



# ACTION AND ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

## CREATING POLICY CHANGE

To advocate, according to *American Heritage Dictionary*, is “to speak, plead, or argue in favor of.”<sup>8</sup> Advocacy can be done by individuals or groups, on behalf of individuals, groups, or ideas. In individual advocacy, one person advocates for another, usually because that person is not in a position to “speak, plead, or argue” on his or her own behalf. In this section of the toolkit, however, we will discuss advocating as a group in favor of changes to policies that affect teen bullying. In a sense, we are advocating for teens that have been bullied or are at risk of being bullied by advocating for policy change.

Policies can be laws, rules, or regulations that are defined by federal or state legislatures, other branches of government, institutions, or even heads of households. (What’s the policy in your home about curfews?) These policies are basically statements (both written and unwritten) about what will or should be done in certain circumstances. Let’s take the issue of bullying, for example, and look at different types of policies that might affect youth who are bullied.

At the **federal** level, civil rights laws prohibit discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, disability, and age. These policies can help bullying victims who are targeted for these reasons. (In some court cases, gender identity and sexual orientation have been determined to be aspects of “sex” for purposes of determining a victim’s rights under civil rights law).

Many **state** governments have recently passed laws requiring all public schools to have anti-bullying policies in place. You can check to see whether your state has such a law, and advocate for one if it doesn’t. Criminal law is also defined at the **state** level, so your state laws will determine whether a bully’s actions—such as assault, robbery, or stalking—are illegal and will indicate what the potential consequences are for breaking those laws.

At the **local** level, your school system may or may not have a policy specifically about bullying, but it probably defines what types of conduct are not permissible



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in the student code of conduct. You can check to see if your school district has a policy about bullying, and see whether the policy holds students who bully accountable and is sensitive to victims' rights to safety and support.

**Institutional** policies can include those of your work place, after-school program, or youth group, for example. Is bullying prohibited in these settings? How is the behavior defined, and what are the consequences for the bully and the options for the victim?

## Why Advocate for Policy Change?

As described above, there are many different types and levels of policies that affect teens how have been bullied. Nearly all of the policies that affect teens were developed without input from teens, and some do not even take youth into account. (For example, policies about victims' rights to confidentiality are not always applied to teen victims, even if the law makes no distinction about the age of the victim.)

Some policies have bad effects on teen victims because they do not recognize the dynamics of victimization—for example, policies that refer all cases of bullying to a mediation program without regard to the power difference between a bully and a victim or to the victim's safety before, during, and after the mediation.

Sometimes a *lack of policy* has a bad effect because victims have no standing to demand safety or support if these rights are not explicitly given to them in writing. A lack of policy can also contribute to inconsistent and confusing responses to victimization, leaving victims with no assurance that their situation will be handled in a way that is helpful rather than harmful.

Advocating for good policies is one way to make lasting change in your community. If you are successful in advocating for a new and improved policy, the impact of that change should last well beyond the end of your project.

Policy advocacy requires analyzing current policies on your topic, deciding as a group what kind of change you think is required, learning who has the power to make that change, and then developing and executing a strategy to convince the decision maker(s) to make the change you seek.



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## Building a Youth-led Response to Bullying

### Steps in Policy Advocacy

#### ***Step One: Survey Your Community.***

There is not a lot of information about the impact of bullying on youth with disabilities. Ask people to take the bullying survey, and share their stories on the YO! website ([yodisabledproud.org](http://yodisabledproud.org)), familiarize yourself with YO! Bullying resources and additional information on how other communities are handling the issue. Set a goal for the number you want to reach. When you reach that number review the results and consider your findings, what are the common themes?

Use the themes you identify to develop your plan by developing statements: for example “Youth with disabilities do not know they can use their IEP to combat bullying”. Then, as a group, brainstorm questions prompted by that statement. You might come up with questions such as: why don’t they know? How does someone use the IEP process to stop bullying? How do they learn about it? Is someone failing to provide information, or is information being intentionally withheld? The process of generating questions will lead you to think more deeply about what other information you need and what policies might need to be changed to improve the current situation.

#### ***Step Two: Analyze current policies.***

Research what policies are already in place at the different levels mentioned above (federal, state, local, and institutional) that relate to bullying and the questions you generated in Step One. If policies do exist, ask yourself if they help or hurt people who have been bullied, whether there is room for improvement, and if the policies are being fully implemented. If there are no policies related to your bullying, think about what an ideal policy would look like. (You can look to other towns or states for examples.) If existing policies aren’t being followed, think about what would need to happen for the policies to be enforced.

#### ***Step Three: Review your goals and decide what type of change is needed, and at what level.***

If your goal is for youth with disabilities who are being bullied to be safer and to receive the support they need, think about what types of changes to current policies will help achieve those goals. You may decide to concentrate on an



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institutional policy, such as in your own school or organization, or you may decide to mount a campaign to change your state's law.

