From the Director's Desk - "Advocacy: It's in Our Name"
by Suzanne Bowers

At PEATC (The Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center), we believe strongly in “advocacy” so much that it’s in our name! And “giving back” is why PEATC’s staff works so hard for you! Our staff members are parents, family members, and friends to students with disabilities and it’s our passion to thank and give back to those who helped us in the past and give back to those who need us now. PEATC’s mission is to empower families and individuals with disabilities to be effective advocates and to collaborate with schools and outside organizations to build a community of support for persons with disabilities.

One of the most common questions we are asked at PEATC is if we will go with families to their IEP meetings as their advocate. As much as our dedicated staff would like to help every family by supporting them at their meeting, the answer is NO because it goes against our philosophy of empowering families to be their own best advocates. The second most common question or the one that follows is if we can recommend a good advocate for the family. We do maintain a list of advocates who have demonstrated that they share PEATC’s philosophy of collaboration and partnership but before we give out the list, we work with the family to educate, empower, and prepare the family to the maximum extent possible. Then, if the family still wants the list of independently employed advocates, we are happy to share it.

December is the month for reflecting on everything that we have to be grateful for and it should also be the time that we make a conscious decision to give back for all of our good fortune. This may be through helping to educate other families about the special education cycle in Virginia, sharing a meal with neighbors, donating to the local food bank, or donating to PEATC so that we can continue to grow our outreach to families in need of support. Our annual Holiday appeal letter will be mailed out this month but donations are accepted throughout the year. So please consider giving back to PEATC through a tax-deductible donation this holiday season!
Family Engagement Corner by Artina Norris - "Advocacy & Giving Back"

Parents and families are their children’s most important educator and teaching begins immediately in the family setting. Parents educate daily through love, positive interactions and healthy relationships. Children are taught at a young age the concept and importance of sharing. These lessons lay an inner foundation for empathy and compassion for others.

As a nation we tend to rise to the occasion and lend acts of kindness when others are experiencing hardship and crisis. Children that have been exposed to this type of generosity tend to remain open and receptive to aiding others in times of need. We have all witnessed random acts of kindness demonstrated by not only adults but by children alike. We have heard of school age children rallying behind a cause in support of a classmate in need. They creatively and instinctively come up with solutions that result in a favorable outcome. Learning to be thoughtful of others and giving back makes each of us feel empowered. Children learning to give to others at a young age helps them develop a spirit of empathy and compassion.

Many parents are using the varying types of destruction we have experienced as a nation as opportunities to help their children understand the importance of putting others needs and wants above their own. Family engagement is vital because the families as a whole can impact change. Families can choose organizations to support monetarily and charitable activities they can do together. Families can create games of gratitude, for example, using the alphabet, have the child come up with one thing for each letter that they are thankful for. Taking time as a family to appreciate one another is so important. This can create an atmosphere of laughter and cheer for the entire family.

Parents can show acts of kindness to their children’s school, by simply baking cookies for their child’s class or having their child make holiday cards for their friends. Children can also go through their old toys and clothing and donate them to a shelter for the less fortunate. Giving back are simple acts of kindness generated from a heart of compassion and expressed in various forms.

Children of all ages can benefit from volunteering and giving back to their communities and to others. Grateful children grow into happier adults!

Transition Corner by Sherri Coles - "Giving Back"

December is a holiday season for many people. This is often a time for reflecting on the year and thinking about how we can give back, or help others, just as we have been helped. It is always good to remember that we are interdependent, and sometimes rely on others for help. It is also a time to reflect on the achievements we and our families have made, and to plan and prioritize our goals for the coming year.

It is scary to think of the time your child leaves school as an adult. While many school services are good, there may be some that have not gone well, or have not even been tried. As your child’s best advocate, you need to keep the end game in mind: a meaningful life as an adult for your child with disabilities. School should be helping them (and you) prepare for their life as an adult.

As with anyone’s life, our children with disabilities will need supports. They will undoubtedly need more supports than their siblings. Think about the people who provide services or have provided support this year or in the past. The list may be quite long: family, extended family, teachers, aides, support personnel, neighbors, agency providers, non-profits groups such as PEATC, The Arc, and the Independent Living Center.

You may want to give some of these individuals a small token of appreciation—perhaps something you or your child have made, a letter of appreciation, or an act of kindness. Gifts that take time, effort and/or thought are always appreciated, and don’t need to cost any money! Everyone likes to be recognized for a job well done. This can be a very motivating thing.

Another way to show appreciation is by “paying it forward.” Some ideas for doing this might include helping another family with a child who is receiving special education services and who feels overwhelmed. It could be volunteering at the non-profit that has helped you. How about going to an IEP meeting with another parent who is nervous or afraid they don’t know enough to advocate for their child effectively? Sometimes just listening to a parent who feels overwhelmed can be a huge help. You can help connect parents to new-to-them resources, such as PEATC.

The old saying “It takes a village to raise a child” is really true. This month try to think of the “village” of people who have helped your family and your child with disabilities, and let them know how much you value and appreciate them. You will make their holiday season much brighter, and give them encouragement to continue (or re-double!) their efforts in the coming year. It will also remind you of the kindnesses and help that have made your life better. Then by “paying it forward”, you can help create an avalanche of kindness and gratitude in your community. What a wonderful way to start the new year!
Parents are the real experts on their children. We are at the forefront of all aspects of our children’s lives. We get advice from family members, friends, and books on sleeping techniques, potty training, eating habits, and even which toys they should or should not play with. All of this advice can be helpful, but what do you do when none of the techniques are working? When navigating child development it is important to understand that all children develop at different rates. Some will walk and talk before the age of one; some may be “late bloomers”. But what if you think your child is not blooming? You may have Grandma in your ear saying, “Oh well you were a late talker” or the teacher says “He/She just doesn’t want to try”. How do you stand up for your child and get their needs met?

