

## **Family and Community Session 3**

### **Positive Advocacy and Effective Self-Advocacy: Teaching Students Advocacy Skills Through Role-Modeling**

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## Foreword

The topics for these community forums were chosen with input from a variety of stakeholders in Project North Star. We understand that these topics are significant in parenting and educating gifted children in rural areas, but that they are just a handful of important topics families, educators, and communities need to discuss when nurturing the gifts and talents of young people. **These are a tiny lens on very large topics, and are intended to be a starting point for discussion and further exploration.** Please use these forum guides in whatever way makes sense in your community, and feel welcome to use them as a template for addressing other important topics.

The contents of these guides have been chosen using a number of criteria. We asked:

- Are they relevant to people who live in rural areas?
- Are they current and/or timeless?
- Are they respectful?
- Are they universal? (Some resources reference specific cultures, regions, or traditions. We know the readings cannot be specific to every group, but do the selected resources spark important questions that are relevant to our target audience—communities, educators, and families in rural areas who are actively engaged in creating opportunities for growth for gifted and talented children?)
- Are they thought provoking?
- Can we show alternate points of view with multiple readings, in order to help start a positive dialogue?
- Are they readily available in complete form? (Most sources are available online. We felt the need to include excerpts from several books whose authors' wisdom we felt necessary to include in our work. All sources are cited.)

We understand that not all readings will ring true to all people. Please read with an open mind, and the understanding that multiple points of view are helpful, even if the specific information offered does not apply to your situation. Analyze the readings with an eye for finding similarities, differences, and commonalities of purpose to your own experience. Feel welcome to disagree respectfully, or to champion another point of view with equal respect.

The content of these sessions are not intended to reflect the opinions or beliefs of the Project North Star staff, contractors, consultants, or participants. In fact, resources were chosen with an eye to presenting multiple points of view, with the intent of providing a lot of scope for conversation.

Above all, the Project North Star Team applauds you for engaging in discussions that bridge the divide often found between education, family, and community. We know that this collaborative spirit is very often a strength of rural communities, and is something we seek to share with others. We sincerely thank you for your contributions to this work.

## Family and Community Meeting Checklist

- 3 weeks or more ahead of time
  - Schedule speaker/facilitator
    - Ask about tech needs
    - Ask about hand-outs
  - Reserve space
  - Make childcare arrangements (if applicable)
  - Create flyer, including
    - Date
    - Time
    - Venue
    - Topic/speaker
    - Childcare availability
    - Cost (optional for event with paid speaker)
    - Benefits of attending (building community, engaging topic, refreshments, etc.)
    - Target audience
  - List event on school website
  - Advertise event using community channels
    - Newspapers and newsletters
    - Radio
    - Bulletin boards
- 2 weeks ahead of time
  - Notify email list
  - Send flyers home from school
  - Post flyers in public spaces
- 1 week ahead of time
  - Print hand-outs
  - Confirm space

- Create any necessary signage for venue
- Second reminder to email list
- Create and print meeting agenda and/or introduction notes
- Two days ahead of time
  - Remind speaker/facilitator
  - Remind childcare provider
  - Third reminder to email list
- Day of
  - Refreshments
  - Arrive early to set up chairs, signs, and test equipment
  - Take notes and create an action item list
- Follow up
  - Post and/or email notes from the meeting
  - Thank speaker/facilitator
  - Accomplish action items
- Sample flyer format, can be half or third sheet

Your School or District is hosting a facilitated discussion on Creating a Collaborative Team to Nurture and Grow our Children's Talent

Date:

Topic:

Location:

Cost (include the word free if no cost)

Open to public, invite a friend, or specific audience (optional)

Childcare (if applicable)

RSVP: Your contact info, end date to RSVP

*Purpose, e.g., As we work to build community and collaboration between school and home, we are offering a series of facilitated discussions on topics of interest to families and educators of high-potential students. This discussion will focus on building a supportive network for students, including home, school, and community. Please join the discussion to learn more!*

## Suggested Reading #1

### Advocacy Skills for Parents from Diverse Backgrounds

By *Tiombe Kendrick*

Parents of gifted and talented children from diverse backgrounds often experience unique challenges as they advocate for their prodigies. It is crucial that these parents develop strong advocacy skills which can help mitigate the many barriers this population of gifted children often faces. These skills help to ensure that their children receive the types and levels of services that will meet their specialized needs.

