

LDAO - "Building self-advocates: a key to student success"

Video transcript

With the right support and an inclusive environment, all students can develop self-advocacy skills, including those with learning disabilities. Helping students develop self-advocacy involves being able to help them understand their own learning strengths and needs, and encouraging students to speak on their own behalf. Self-advocacy is especially important for students with LDs. It will help them achieve maturity, confidence and a sense of identity to be successful in school, and in their future.

If students can advocate for themselves and take a more proactive approach to their needs, I think it can only benefit and help them maximize their potential.

Self-advocacy is very, very important, mainly because sometimes students get lost in our school system. And when students are able to voice what is important for their learning, they would have much more success.

For primary students, I think self-advocacy is being able to ask for what you need, to be able to understand what the task is, and what it is that you need to do to be successful.

When students start to advocate for themselves, they become a stronger person. They become a person who can figure out what they need out of life and go out and get it, rather than being a passive product of their environment. It allows them to take risks, for example, and to generally speak up for themselves when they need to do.

Recognizing your own strengths is an important part of the development of self-advocacy.

You got history, which was my strength. And really focusing on that strength makes school more enjoyable. And when you're learning, like say, you're reading, I used to read in English class. Didn't like English, but whenever we'd learn about Shakespeare, I used to enjoy the history component.

I brought my trumpet because I like music. It's, I think, my best subject. And I like to play with other people, like in a music class, so it helps me learn. [PLAYS TRUMPET]

Being kind, helping others, doing what is right, and listening closely so I can follow the instructions.

I just really like to dance and express your emotion, and show people, like, how to do stuff. And it's fun because you can also inspire people to do stuff. And the art form is also a great way to be inspired. So I just like how it's made my life better.

Math, because I like the problem-solving, and I like when I get it right. But when I get it wrong, that's okay, too. I just learn more ways just to do it.

Equally important for the development of self-advocacy skills is a strong understanding of your learning needs and the areas in which you need help.

I feel like they need to know that I'm a little bit different than other kids, I need that extra support.

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Honestly, it's just reading is a huge problem for me. I mean, I have no problem reading in my head, but as soon as I'm told to read aloud, it's really choppy.

When I read it in my mind, or, like, say it in my mind, I forget most of the things. But when I hear it, I remember it better.

There are many different strategies that can be put in place to support the development of self-advocacy among students with LDs. Using learning profiles to better understand the student's needs and learning style can lead to better engagement and give students a chance to realize how they learn best.

A student's learning profile can be really helpful as far as choosing methodologies and teaching strategies for particular students. When teaching students with learning disabilities, the more you can tailor the learning to their personalities, I find you get a lot more engagement from students when that happens.

My lesson is tailored to the majority of the students' learning profile in the classroom, which is typically visually kinesthetic. So I will teach the lesson in that mode. And then through questioning, I'll gain an understanding of whether or not they understand the concepts. If they understand the concepts, that's great. If not, what I'll try and do is, hit the same topic at different angles and come at it from different approaches. I might use another object to help me demonstrate a particular topic, or I may just explain it in a different method that that particular student may understand better.

As an educator in the primary years, I think we're just developing their learning profiles. I think that we are big contributors to that in the early primary years. Students may not know what it is that helps them to learn. And so it's our job to teach them a variety of strategies to give them a lot of tools, to try things out and see what works for them and what doesn't work for them. So in an environment where you can have a quiet space to work, if that's what you need, that they need to know that it's okay to be different and to learn and work in different ways than other students. And if we're accepting of everybody learning differently, it doesn't matter if I need the quiet space, or I need the calming centre. We're all in it together, and those are the things that I need to be able to do the best that I can do.

By nurturing a good relationship between students and teachers, individuals with LDs will develop more confidence to self-advocate.

Every year it became a partnership with the teacher, just telling them this is my name, this is what I need, and this is why. And then it reflects in your work when they see the difference between you doing the work without help and without the support you need to, now you're doing it with what you need. And you're just so much more successful. And it makes the lives of the teacher and yourself so much better.