You might decide to divide into committees and work for change at different levels at the same time. But be careful not to spread your team too thin. Policy work can be daunting, and everyone will need to give and receive a lot of mutual support. Most importantly, be sure to choose a change that your group cares about and really believes is important. This will make the work more meaningful and help keep everyone motivated.

For more on the technique of generating questions as a form of advocacy, see the Right Question Project, Inc. at [www.rightquestion.org](http://www.rightquestion.org).

### ***Step Four: Find out who has the power to make the change you want.***

This person or persons may be more or less evident. If you want to change a state law, the decision makers are your state legislators and governor. If you want to change school policy, you may start with the principal but find out that the real decision-making power sits with the superintendent or the school board. If the school board is appointed by the mayor, you may need to get the mayor on your side. If the school board members are elected, you will have to take politics into consideration. Vocal parents almost always have influence over school board decisions, so think about getting yours on your side.

### ***Step Five: Find out the current position of the decision makers and what pressures and influences they are susceptible to.***

Are the decision makers likely to be for, opposed, or indifferent to the change you are proposing? Develop a strategy based on sharing with the decision maker why your change is the right thing to do (moral appeal) and why it is also in his or her best interest as a policy maker (self-interest or political appeal). Because your proposed change will benefit youth, it can help to find out if the decision makers have children or grandchildren with disabilities and ask them to think about how the policy would benefit the children and teens in their lives.

### ***Step Six: Recruit influential allies.***

By this point in the project, you have probably talked to a considerable number of people in the community who support your efforts. Review your list of contacts and highlight anyone who may have influence over the decision makers you are



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trying to persuade. Brainstorm the names of other people who might have influence and add them to your list as well. It's usually only helpful to approach these people if you already have a contact or "in" with them. If the influential contact is just as difficult to approach as the decision maker, then don't bother—focus your efforts on the decision maker.

### ***Step Seven: Determine the best approach to the decision makers.***

On the continuum from friendly to confrontational, what type of approach is most likely to move the decision makers you need to influence? If you feel that they simply need to be educated about the potential benefits of your proposed policy change and they will see the light (they just hadn't thought about it this way before), then take a friendly approach.

If the evidence tells you that the decision makers are already dead-set against the change you want to make, you might skip right to a more confrontational approach. However, first consider whether the decision makers can be budged at all. If not, you may want to choose a more winnable change. If you're unsure where the decision makers stand, start with a respectful and friendly approach and be ready to escalate your efforts if you don't get the response you want.

After an initial negative response, you might want to let the decision makers know that you have a full-fledged campaign that you are ready to implement. If they see that you're organized and serious, they may give a second look to your request before you take your actions to the next level. Even if you determine that a confrontational approach is the best way to go, keep it positive and non-violent. It would set a poor example for an anti-violence group to try to bully someone into making change! See the specific tactics listed below for more information on the different ways to approach decision makers.

### ***Step Eight: Choose your tactics.***

Below is a list of possible tactics to advocate for policy change, loosely organized from friendly to confrontational. A creative group of youth will probably come up with several additional tactics. Be sure that any tactic you choose fits with your overall approach and makes the best use of your knowledge about the decision makers you are trying to influence. Be prepared with a Plan A and Plan B (and maybe even a Plan C). Policy change often takes hard work and a long-term



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commitment, but you can maximize your effectiveness with a good strategy, strong allies, and well-executed tactics that match your goals and strategy.

## Advocacy Tactics

### *One-on-One Meeting*

If there is one primary decision maker to influence, try to get an appointment to meet with that person individually. One individual or a small group can go to speak to the person. If you go as a group, be clear about the roles of each person in the meeting. Keep in mind that you may only get five minutes of the person's time, so it's essential to be well-prepared and organized. Practice making a two-minute pitch that includes:

- the issue you want to discuss,
- why it is important to you,
- the change you are seeking,
- how your change will improve the situation,
- what you are asking the decision maker to do,
- and why he or she should do it. (Remember to appeal to both the decision maker's sense of moral fairness and his or her self-interest.)

The decision maker will probably appreciate having written information that supports your presentation, so bring along your materials or send them in advance—or both. Be prepared to answer any questions with facts you have discovered through research, including your findings from surveys, stories, YO! fact sheets and resources and additional information on how other communities are handling the issue. Remember to thank the person for their time before you leave. You should also follow up with a written thank-you note within a week of the meeting.

