

7 Steps for How and When to Advocate for Your Child

1. Listen to your child and validate their emotions.

When our child chooses to share something that is bothering them, our first job is to listen and validate their feelings with compassion. Even if you think your child is exaggerating or overreacting, **the best way to bring about feelings of safety and greater calm is to listen with your full attention.** That means putting down your phone, making eye contact if your child seems to want it, and showing with your body language that you are listening - nodding gently, turning towards your child, getting on their level if they are smaller than you.

Your full attention is often enough to help your child sort through a situation to find their own solution.

To check that you have understood their experience, you can simply say something like, "So it sounds like... What's your next step?" or "OK. So I'm hearing that...Do you want to do something to respond, or do you feel a little better just sharing with me? What do you need right now?"

Avoid sharing opinions or offering suggestions at this point. Just listen and empathize.

2. Notice your own emotions

It's easy to get triggered by things our kids tell us, especially if they bring up fears or memories for us. While you're listening, notice what's coming up for you, but keep it to yourself for the moment. **Let your child enjoy your attention without getting distracted by your interpretation or your opinions** at this moment.

You might share your thoughts or ideas later, but you'll receive more information about your child and the situation by listening without much comment. In general, it's better to stick with short comments like, "Got it," or "Oh, that must have been disappointing," or "I'm so sorry that happened to you."

If you are having a memory or big feeling about what your child is saying, observe how you are feeling in your body. Notice what thoughts are running through your head, and then focus back on your child's experience. To help make sense of those feelings and thoughts, you can share them in a journal, with a partner or friend, or possibly with your child, depending on what will best serve them.

3. Gather information.

Lead with curiosity. It's so tempting to jump in and make assumptions, take action, and share opinions. However, if you lead with curiosity, you will gather the information you need to be a helpful advocate for your child and/or to help your child advocate for themselves.

WHAT or HOW questions tend to elicit the most information, but the good old **Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why** questions all can be useful depending on the situation.

4. Consider your child's feelings, needs, and next steps of growth.

What **feelings** is my child sharing about this experience?

Which **needs** of my child are being met / not met?

How can my child **grow** from this experience? What **specific requests** can be made (either by my child or by me, the adult) to meet those needs?

5. Consider your own feelings, values, needs, fears, past experiences, and present hopes for your child.

What **feelings** are coming up for me when I see and hear my child's distress?

Which **needs** of mine are being awakened / triggered by this situation?

Which things are **within my control** and which are **outside of my control**?

What **next step** can I/we take to support my child?

6. Prepare to advocate.

Decide if your child should start a resolution process or if you should, based on age, social situation, and competence. **If your child is going to advocate for themselves, help them prepare what to say.**

- Get clear on observations, feelings, needs, and specific requests that will help meet their needs.
- Role play if they are willing.
- Possibly visualize the situation having a good outcome.
- Check in about how it went afterwards.

If you are going to advocate for your child, prepare your message:

- **Get clear** on observations, feelings, needs, and specific requests that will help meet your child's needs.
- **Ask for a time** to speak to the other person/people involved.
- **Reflect back** what you hear and ask the other person to reflect back what you have said if appropriate. "I'd love to hear what you are understanding about what I'm sharing with you."
- **Seek clarity and agreement** about next steps.

7. Check in about progress.

It is very important to set up a time to check in with the person or people you are connecting with to advocate for your child. This creates a sense of accountability and lets them know you will follow through. Set a reminder on your phone or calendar to help yourself not forget.

Commend your child or teen for the steps they take to advocate for themselves and ask them what worked for them. This will help them to grow confidence and skill in self-advocacy.

Want to share your story? Please consider emailing me about how it went. I'd love to hear how it went and what worked or needed tweaking from these 7 steps. Email me at amycehrens@gmail.com