

Advocacy Reference Guide

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Ad vo cate (noun): a person who publicly supports or recommends a particular cause or policy.

It might not feel like it, but advocacy does make a difference. Children and families need you to speak up for them in the halls of power, whether those passageways are in your town hall, state capitol, or Washington, DC. This guide is designed as a handy reference for your advocacy efforts. BTC created this guide to help make it quick and easy for you to become involved in advocating for systemic community and policy change on behalf of the infants, children and families with whom you partner.

This guide provides a reference on how to:

- Use your personal story and professional credibility as a family-facing provider to influence positive change for babies, children, and families
- Advocate on behalf of issues that you care about at the community, state, or federal level
- Understand the public policy-making process, and how the process relates to your advocacy efforts.
- Motivate decision-makers to focus on and support children’s health and well-being.
- Find and work with others in your community who care about issues that are important to you and your community
- Work with the media to create a broader awareness and understanding of the issues that are impacting the children and families for whom you provide care
- Help make your issues a priority to policymakers advocacy activities

In this guide, you will find:

- I. Why Advocacy
- II. Types and Levels of Advocacy
- III. Core Advocacy Skills
- IV. Summary of Advocacy
- V. Tips for Emailing Decision-makers
- VI. Tips for Calling Decision-makers
- VII. Tips for Meeting with Decision-makers



I. Why Advocacy

Advocacy starts with a problem that needs to be changed, and it is a way to drive or effect that change. Being an effective advocate does not mean you need to know everything about an issue. It takes passion, commitment, and some knowledge of the process. Once you've identified a problem affecting children and families, you can begin advocating for change by raising awareness of the issue to help find a solution. Advocacy comes in many forms; regardless of the type or level of advocacy you get involved with or how much time you spend advocating, your efforts connect with others who are making a difference for children and families.

Advocacy can make a real difference for children and families, as well as the family-facing professions, because it:

- **Makes use of your professional experience, by allowing you to speak on behalf of children and families while contributing your expertise as a family-facing professional to policy discussions and influence decision-making.**
- **Fuels a sense of energy and community, creating excitement and momentum that gets the attention of leaders and elected officials.**
- **Influences policy by raising awareness and educating decision-makers who can change the rules to further support children and families.**
- **Impacts elections by persuading others in their community to vote with children's health in mind.**
- **Offers an antidote to cynicism by harnessing personal experiences and translating them into concrete and meaningful change**
- **Shows strength in numbers by galvanizing community and organizing like-minded individuals**
- **Creates meaningful and systemic change for children and families**

Family-facing providers are motivated to make a difference in the lives of children and families, who have names and faces, and need to be heard. The stories of the children and families in your community can put a human face on broader issues, authentically making them real in a way that fact sheets and statistics alone cannot. This garners the attention of community leaders, elected officials, the media, and the general public, and helps them understand how these issues personally affect children living within their communities.

II. Types and Levels of Advocacy

Advocacy can be done individually, or in community with others who care about the same problem or issue that you care about. It can happen in local, state, and federal arenas, depending on where policy governing decisions around that issue are made..

Individual Advocacy:

Individual advocacy is the direct care and resources that you provide every day, and describes the work you are already doing to improve the health and well-being of infants, children, and families with whom you partner. Advocacy can quickly and easily fit into the work you do every day. Consider some of the following ways to integrate advocacy into your daily routine:

- **Follow your local news outlets:** This can allow you to learn what's going on in your community, who's active, and who's making the decisions.
- **Write a short Op-Ed (Opinion Editorial) or letter to the editor:** When you see something in the news that interests you or that reflects what you are regularly seeing in your work, write a letter to them about the importance of this issue from your professional perspective. It doesn't have to be long and detailed; many letters are published that get right to the point in five or six sentences.
- **Sign up for and respond to action alerts from advocacy groups and coalitions:** Sign up for and respond to action alerts from advocacy groups and community coalitions whose issues match your interests. Many will send a link to a pre-populated email to elected officials. All you have to do is enter your name and zip code to have the email sent to the officials who represent you.
- **Call your public and elected officials:** Phone calls to your community leaders or state and federal public officials make a big impact and further elevate the issue. Calls don't have to be long and detailed; you can leave a message with the aide who answers the phone saying "I'm calling to ask my elected representative to please support X" or "please oppose Y."
- **Talk to other family-facing professionals and parents/caregivers:** Talk to your colleagues about the importance of the issue you are involved in, and educate them about how they can support the issue themselves.
- **Invite community leaders or decision-makers to tour your professional setting:** Inviting community leaders and elected officials to visit your program or daily professional environment can give them firsthand insight into the children, families, and issues that you care about.

