**Self-Advocacy - Lesson 1: Instruction in Self-Advocacy**

**Introduction:** Welcome to our first lesson, Instruction in Self-Advocacy. As a Provider of Pre-ETS, you are a powerful advocate for students with disabilities. However, you do much more than advocate for your students. You also teach students how to advocate for themselves. Self-advocacy is an essential skill for students to learn during high school. This lesson will explore how to provide opportunities for students to learn and practice advocating for themselves while creating a sense of ownership of their lives.

In this lesson we will

• Define self-advocacy and explain why it’s important for young people with disabilities

• Explain the connection between self-advocacy and self-determination

• As well as describe key self-advocacy skills

**Developing Self-Advocacy Skills:** It’s important for every student, whether or not they have a disability, to develop self-advocacy skills. When you speak up about the things you like and dislike, you are self-advocating. When you take responsibility for your actions and outcomes in life, you are self-advocating. When you ask for help when you need it, you are self-advocating. Self-advocacy is a skill any person can learn and it’s a skill that is strengthened through regular practice.

**Adolescence:** All the students you work with are developing and changing. Human development is a lifelong process of physical, behavioral, cognitive and emotional growth and change. Adolescence is an especially important developmental period during which students grow in their self-awareness, desire greater independence, and make plans for their futures. It is during this stage that self-advocacy starts to become vital. Every student needs to learn to make themselves heard. Self-advocacy is a learned skill, rather than an innate ability. Given proper instruction, opportunities to practice, and time, any person can become a skilled self-advocate. This is true regardless of the individual’s disability. Let's listen to a few students as they describe what self-advocacy means to them.

**What is Self-Advocacy?**

[Video footage begins playing. Video cuts to show individual students explaining what self-advocacy is.]

Male Student: “Ok self-advocacy is to me is um I need to speak up for myself. A way they know what I need in classes.”

Female Student 1: “I actually went to a Best Buddies conference and I self-advocated myself to them and did a speech.”

Interviewer: “What was the speech about?”

Female Student 1: “It’s about inclusion and how we have to um like keep us in the loop kind of thing.”

Female Student 2: “It’s training you to see what a world is doing and um it’s like you know who you are and where you’re going to be at in the future.”

Female Student 3: “What I think it is to be a self-advocate is speaking up for yourself and also helping, asking to other people like if they need any help with something.”

Female Student 4: “Self-advocacy means to me is just like speaking up and knowing your rights and accommodations that you’re really going to need.”

Male Student 2: “Well I think that the most important thing about self-advocacy is that you show others that hey this is I’m better and I can do stuff and I just need a little help sometimes and I need a hand up not a hand out, you know. I’m doing the best I can but I can only do so much, you know, I’m not trying to be. If you help me, the returns on your investment are going to be way worth it

**Key Elements of Self-Advocacy:** The students we just heard from are learning to be strong self-advocates. Self-advocacy helps students get the outcomes they desire in order to succeed in the world. In the professional literature, self-advocacy is defined by four key elements:

• self-awareness

• knowledge of rights and responsibilities

• communication needs and preferences

• and leadership skills

**Instruction in Self-Advocacy:** Students need instruction in all four of the key elements of self-advocacy. Let’s take a look at what it means to be a self-advocate. It means speaking up for yourself and being proactive. It is also imperative that students with disabilities develop an understanding of their disability and how it can impact their daily living. We need to keep in mind that instruction in self-advocacy is about supporting students to develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence they need to be become actively involved in decisions that affect their success and future. This creates a sense of ownership for the student. Developing a sense of ownership and self-awareness results in increased self-confidence and increases the student’s ability to learn. To sum it up, self-advocacy is any time a person speaks or acts on their own behalf to improve their quality of life.

**Importance of Self-Advocacy:** Now that we’ve established a working definition, let’s take a look at why self-advocacy is so important for young people with disabilities:

• Students with disabilities who learn how to self-advocate during adolescence are significantly more likely to enroll in college and obtain employment after high school than students who don’t.

• Students who develop strong self-advocacy skills while in high school are much more likely to retain, use, and benefit from those skills as they progress further into life after high school

Research also indicates that instruction in self-advocacy helps students to,

• pursue the accommodations they need in college, the workplace, and beyond

**Promoting self-advocacy skills:** Self-advocating isn’t always easy. When learning and practicing skills for self-advocacy, students can experience feelings of uncertainty. It might even be tempting to return to old habits of letting a parent, teacher, or provider advocate for them. When students don’t advocate for themselves, often choices are made for them which denies them the opportunity to make important decisions that affect their education and future. They can also become less motivated, disempowered, and veer toward learned helplessness. I am sure you can remember a time in your life when you advocated for yourself and it made a significant impact on your life. Students with disabilities need to have the skills to speak up for themselves too. And as a Pre-ETS provider it is important to promote self-advocacy skills so that students learn to support themselves. We have to remember that ultimately it’s the student’s life, and they should be the person in charge.