When a child enters preschool age there are some standard developmental milestones they should have met (i.e. increased vocabulary, basic social skills, and self-help skills). Use your instincts and pay attention to your child’s daily activities to see if what they can or cannot do is “typical” for their age. If you have observed children in this same age group and do not see similarities between them and your child and are concerned that your child may be having some difficulties there are a few steps that you can take to advocate for your child:

1. Do not think or allow anyone to tell you that your concerns are not warranted. Or that you may be over exaggerating or being overly protective. Know your child best.

2. If your child is in a child development/child care center talk to the care takers about your child’s development in comparison to the others in their age group.

3. Meet with your child’s pediatrician. Ask questions about what should your child be doing at his/he age, “Is this within the normal range of development or is this just a phase?” “Should I be concerned if they are not ____ by now?”

4. If an evaluation is suggested or requested by you, there are regulations that govern this process, take the time to familiarize yourself with them.

5. When attending any meetings in regards to your child come prepared with up to date medical and academic records and observations. Including your own is also helpful because you see your child in their natural setting the most.

**PEATC On Demand and In the Spotlight: "How to Talk so Schools will Listen" by Leslie Edwards**

Here at PEATC we pride ourselves in encouraging and empowering parents to be advocates for their children. When IDEA was reauthorized in 2004, lawmakers made it very clear that parents are to be equal partners with the school. This notion is based on well proven research that the education of children with disabilities is made more effective when parents have an active role in the Special Education process. Parents and caregivers have a unique insight and knowledge about their children that makes them experts. This insight, knowledge, and expertise is an essential piece to the creation and implementation of a student’s education. Not only is the importance of parent participation something that many of us can agree on, it is also the law!

However, no matter how many times you as a parent may hear this notion, when it comes time to execute your advocacy skills you may find yourself feeling overwhelmed. Much like a sport, advocacy takes practice.

Through this month’s On Demand and in the Spotlight feature, PEATC invites you to access our training “How to Talk so Schools will Listen”. This training will enable parents and caregivers to discover communication techniques, learn how to recognize and prevent barriers to communication and build agreements around difficult problems. These are all very important skills to practice and prepare for when it comes time to voice your expertise as parent. To access this training please paste this link into your internet browser: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=beOlfRWCog8
¿Qué es abogar por un ser querido? Ha escuchado esta frase muchas veces en talleres y de varias organizaciones que sirven a personas con necesidades especiales, pero ¿qué significa? Abogar quiere decir hablar por los derechos de otro persona, sus necesidades y fortalezas, es decir ser la voz de alguien. Viendo la palabra “abogar” en el ámbito educativo, los padres abogan o hablan por las necesidades y fortalezas de sus hijos con los maestros y administradores. Ellos les informan y hacen conocer a sus hijos para qué asistir a la escuela y los padres trabajan juntos para proveer una educación adecuada a los niños. Así mismo, los niños también pueden abogar por sí mismos. Ellos tienen una voz y cuando logran entender sus necesidades y comunicarlas con los demás, ellos están abogando por sí solos. Cuando ellos también comunican sus intereses, ellos abogan por sí mismos. Los padres pueden pasar estas destrezas a los niños. Un defensor o alguien que aboga por alguien debe ser preparado, organizado e informado. Un defensor se informa de los reglamentos y políticas, la discapacidad de la otra persona (o su propia discapacidad) y su comunidad y se prepara organizando toda clase de información que obtuvo de fuentes externas y de sus propias observaciones. El defensor aplica su conocimiento y pone sus puntos por escrito cuando sea necesario. No necesita entrenamiento específico, solo el deseo de informarse, aprender, organizarse, averiguar y participar e involucrarse en su escuela y comunidad. ¿Estás listo para prepararte, organizarte e informarte todo lo que puedes para no solo abogar para tu hijo, pero para ayudar a otras familias con el conocimiento que adquiriste?

Advocating for a Loved One

What does it mean to advocate for a loved one? You have heard this phrase many times in workshops and from organizations who serve people with special needs, but what does it mean? To advocate for someone means to speak for the rights of another person, for his needs and strengths, in other words, to be the voice of someone else. When we talk about advocacy in the education setting, parents advocate or speak about the needs and strengths of their children to teachers and administrators. They inform and share what they know about their children, so that the school and parents work together to provide an appropriate education for their children. Children can also advocate for themselves. They have a voice and when they understand their needs and communicate them with others, they are advocating for themselves. When they communicate their interests, they are also advocating for themselves. Parents can pass these skills to their children. An advocate informs himself of regulations and policies, the disability of the other person (or his own disability) and of his community and prepares himself organizing all types of information from outside sources and from his own observations. He applies his knowledge and when necessary puts his points in writing. He does not need special training, only the desire to inform himself, learn, organize, search and participate and be involved in school and his community. Are you ready to give it your all to prepare, organize and inform yourself to not only advocate for your child but to help other families with the knowledge you acquire?