In election years, there are even more ways for individuals to advocate:

- **Vote for candidates who prioritize children and families.** It can sometimes be difficult to find a candidate's position on issues affecting children and families; their literature, ads and websites may be focused on the platform issues they think will get more attention and more votes. If all else fails, call the campaign office and ask where the candidate stands on the things you care about so you know how to vote.
- **Participate in candidate forums and ask questions of the candidates.** Questions regarding children, particularly education, maternal and child health, mental health, adverse childhood experiences, and supports for parents and children living in poverty are much less likely to be asked in open discussions than questions about other political issues and hot-button topics. Use your question to educate the candidate(s) and the audience!

Community Advocacy:

Community advocacy builds on and reaches beyond individual advocacy by engaging others in advocating for the children within your community.

Some examples of the role you can play in community advocacy include:

- Partner with child and family advocacy organizations and coalitions in your area
- Volunteer with an organization that supports and advocates for children and families
- Raise awareness by sharing your story at community forums and public events, or providing testimonials to official activities
- Educate community leaders, decision-makers, and elected officials about issues that are affecting children in your community in joint visits, virtual meetings, or other outreach
- Encourage parents, teachers, and other family-facing professionals in your area to get involved in local efforts to support children and families
- Volunteer for child- and family-friendly candidates. Campaigns always need help, and often offer evening and weekend shifts doing a wide variety of different activities that can fit a wide variety of schedules, skills and interests.

Finding the Right Level: Local, State and Federal Advocacy:

Advocacy is about changing public policies and encouraging funding for programs that impact children and families. To do that, you need to figure out which level of government is making decisions. That way, you can focus your advocacy on the people who can have the most impact on the problem you are trying to solve.

For example, let's say that there is a park in your neighborhood that isn't safe for children to play in. You can call your Representative in Washington, DC, but that person isn't directly responsible for local policing, sanitation, lighting or traffic enforcement. Starting with a member of your local city or town council, board of supervisors, or your mayor is probably more effective.

Other decisions may be made by your state government - such as how much money to invest in housing or how to allocate state tax revenue. If the problem you are trying to solve is under the jurisdiction of your state government, you may need to talk to your state legislators or governor's office. And, if the issue is primarily governed by federal policy - like Head Start funding or eligibility for the child tax credit, you will need to reach out to your federal Representative and Senators, and maybe write a letter to the President.

Finding the right level of government, with the people who can most directly address your issue, will help you focus your time and energy on the people who can make a difference.



III. Core Advocacy Skills

1. Identifying issues

To get started as an advocate, first choose issues and focus areas that matter to you and the children and families with whom you partner, and where you think there is a realistic solution. In fact, a critical element of advocacy is that it focuses on creating real change for families and their communities.

2. Setting goals

Public policy and systemic change comes from defining and setting clear goals .When outlining your advocacy goals, consider:

- **Being realistic:** If nothing else, your goals should be attainable. Consider limiting the number of goals you choose to work on to a manageable number. This will allow you to focus on a limited number of things well and eliminate the risk of spreading yourself too thin.
- **Thinking incrementally:** While your long-term goal may be bold and aggressive, be sure to create shorter-term goals and milestones that celebrate your progress along the way. For example, if your long-term goal is to ensure continued funding for a particular program that helps children and families, a short-term goal could be getting the legislation to fund it introduced
- **Define success broadly:** There are many ways that success can be defined, such as having legislation introduced and passed, knocking on a certain number of doors to raise awareness of the issue, having a letter to the editor published, or recruiting key stakeholders to join you in supporting a particular solution.

3. Knowing Who Decides

For every issue you care about, there are multiple decision-makers who can affect the outcome. Depending on the issue, decision-makers include elected and appointed officials serving in local, state, or federal government; community members, religious leaders, and business owners who help influence and shape public opinion; community institutions and their leaders, such as hospitals and schools.