### *Presentation to a Group*

If you are trying to influence a group of decision makers, such as a city council or a school board, try to get on the agenda of one of their meetings to make a brief (5- to 10-minute) presentation. For your presentation, you will want to include the same elements of your argument that you would for an individual meeting (see above), but the delivery will be different. Clear and well-designed visual aids can help convey information to a group, but be sure not to present so much visual information that the audience is overwhelmed. A simple PowerPoint

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presentation, and photographs, charts, or maps showing the themes of your survey results can help the listeners focus on the main points of your presentation.

The presentation may be made by one individual or a small group, but everyone's role should be well defined, and the presenters should practice several times in advance of the meeting. It's also a good idea to have concise handouts containing the main points of your presentation for both the decision makers and the audience to take home. If the meeting is open to the public, invite additional members of the group to attend to show support for the presenters and for the proposed policy change. Be sure to stay until the end of the meeting. There may be additional allies in the room who will want to talk to you after the meeting to offer their support. By the same token, if you see people in the audience that you would like to have as allies, strike up a conversation with them before or after the meeting. Making these contacts is called *networking* and is an important skill in all types of advocacy.

### **Letters and Petitions**

If you cannot schedule a face-to-face meeting, or the meeting is unsuccessful, try a letter-writing campaign or petition drive to reach the decision makers. The more people who write letters or sign your petition, the more impact this tactic will have. When communicating in writing with legislators or other decision makers, keep in mind:

- Hard-copy letters in hand-addressed envelopes usually receive the most attention.
- If time is short, e-mail and faxes will do the job more quickly, but you'll need to collect more of them to make an impact.
- People in public office are kept there or removed by *voters*. Therefore, collect as many signatures as possible from registered voters ages 18 and older. Where youth under 18 are signing, they should indicate when they will be eligible to vote and that they intend to exercise their civic duty to vote as soon as they are able.



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- Use the proper term of respect when addressing your letter (e.g., “The Honorable [name]” or “Dear Representative X”).
- Verify the address, fax number, or e-mail address where you will be sending your correspondence. It would be a shame for your efforts to be wasted because your correspondence didn’t reach its destination.
- If you do not receive a response within a week, follow up with a phone call, making reference to your correspondence.

### ***Public Information Campaigns***

You can use the media to try to reach young people with disabilities who have been bullied and encourage them to get help, you can also use the media to try to influence decision makers to support your policy proposal. Follow the steps outlined in the Media Toolkit, keeping in mind your goal of policy change and your audience of decision makers (and the people who can influence them). Public information campaigns are especially useful with elected officials, as they need public good will to be re-elected. Use their dependence on votes to your advantage by getting the public on board with your policy proposal and putting political pressure on your official(s) to support the change you seek.

### ***Marches, Rallies, and Sit-ins***

These are tactics of protest to be used when decision makers are unmoved, unresponsive, or opposed to your policy proposal. These tactics require gathering a large number of participants and keeping the protest non-violent to work; violent protestors tend to discredit themselves in the eyes of both the general public and the decision makers, which is counter-productive to winning support for your issue. The rights to peaceably assemble and to petition the government are protected in the Constitution, but you may need a permit to hold your event in a public space. Check with your local police.

Remember that one tactic is not a campaign. You need to put careful thought into your goals and overall strategy, and be prepared to try several different tactics to achieve your goals. Be sure to celebrate small wins along the way to keep up your spirits and your momentum.



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## Advocacy Role Play

**Materials:** Handout **Time:** *Long version:* 1 hour *Short version:* 30 minutes

### Long Version

1. Have youth divide into groups of three.
2. Hand out scenarios
3. Have each group pick one scenario to begin. One person should play the teen, one should play the decision maker, and the third person should observe the interaction and give feedback on what went well and what could have been done better.
4. Within each group of three, rotate roles and act out a different scenario, until all three people have had a chance to play all three roles, and each group has worked on each scenario.
5. Gather as a large group to debrief the exercise by discussing what was difficult about speaking to busy and indifferent decision makers, and what the observers thought worked well. You can make a list of guidelines as a group based on everyone's observations of the role plays.

### Short Version

1. Divide into pairs and assign one role play to each pair.
2. Each pair practices their role play for five minutes and then performs it for the whole group.
3. The whole group gives feedback on what was successful and what to improve.

**Note:** The person playing the decision maker should make the teen work to get their attention. Be busy, indifferent, dismissive, but don't make it impossible. If you think the teen is presenting a convincing argument, give a positive response.



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## Advocacy Scenarios

1. You want to interview the school principal about the school's bullying and harassment policy. You want them to support the Disability Pride Club's Own MY Power Freedom from Bullying Day.
2. You have made an appointment with your state senator to discuss a bill that would require all school districts in your state to have specific anti-bullying policies and programs in place. You want your senator to support the bill.
4. You have made an appointment with your local city council member. You would like the City Council to support the Own My Power Freedom from Bullying Day, by adopting a resolution or making a proclamation.

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