**Positive Self-Image:** Having a positive self-image can have a favorable impact on self-advocacy skills. A positive self-image can contribute to finding success in college, the workforce and life in general. Students that have a strong self-image are able to face personal challenges with a positive mindset. Moreover, they develop a greater sense of independence, make informed decisions, take responsibility for their actions, and brainstorm solutions that others might not have considered. In the classroom, instructors can incorporate many opportunities to promote a positive self-image among the students in the classroom. For example, spend time brainstorming a positive classroom mantra, set up practice scenarios where the students discuss their strengths, or once a week have students share a weekly success. Consistent encouragement in the classroom will help the student to remain focused on their strengths and forward progress.

**Opportunities to Self-Advocate:** Opportunities to self-advocate occur daily, like choosing which elective course to take, asking a teacher for a different seat assignment, or even keeping a list of personal accomplishments. Self-advocacy can be applied to both small and large issues or problems. It isn’t just having a leadership role or speaking up on a major community issue. By practicing self-advocacy in routine day-to-day living experiences, students are more prepared to:

* understand their strengths and weaknesses
* make decisions based on interest
* view themselves as skilled and competent individuals
* set goals for personal success
* recognize who can help them with problems
* and stand up for themselves and others

**Self-Determination:**

[Video B-roll footage begins playing. Video cuts to show students in classroom participating in work-based learning. Video cuts to show a man driving a car. Video then cuts to show a volunteer for the Nashville Humane Association petting a dog. Video cuts to two students working on a tablet with an instructor standing by. Video cuts to a student placing a donut in sprinkles. Video cuts to a boy reading a magazine. Video cuts to boy and girl cooking.]

As you provide instruction in self-advocacy, you might have the opportunity to address self-determination. Self-advocacy is a component of self-determination. Students who have learned to self-advocate tend to be more self-determined. In the literature, self-determination is defined as the combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, and independent behaviors. Put more simply, self-determination means having the attitudes, skills, and opportunities to steer one’s life in meaningful ways. Providing opportunities for students to practice choice-making, problem-solving, decision-making, and goal-setting will help them build self-determination skills.

**Model by Example:** Take a minute to think about the self-advocacy skills you use every day in your role as a Provider of Pre-ETS. Do you show open-mindedness by listening to the opinions of your students and colleagues? Do you set goals for yourself and track your progress? On hard days, do you focus on the positive and remain optimistic? During your student interactions, try to model self-advocacy skills. The more students have the opportunity to practice self-advocacy skills and see others engaging in self-advocacy, the better prepared they will be to take on life challenges.

**Wrap-Up:** Thanks for watching this lesson, Instruction in Self-Advocacy. We hope that by learning more about the importance of self-advocacy and skills related to self-advocacy, you’ll feel more prepared to implement effective activities during your instruction. Be sure to check out our supplemental materials and resources tab for additional information and activities. We hope that you’ll join us for the next lesson, The Elements of Self-Advocacy.

**Self-Advocacy - Lesson 2: The Elements of Self-Advocacy**

**Introduction:** Welcome to our second lesson, the Elements of Self-Advocacy. In our previous lesson, you learned what self-advocacy is, how it impacts students’ success, and the skills that can enhance self-advocacy. We also briefly mentioned the four elements of self-advocacy. Through this second lesson, you will be able to:

* Define the four elements of self-advocacy
* And Understand the importance of each element

**Key Elements of Self-Advocacy:** Although self-advocacy is a skill that continues to develop throughout our lives, adolescence is an especially critical time for learning how to self-advocate. Developing skills for self-advocacy takes time and requires instruction and practice. High-quality instruction in self-advocacy should address four key elements, which are:

* Self-awareness
* Knowledge of rights and responsibilities
* Communication of needs
* And leadership skills

**Self-Awareness:** Understanding oneself sets a strong foundation for a life of self-advocating. Let’s take a closer look at the first element of self-advocacy, which is self-awareness. Self-awareness is knowing one’s—

* strengths
* preferences
* goals
* aspirations
* interests
* learning styles
* support needs
* accommodation needs
* disabilities
* And responsibilities

**Building Self-Awareness:**

[B-Roll video footage cuts to a young male employee putting away linen with the support of a male boss. Video cuts to two young women eating lunch in a cafeteria setting. Video cuts to young male employee wiping down chairs in the cafeteria.]