4. How to influence decision-makers

Decision-makers are influenced by personal contact and communications. When choosing how you want to contact a decisionmaker, keep in mind that the more individualized you can make your communication, the better. There are several things to consider when you're contacting a decision-maker:

- Make your communication personal by telling your story and helping put a real face on your issue
- Be clear and concrete about how they advance a solution
- Make ongoing or repeated contact with your decision-maker so that they can get to know you and your issue and be inspired to act

5. Negotiating with decision-makers

Negotiation is a critical part of advocacy involving a give and take between competing interests. Working together—whether it is with an elected or appointed decision-maker, a community leader, or an opposing advocacy organization—is part of successful advocacy. Key variables for successful negotiation include:

- Different opinions and priorities can often mean radically different perceptions of similar data and strong emotions. Separate the people from the problem and treat everyone with respect.
- Determine the specific interests that underlie a particular position on an issue, and identify what's in someone's personal interests to agree to.
- Build bridges between competing interests by identifying mutual win-win options and solutions

6. Sustaining your efforts

Advocacy takes time and consistency, so don't forget to celebrate your progress and the "small wins" over time. This will help sustain your efforts and keep you engaged in advocacy. Developing a relationship with your elected officials and their staff so that you can become a trusted source of information to them helps to build on those wins - but also takes time! Remember to:

- Be consistent and don't give up - relationships take time to build, especially with decision-makers and others who many demands for their time and attention
- Choose issues you're passionate about
- Set realistic timelines and identify milestones along the path toward your end goal
- Celebrate, and celebrate often!
- Evaluate your efforts so you know what works and what doesn't

IV. Summary of Advocacy

In summary, advocacy involves these steps:

- Find the problem that most deeply affects you and the children and families with whom you work
- Determine your advocacy goals to identify the ways in which you know your advocacy is making a difference and measure your success
- Identify the decision-makers and stakeholders
- Build relationships with decision-makers and stakeholders
- Enlist allies who care about the same issues as you
- Be persistent and advocate frequently

Advocacy doesn't have to take a lot of your time.

In less than an hour, you can:

- Vote in a primary or general election
- Call, e-mail, or write a short letter to your decision-makers
- Contribute to a political campaign or a nonprofit advocacy organization
- Sign up to receive emails from advocacy groups' and coalitions' email lists that focus on children's issues
- Patronize businesses that actively contribute to or are involved in issues that matter to you, children, and families

In about an hour, you can:

- Engage in a conversation with decision-makers in your community to build relationships
- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper
- Talk to parents and other family-facing professionals about the advocacy issues you care about
- Meet with a decision-maker at your place of work or in the community, or have a virtual meeting with the decision-maker when he or she is in the office
- Attend a community event or advocacy forum where decision-makers will appear

In an hour or more, you can:

- Testify before the state legislature or participate in community forums
- Go door-to-door in your neighborhood or community to raise awareness among others about your issues and concerns
- Staff an information booth or display at a community event or advocacy forum
- Volunteer with an advocacy coalition or organization in your community



V. Tips for Emailing Decision-makers

Email is fast and easy, but it also can get lost in the fray among the inboxes of busy decision-makers and their staff. To combat this, it's helpful to personalize your emails. Be professional in your communication. Deliver your information clearly and succinctly: if the email is too long, it might not be read completely. Often, community organizations or non-profits will circulate a sample message, or use software that allows you to send a pre-written message with or without the addition of your personalized information.

Emails can be a valuable complement to other forms of communications, such as phone calls. Emails are also a good way to ask for a longer phone conversation or meeting to discuss an issue.

These guidelines can help make your emails effective and stand out in an inbox:

- State the issue in the subject line. This helps get your message to the right person in the office.
- If you live in the district the elected official represents, start by saying "I am a constituent who lives in ____" and give the name of your community. It is often helpful to provide your town name and/or zip code. It is not usually necessary to provide your street address.
- If you are sending an email that was written by an advocacy group for many people to send, don't be afraid to change it and personalize it
- Be clear and concise with your request, and keep it short and to the point
- Share links to resources, fact sheets, or websites of groups working on your issue to help the decision-maker learn about the problem and its potential solutions
- Recruit others you know to also send emails, and help make it simple for them by sharing your email so they can use it and modify it for their own voice
- Follow up with a call or another email, referencing your original email or forwarding the message that was previously sent in your new email

VI. Tips for calling Decision-makers

There are two kinds of calls with elected officials: short, one-sided calls to an office, and longer calls with an office. Each serves a different person.

Calls to an office are usually organized when a decision or vote is urgent and imminent. Constituents call their elected officials just to leave a message with a staff person who answers the phone. Usually, these conversations last for about a minute or less. You might be calling to say “I am a constituent and I am calling to urge Senator So-and-so to support the children’s nutrition bill” or “I am a constituent and I am calling to urge Councilmember Such-and-such to oppose cuts to teachers’ salaries.” The staffer may ask for your name and your zip code. The staff will keep track of how many calls are received - on both sides of the issues - and that will be reported to the elected official.

