

# Adolescence and the Art of Advocacy

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Advocacy, and most especially self and peer group advocacy, is one of the most important ways in which a young person can develop the skills of responsible adulthood. This is most especially the case with those who, for whatever the reason, are most vulnerable and excluded. One might include among this group those living with disabilities, those from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, those from divided or dysfunctional families and those who find themselves culturally alienated or suffering from the debilitating effects of racism – both conscious and unconscious.

Unfortunately, however, though many pay lip-service to the potential value of advocacy, many adults continue to regard advocacy with, at best, ambivalence. The idea of young people taking control of any aspect of their own lives does not rest easy with those responsible for their care and upbringing. This despite an overwhelming body of research that indicates that the most successful programmes for the young have historically been those stimulated by the needs, desires and often rage and despair of young people themselves.

Part of the problem, of course, is the nature of the term 'advocacy'. It is a term that is used in many disparate ways. Often it is associated with the stridency and antagonisms of political advocacy movements, whether animal rights or 'right to life' groups, environmentalists or field sports supporters. It is also no doubt linked with the adversarial nature of legal advocacy.

Yet social and health care advocacy out of which advocacy for young children and adolescents has emerged is none of these things. At its best, this form of advocacy is pro-active and conciliatory by nature, depending on the advocate's awareness and understanding of the often conflicting needs and priorities involved in the provision of social care services and assessments of needs and risks. Above all, it is about giving people of low self esteem a strategy to achieve the ability to assess their own needs and successfully represent them in a manner that will achieve the optimum solution with a minimum of conflict. This means, of course, developing the skill to identify and understand the other person's point of view because, unless this is understood by the advocate, conflict inevitably follows.

Understanding the other person's point of view, of course, does not necessarily mean agreeing with it, but at least it creates a common ground in which the

needs of the person advocating can negotiate ground rules and priorities that are acceptable to both parties.

At the heart of all forms of advocacy is the development of assertiveness skills and an awareness that advocacy cannot be practiced in a vacuum. In this respect it has to be acknowledged that the term 'self-advocacy' is slightly misleading, in that self-advocacy can only exist within the framework of a strong and organised peer group framework that can sustain individual and group support and the formation of 'Speaking Up' groups. It also has to be recognised that advocacy, as with assertiveness, is a learned activity – an invaluable learned skill. This is a lesson that has been hard-learned by those involved in the various forms of disability and social care advocacy. The shortage of skilled and experienced advocacy trainers has been one of the major impediments of the development of advocacy. This is especially true for New Zealand where advocacy as a recognised movement is in its infancy. In fact, as I have travelled around New Zealand in the last several months, the most urgent problem articulated has not been, 'who will provide the training?', but, 'who will train the trainers?'.

This question has a special resonance when discussing self-advocacy for the young, because it is a fact that advocacy training at its best is a peer group activity – in this case, the young training the young. Yet for this to happen there must be a strong cadre of young people who have themselves acquired the skills of advocacy and assertive behaviour and this, unfortunately, cannot be 'learned' by some process of osmosis. It is a process that can only be carried out as a group activity led, in the first instance at least, by a skilled facilitator who is most likely to be an adult – but an adult who is acceptable to and in empathy with the particular group.

Because we are talking about what is, after all, an educational activity, the 'obvious' solution would seem to have advocacy developed as a formal educational activity within the school/college system – an activity implemented and supervised by trained teachers. Yet experience in Canada, The Netherlands, the USA, the UK and elsewhere suggests that, although there is an absolute need for 'personal development programmes' being an integral part of formal education, advocacy training programmes invariably work better outside the formal education system and in locations removed from the school/college environment.

It appears to be a fundamental tenet in advocacy that the 'service user' (in this case young people peer training groups) work best when the service users are allowed to select both the time and place for their self advocacy awareness and development meetings – whether this is for formal training or for advocacy discussion and development. It has to be realised that 'Youth' is not, as many adults think, a homogenous group. In any community, adolescents will separate into groups according to their needs. Sometimes these groups will overlap – sometimes they will merge and sometimes conflict. Thus you might find that one group will want to place their place of development in a park; others in a private house, a youth club, a place of worship - the common denominator being access to a space where the group members feel comfortable, safe and empowered.

Self/peer group advocacy for adolescents may not be a complete panacea but experience has shown that, properly implemented, it can prove an invaluable tool for carers, educationalists, social care professionals and, above all, the kids themselves.

*NOTE: PAN provides advocacy training packages for a range of advocacy needs, and runs one day workshops in all aspects of advocacy and 'speaking up'. Kate and John are currently working on a series of illustrated books on advocacy and advocacy issues. If you want to find out more about the content and availability of these books, then You can visit their website at <http://www.advocacynetwork.org>, or contact the authors at [enquiries@advocacynetwork.org](mailto:enquiries@advocacynetwork.org).*