

Surviving Advocacy

by Stephen Hughes, advocate with San Luis Obispo CASA

While jumping through the hoops required to get my CASA boys the education they need, it has occurred to me that both the child and the advocate end up learning several lessons as they wander through the school system. After three years, I am still a novice negotiator at school meetings, but I have discovered a few trails through the administrative jungle. These are my top ten personal observations that help me at the education “bargaining table.”

1. No one really wants to impede your progress. Sometimes it feels that way. However, it is the complicated system that is unfriendly.
2. Solutions are easier to find by realizing that all parties are in this together. It is useful for me to admit my ignorance, clearly define my objectives and ask for everyone’s help to get there.
3. Acknowledge that everyone in the room is an expert in his or her field and deserves respect. None would be in this line of work unless (s)he cared about children. Advocacy is a team sport, and everyone appreciates affirmation of personal skills, dedication and good work.
4. Do your homework. Be as knowledgeable as you can about what is in the best interest of the child. Make sure that what you want is at least possible.
5. Listen a lot. It is not only polite, but I am often surprised at the useful hints I get from school officials – if I am patient enough to let them surface.
6. This is not about you or any other adult. Keep focused. Straying from the best interest of the child dilutes your effectiveness.
7. If you’re right, you’re right. Sometimes being assertive is the only way to help your child. Do not lose services by being too timid.
8. I have seldom seen procrastination add to the quality of a decision. Do your best not to leave any meeting without closure.
9. If there is something you do not understand, especially when it comes to signing papers, contact your Case Supervisor. You have experts on your team who are trained to give you good advice.
10. Don’t expect miracles. The system is not perfect, and neither is your CASA kid. Do the best that you can. If things do not turn out the way you hope, keep your frustration at bay and move on to the next challenge.