to the child being the driver with the parent being in the more supportive role, and I think that’s when role play can be such a helpful tool in practicing and in leading that transition.

It’s so important for our kids, especially as they become teens, you want them to be independent, especially with this skill because that’s going to make a big difference for them going forward. I know that some kids are resistant to learning the skills and to practicing them, to doing them. And I get this cause I tend to be this way. It’s like, as an adult, as a parent it’s probably easier for me to go and advocate than to try and teach my child how to advocate and have to deal with them when they’re disappointed or discouraged or frustrated that their advocating didn’t work. So, to our listeners, if you’re in that position, maybe you can choose a few places where you are going to really work with your child to teach them some skills in certain situations. It doesn’t have to be everything and every day, but perhaps just choose a few things that you can work on with your child.

It’s so important to start small and it can be really helpful when the child is motivated. So if you’re going out to a fast food restaurant, for example, a child’s usually motivated. So why don’t you order for yourself and be really clear, you don’t want mayonnaise on your sandwich. It can be going to the doctor’s office, so they might not be as motivated. Um, but it can be, you know, my name is such and such, and I’m here my 10 o’clock appointment. And then if the person says, “well, I don’t have you here on the appointment book.” Okay, what do I do? Right. And so, there are these opportunities, where your child can have this experience of advocating with you close by as their coach in the background, but where they’re motivated to start the process of speaking up for themselves and coping with the outcome.

Cindy Lopez:
Yeah. I love all these examples and I know that our listeners love it too when they get

specific things that they can walk away with and try. So Meghan and Joan, what would be your top takeaway for parents or caregivers as they work with their children to develop these important self-advocacy skills?

Self-advocacy is an important tool for all of us, for adults and for children, and it does not come naturally to a lot of us, that is okay. And I'm hoping that parents can give themselves permission to engage in self-advocacy so that it feels more natural for them, and so that's something that they can model for their kids.

I think one aspect to keep in mind is that what some person might feel intimidated to self-advocate for might be perceived by another person as no big deal, and so I really like what Meghan said earlier about validating that what you're asking for and what you want is important. It's a learned skill that can start when your child is a toddler, and if your child is in middle school or a teenager, it's not too late as hopefully you can be modeling as a parent how to self-advocate for yourself ,and you can be using DEARMAN skills and other techniques that we've talked about so that your child or your youth, your teen, can be using direct and respectful communication so that they can get what they want, feel good about it and feel motivated to continue it.

Cindy Lopez:
Joan and Meghan, thank you so much for sharing your insights and experience with our listeners today. It's been a great conversation. If you're working with your child and you're feeling like you need some help, like you want some more support, please reach out to us, chconline.org. You can reach out to our care team. As I mentioned previously, care team can connect you to the right resources and the right services for you at CHC and that's careteam@chconline.org, and you can also call 650-688-3625. Thank you all for being with us today.