In part, building self-awareness encourages students to focus on themselves. However, students should also be encouraged to consider how others perceive them. By considering how their actions, habits, and behaviors might affect others, students build empathy and learn how to appropriately react and adapt in social and professional settings. Activities such as guided discussions and journaling allow students to develop an awareness of how personal actions can affect others.

**Activities for Self-Awareness:** Students should understand that every person has unique abilities and areas for growth. Supporting students to identify the characteristics of their disability or challenges enhances a strengths-based approach to instruction. Students benefit from learning to understand their needs, rather than ignoring them. When students become aware of their areas for growth, they’re more likely to focus on their strengths and abilities in order to achieve their goals. Students can develop a positive perspective of their challenges by engaging in self-assessments, community resource mapping, and other student-led activities. Putting the student at the center of your instruction allows them to develop a strong sense of self-awareness.

**Knowledge of Rights and Responsibilities:** The next self-advocacy element is knowledge of rights and responsibilities. We’ll explore both parts of this concept, starting with knowledge of rights. It’s important for every young person to be aware of the federal, state, and local laws that secure their rights. All individuals are protected by anti-discrimination and civil rights laws. At the same time, there are some rights specifically connected to disability. Because you’re providing services to students with disabilities, there are a few pieces of legislation your students should be aware of.

**Disability Legislation:**

[B-Roll video footage begins playing. Video cuts to group of young people gathering in a conference room while attending Disability Day on the Hill. Video cuts to a young woman speaking to an elected official at Disability Day on the Hill. Video cuts to young male speaking to a group of people in a conference room during Disability Day on the Hill. Video cuts to people and elected official applauding the young male. Video cuts to group of people in a larger room at Disability Day on the Hill and shows a female interpreter signing. Video cuts to an elected official speaking to young people in a conference room. Video cuts to disability advocacy groups with displays during a symposium. Video cuts to a young male speaking in front of large group at Disability Day on the Hill.

A few of the laws that specifically protect the rights and responsibilities of students with disabilities include: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. These laws help to ensure people with disabilities have the right to be free from discrimination in schools, the community, and the workplace.

Disability legislation upholds that students with disabilities’ rights include but are not limited to:

* a free and appropriate education (FAPE)
* placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE)
* special education services as outlined under IDEA, such as an IEP.
* opportunities for employment skills training
* accommodations and modifications in the academic and work settings
* options for accessible public transportation

**Workplace Rights and Responsibilities:** As students transition into adulthood, many responsibilities shift from parents, teachers, and providers to students themselves, as they become more independent. As self-advocates, youth need to understand that they will have a different level of responsibility when they leave high school and enter new environments. For example-

In the workplace, it’s the employee’s responsibility to—

* + choose whether or not to disclose a disability to an employer
  + request appropriate workplace accommodations
  + communicate regularly with their employer regarding job tasks, performance, or specific needs

**Postsecondary Rights and Responsibilities:**

[B-Roll video footage begins playing. Video cuts to a large lecture hall with male professor lecturing. Video cuts to two students in the lecture with laptops open. Video cuts to students walking outside on Vanderbilt’s campus. Video cuts to small group of students meeting in a classroom. Video cuts to group of students walking outside on college campus. Video cuts to two students reading with an instructor.]

When a student decides they would like to pursue the path for postsecondary education, they need to understand that their rights and responsibilities will be very different from high school. For example, in the postsecondary education setting, it’s the student’s responsibility to—

* choose whether or not to disclose a disability to the disability services office
* provide up-to-date documentation of a disability to request appropriate academic accommodations
* and attend classes, complete assignments, and communicate regularly with the office of disability services regarding specific needs

**Activities for Understanding Rights and Responsibilities:** Although the transition into adulthood can be an exciting time for youth, it can also be challenging. Not only do students’ services change, but so do their legal rights and responsibilities. By receiving instruction in self-advocacy, students can prepare to face the changes that accompany their transition. Activities that allow students to explore their future rights and responsibilities include—

* Journal entries. For example, students could collaboratively create a list of disability rights and write about which rights are most important to them.
* Visual illustrations. Students can create posters that depict basic human rights, or a Venn diagram that compares and contrasts rights and responsibilities.
* Role-playing. This could involve developing a group skit that demonstrates a citizen's responsibility in a community conflict.
* Community interviews. For example, students could interview a representative from a disability services office about the difference between students’ rights in secondary and postsecondary education.
* And finally, mock interviews can allow students to practice disclosing a disability and requesting workplace accommodations.

