

A Strategy for Teaching Samantha to Advocate for Herself

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Over the past week you notice that your 12 year-old student “Samantha” has been coming to your homeroom seemingly troubled and at times crying. With careful questioning, followed by observation, you find that in her inclusion math class, some of the students take great delight in watching Samantha squirm as they lightly touch her in apparent hopes that she’ll eventually strike out at the most inopportune time... when the teacher is looking.

Talking to the math teacher in past about challenging situations with other special needs children has always been met with utmost concern for the child, along with an insightful and honest attempt to rectify the problem. You have every reason to think the math teacher will be sympathetic and helpful this time as well. However, after reading *Ask and Tell: Self-Advocacy and Disclosure for People on the Autism Spectrum* (Shore, 2004), instead of just asking the teacher to move Samantha away from the bullies you realize that it is time to educate Samantha on how to advocate for herself.

For great tips on eradicating bullying on the individual, classroom, and school wide level, check into Rebekah Heinrich’s *Perfect targets - Asperger Syndrome and bullying: Practical solutions for surviving the social world* from Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

Given that Samantha is at the beginning stages of learning how to advocate for herself, she is going to need a lot of support in planning for and making the advocacy effort successful. She is at the *Planning and Modeling* stage, which is the first of six developmental steps in learning to advocate for oneself (Sibley, K., 2004). You now chart out your course of action for helping Samantha.

Using a protocol known as SOCCSS (Myles, Trautman, & Schelvan, 2004), or *Situation – Options – Consequences – Choices – Strategies – Simulation*, you begin by helping Samantha process her *situation* by answering the questions of *who*, *when*, *what*, and *why* of this unfortunate event, as well as validating her possible feelings of anger, shame or other at being bullied in this manner.

Next, you conduct a guided brainstorming session with Samantha for *options* for an appropriate way to advocate for herself. For example, while exercising the *option* of punching the bullies in the nose the next time they touch her lightly may initially feel good, this course of action will likely have negative *consequences* of Samantha receiving a detention for fighting in class, making this not a good *choice* of action. After running through a few more possibilities, you both agree that the best *strategy* is to separate Samantha from the bullies by changing her seat.

The final step in preparation for having Samantha advocate for herself at the *Planning and Modeling* stage will be to *simulate* how the actual advocacy effort takes place through role-playing or other means until Samantha gains confidence with participating in her own advocacy effort with you. Since Samantha is at the early stages of learning to advocate for herself, it is likely that you will actually do most of the talking. For example, you might initiate the conversation with the math teacher by stating that “Samantha and I have something we wish to talk with you about in math class,” followed Samantha explaining, to the best of her ability the *situation* and the suggested *strategy* both of you have worked out earlier. As Samantha’s advocacy facilitator you can support Samantha’s efforts by prompting and jumping in as needed.

Educating Samantha in advocating on her behalf will pay many dividends as she transitions to adult life where the Americans with Disabilities Act requires people needing accommodations to advocate for themselves.

References

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