Of course, it’s also possible to have a longer call with an elected official (or a staff person who advises that elected official) to share information and exchange views. It’s occasionally possible to make an unscheduled call to an office and be lucky enough to catch the staff person or elected official on the phone. More likely, these longer calls will need to be put on the calendar in advance. If you are able to have a longer call with an elected official or staff person, it’s worth doing advance planning and preparation.

Calling a decision-maker can be daunting or intimidating to even experienced advocates, and it’s important that your call be effective. These guidelines can help maximize the impact of your call, and ease any anxiety you may have about reaching out by phone.

- Plan out what you are going to say before you make the call. You don’t need to read from a script, but having your thoughts organized can help you be concise.
- Unless you have been told differently beforehand, expect that you may only have about fifteen minutes to make your point. Because schedules unexpectedly change, know what you’ll focus on if you have less time to talk than you had planned. Be prepared to talk with a staff member or reschedule if the elected official cannot be on the phone
- Make your call personal and tell them what you hope they will do, be it vote on legislation, attend a community forum, or speak out on an issue.
- You’re more likely to be effective when you are clear and concise and do not spend a lot of time on introductions or small talk. While it’s good to make a connection it’s easy to spend all your time chatting and never get to the issue or problem to be solved
- It’s important to thank decision-makers or whomever you are speaking with for their time, their support, and their interest in the issue.
- Recruit others you know to also call, and share with them your notes or outline of what to say to make it easy for them. There is always strength in numbers!
- Consistency and frequency matters in advocacy, so stay in touch over time to keep encouraging progress or check in about where solutions to your issues stand.

VII. Tips for Meeting with Decision-makers

In person or zoom meetings with decision-makers and/or their staff is a very powerful form of advocacy, giving you an opportunity to speak directly to them about your issues, learning about their knowledge of the topic and gauging their reactions to potential solutions or your request for their support or actions. It also helps position you as a valuable resource for them as a passionate constituent and expert in the field. These steps can help you have a successful meeting with decision-makers and their staff members:

- Before the meeting, find out how long the meeting will be, and decide whether you are meeting alone or with a group of people. If you meet as a group, identify one person as the lead, and plan how each person will contribute to the conversation. It isn't necessary to have a script, and scripts can make a meeting feel stiff and inauthentic. It is a good idea to have planned out the points that need to be made and who in the group will make each one. Do a dry run in advance! Practice is always helpful.
- Conduct some background research on the decision-maker you're meeting with so that you know how they've voted in the past, what their positions are, and what role they may be able to play in advancing proposed solutions.
- Identify two or three main points that get to the heart of the matter and share your personal and professional story
- If possible, meet with decision-makers in their home community, when they are less rushed and have fewer distractions for their time and attention
- Try to start your meeting with something that you have in common, such as having attended the same schools, children on sports teams, or some other type of brief small talk that can serve as an ice breaker and keep everyone relaxed. But don't linger in small talk so long your meeting ends before you talk about the issue that brought you there!
- Be clear about why you are there, why they should be interested, and what you want them to do.
- Ask them for their opinions and to share their knowledge of the issue, and be sure to listen first and then respond without interruptions
- Make a request for some type of action, such as voting on a bill, attending a community forum, or visiting a community space to see an issue firsthand.
- If possible, have some type of document you can leave behind, such as a fact sheet on the issue or links to resources they can look at on their own time, and be sure to include your name and contact information on it.
- Thank them in the moment and as follow up, either through a handwritten note, email, or phone call.

This reference guide was created by the Brazelton Touchpoints Center to assist family-facing providers in their advocacy work.

The Brazelton Touchpoints Center provides professional and leadership development, organizational learning and change, and research and evaluation services for family-facing professionals in pediatrics, early childhood, infant mental health, children's libraries and museums, home visiting, and child welfare. The Brazelton Touchpoints Center is home to the Touchpoints Approach, the Brazelton Institute (the Newborn Behavioral Observations system and the Neonatal Behavioral Assessment Scale), the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative, Family Connections, and the BTC Research and Evaluation team. At BTC, we are dedicated to creating a lasting community in which equity, diversity, inclusion, belonging, and access thrive.

The vision of the **Brazelton Touchpoints Center** is that all children grow up to be adults who can cope with adversity, strengthen their communities, constructively participate in civic life, steward our planet's resources, and experience the joy of nurturing the next generation to be prepared to do the same.

We partner with families of young children and the communities and systems of care that surround them so that all children – whatever their life circumstances, challenges, and resources may be – will be healthy, succeed as early learners and have the opportunity to thrive.

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