One thing that's important for helping students with learning disabilities is to connect emotionally with those students. They need to know that the person who's helping them genuinely cares about who they are and what their future is. So in the classroom that means

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a lot of things. That means greeting them at the door enthusiastically, it means having sharing circles where they get to talk about their day, just generally giving them the feeling that the person they're working with really has their best interests in mind.

Creating a safe classroom environment also helps students with LDs feel included, rather than isolated from the other students.

I think it's a process in a primary classroom to be able to develop a rapport with students so that they feel safe. They know that it's okay that I can do things differently, we can learn differently, we can do different activities to achieve the same kind of goal in a different way. Once students are accepting of that in each other, that they feel safe to be able to say, "I'm really not getting this." A lot of times they start with peer questions. And so again, it's just setting up that safe environment where they can feel that it's okay to take a risk and know that it's okay to be different, and that I can ask for help when I need it. It doesn't happen right away. It takes time. It takes time to develop that with your students so that they feel safe enough to be able to do that.

It is important to avoid singling them out in situations, so sometimes we can find subtle ways of having the student leave the room to get extra support. They might have a code word, you know, "I need to go to my locker," and that means, "I need to get help with the LST teacher." So there are ways that we can get around drawing attention to the student who needs extra help.

When we look at students and having them integrated into a regular classroom, it provides them with that modelling, those social skills that they're going to need for the rest of their life. And so we want to promote that. We don't want students to feel like they're off in a special education resource room. We want them fully included in their classroom, because that's we feel how we best meet their social emotional needs.

Giving students with LDs the chance to express their own opinions and give their own input into their learning plays an important role in fostering self-advocacy.

Right from the onset, I encourage students to have a voice, and by doing so, we create a community whereby we have some norms where you're respected, you're valued, everybody has a voice.

When the student voice is valued, students build confidence that will later motivate them to speak up and ask for the accommodations necessary for their own success.

At the beginning of the semester, I let them know, like, I always need extra time, I always go to the LST room to write my tests. And pretty much my main thing is getting extra time, so I just tell them in advance, like, "I'm going to need extra time," and clarify what my IEP states.

I wait for recess to come, and then I'd tell her I'd need, like, sometimes I need help with my math work. And that's how I would tell her.

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Personally, I would just take them aside and just tell them, you know, I am struggling. I wouldn't do it in front of the class, because obviously that could be very, like, I don't know, embarrassing. So being able to just pull them aside and just say, "Hey, I'm struggling, I might need the extra help," is something I would do.

Self-advocacy skills benefit all students, not only those with LDs.

LD or not, everyone's going to have a weakness or a strength in school, and places where they need help.

Learning to self-advocate at a young age with proper instruction will help students with LDs for the rest of their lives.

After you get out of high school and you get out of post-secondary, if you go, you don't have someone advocating for you. You have to advocate yourself.

If I can't ask, then it's harder for you to figure it out and grow.

Life requires self-advocacy. There are so many situations in the world where a person can easily be forgotten about, or taken advantage of, if they don't speak up for themselves. And I see that as one of the really important functions of education, is to teach people to stand up for themselves.

When educators take the time to understand how students learn, create safe spaces for students to voice their thoughts and concerns and focus on students' strengths, all students, even those with LDs, will be well-equipped to develop self-advocacy. Benefits of self-advocacy include the development of self-confidence and a positive self-view, which will allow them to be successful in school and in their future.

Our students with learning disabilities need to know, understand and communicate their own learning needs and strengths. This is how they will be successful. These are our students -- not mine, not yours, but ours. Every student must feel a sense of belonging, and know that they contribute to the learning environment, the classroom, and their peers. We have empowered our students today to share their stories with you and their experiences. It is time to celebrate the varied learning styles that we have in each and every classroom every day.