By developing an understanding of rights and responsibilities, students are better prepared to self-advocate now and in the future.

**Communicating Needs:** The third element of self-advocacy involves communicating needs. Communicating with others, especially in a professional environment, can be challenging for some students with disabilities. By developing strong communication skills, students are more prepared to share information with others, ask for help, and receive support as they transition into adulthood. Consider this scenario: Your student is in his annual IEP meeting. The team is discussing making changes to his accommodations. The student knows he will benefit from extra time for testing and assignments, and would like to discuss this option. But when it’s his turn to talk, he becomes too nervous to express his opinion. This would be a missed opportunity for this student to self-advocate. It’s our job to make sure students are equipped with the right tools and strategies that will allow them to be effective communicators and self-advocates.

**Effective Communication:** Self-awareness allows students to know when they need support and what support they need, while effective communication ensures that they receive that support. Being self-advocates requires students to have strong communication skills. It’s important that students learn the way they communicate the best. Are they better with written communication or verbal communication? Do they need assistive technology to aide them with communication?

**Practice Communication:** Think about your day and how many times you’re asked to communicate with the people around you. You may alter how you speak and your body language and facial expressions may change depending on what type of environment you’re in. Part of helping students be strong self-advocates means helping them to understand which way they communicate best, and how to adjust based on their environment. Some important elements of communication to practice with students are: speech rate, appropriate tones, hand gestures, personal space, and social cues.

**Communicating Needs**:

[Video B-Roll footage begins playing. Video cuts to a young male (YWCA volunteer) and older male communicating. Video cuts to a young male at a radio station communicating with a coworker. Video cuts to a young male employee sweeping in a cafeteria and communicating with a supervisor.

Remember, asking for help can be difficult for anyone. In transitioning into employment, students might need to make important decisions regarding income, savings, and benefit options that may prompt many questions. In transitioning into postsecondary education, students might need to learn the layout of a new setting. Self-advocates are more likely to receive the advice, support, and accommodations they need in order to be successful.

**Leadership Skills:**

As with all other self-advocacy topics, it’s never too early to provide instruction on leadership skills. In order for students to become leaders in the future, they must start building leadership skills now. Leadership opportunities help develop students’ self-esteem and help foster strong leadership skills, which include—

* Empathy developed through recognizing the needs of others
* Communication skills improved by collaborating with others
* Independence practiced by increasing responsibility
* Flexibility practiced by compromising
* Organizational skills developed by overseeing multiple responsibilities or duties within a group
* Interpersonal skills improved by working cooperatively with others
* And sound judgment exercised by making decisions that make positive impacts

**Leadership:** Finally, let’s discuss leadership skills. Self-awareness and strong communication skills allow a person to speak up for themselves and for others. Being a leader means motivating others actions, informing others’ opinions, and guiding others down a successful path. Developing leadership skills takes practice, experience, and time. As a provider of Pre-ETS, you can introduce and encourage hands-on leadership opportunities to students.

**Practicing Leadership:** In the school setting, there are many opportunities to expose students to leadership opportunities. These opportunities might include—

* Student-centered meetings. For example, students can take on greater leadership roles in their IEP meetings by giving input and presenting transition goals.
* Mentoring. For example, a leader of a business could mentor the student via email or your student could mentor a younger or new student
* Journaling/Reflecting. For instance, students can answer guided questions about different leaders they observe in the community
* Extracurricular involvement. Such, students could join Student Government Association, play a sport, or start their own club

**Leaders in the Community**:

[B-Roll Video Footage begins playing. Video cuts to young male speaking to large group at Disability Day on the Hill. Video cuts to panel discussion with young leaders speaking about self-advocacy and community empowerment.]

People with disabilities haven’t always been viewed as leaders. Rather, they’ve often been underestimated, marginalized, segregated, and discriminated against. In response, individuals within the disability community founded national self-advocacy groups like People First, the Arc, and Tennessee Allies in Self-Advocacy (TASA). By participating in self-advocacy groups, individuals with disabilities have become increasingly active in asserting their rights and responsibilities. By providing students with opportunities to practice leadership skills, you’re preparing them to be effective self-advocates. Students benefit from being exposed to opportunities to be valuable leaders in their communities.

**Wrap-Up:** Thanks for watching this lesson. Make sure you check out our nine self-advocacy activities for more in-depth examples of how to assist the students in developing self-advocacy skills. Be sure to check out our supplemental materials and resources tab for more information relating to this lesson.