In order to become strong advocates, parents will need to become “unauthorized” experts about many things:

- It is extremely important that parents of diverse gifted children become familiar with how gifted children are identified and serviced in their respective school districts. Parents must find out things like if the school district their children attends offers magnet programs with themes related to their child’s interest or if they offer programs such as AP, IB, Dual enrollment, and Cambridge. If the local school district does not offer these programs on their campuses, parents can inquire about possible on-line options.
- It will also be important for parents of diverse gifted children to increase their awareness of all local and national private organizations that provide valuable resources to gifted children (including those from diverse backgrounds) such as the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation’s Young Scholars Program, Davidson Institute for Talent Development, Duke TIP, and Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth Program. It is imperative that parents begin their research regarding private organizations while their children are young to ensure they have enough time to prepare themselves and their children for the stringent and competitive criteria often attached to these programs.
- In addition, these parents will benefit from connecting with their state gifted association as well as organizations that serve gifted children and their parents such as SENG, the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC), and The Association for the Gifted (TAG). Parents should look for scholarship programs offered by organizations like SENG, NAGC, and TAG that will allow parents and children to experience attending an annual convention, which can be a great and often life changing experience for the parent of a gifted child from a diverse background.

Being the parent of a gifted child from a diverse background may be difficult but meeting these children’s needs doesn’t have to be impossible. With good research skills and time, parents can become the advocates their children will need to navigate the choppy and uncertain ways of the society and world they live in today.

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[sengifted.org/archives/articles/advocacy-skills-for-parents-from-diverse-backgrounds](http://sengifted.org/archives/articles/advocacy-skills-for-parents-from-diverse-backgrounds)

## Suggested Reading #2

### What is Cultural Awareness, anyway? How do I build it?

By Stephanie Quappe and Giovanna Cantatore

*“A fish only discovers its need for water when it is no longer in it. Our own culture is like water for the fish. It sustains us. We live and breathe through it.”*

Cultural Awareness is the foundation of communication and it involves the ability of standing back from ourselves and becoming aware of our cultural values, beliefs and perceptions. Why do we do things in that way? How do we see the world? Why do we react in that particular way?

Cultural awareness becomes central when we have to interact with people from other cultures. People see, interpret and evaluate things in different ways. What is considered an appropriate behavior in one culture is frequently inappropriate in another one. Misunderstandings arise when I use my meanings to make sense of your reality.

As an Italian it is almost automatic to perceive US Americans as people who always work, talk about business over lunch and drink their coffee running in the street instead of enjoying it in a bar. What does it mean? Italians are lazy and American hyperactive? No, it means that the meaning that people give to certain activities, like having lunch or dinner could be different according to certain cultures. In Italy, where relationships are highly valued, lunch, dinner or the simple pauses for coffee have a social connotation: people get together to talk and relax, and to get to know each other better. In the USA, where time is money, lunches can be part of closing a deal where people discuss the outcomes and sign a contract over coffee.

Misinterpretations occur primarily when we lack awareness of our own behavioral rules and project them on others. In absence of better knowledge we tend to assume, instead of finding out what a behavior means to the person involved, e.g. a straight look into your face is regarded as disrespectful in Japan.

Becoming aware of our cultural dynamics is a difficult task because culture is not conscious to us. Since we are born we have learned to see and do things at an unconscious level. Our experiences, our values and our cultural background lead us to see and do things in a certain way. Sometimes we have to step outside of our cultural boundaries in order to realize the impact that our culture has on our behavior. It is very helpful to gather feedback from foreign colleagues on our behavior to get more clarity on our cultural traits.

Projected similarities could lead to misinterpretation as well. When we assume that people are similar to us, we might incur the risk that they are not. If we project similarities where there are not, we might act inappropriately. It is safer to assume differences until similarity is proven. (Adler, Organizational Behavior, 1991)

There are several levels of cultural awareness that reflect how people grow to perceive cultural differences.

**My way is the only way** – At the first level, people are aware of their way of doing things, and their way is the only way. At this stage, they ignore the impact of cultural differences. (Parochial stage)

***I know their way, but my way is better*** – At the second level, people are aware of other ways of doing things, but still consider their way as the best one. In this stage, cultural differences are perceived as source of problems and people tend to ignore them or reduce their significance. (Ethnocentric stage)

**My Way and Their Way** - At this level people are aware of their own way of doing things and others' ways of doing things, and they chose the best way according to the situation. At this stage people realize that cultural differences can lead both to problems and benefits and are willing to use cultural diversity to create new solutions and alternatives. (Synergistic stage)

**Our Way** - This fourth and final stage brings people from different cultural backgrounds together for the creation of a culture of shared meanings. People dialogue repeatedly with others, create new meanings, new rules to meet the needs of a particular situation. (Participatory Third culture stage)

Increasing cultural awareness means to see both the positive and negative aspects of cultural differences. Cultural diversity could be a source of problems, in particular when the organization needs people to think or act in a similar way. Diversity increases the level of complexity and confusion and makes agreement difficult to reach. On the other hand, cultural diversity becomes an advantage when the organization expands its solutions and its sense of identity, and begins to take different approaches to problem solving. Diversity in this case creates valuable new skills and behaviors.

In becoming culturally aware, people realize that:

- We are not all the same
- Similarities and differences are both important
- There are multiple ways to reach the same goal and to live life
- The best way depends on the cultural contingency. Each situation is different and may require a different solution.

### ***How Do I Manage Cultural Diversity?***

We are generally aware that the first step in managing diversity is to recognize it and learn not to fear it.

Since everyone is the product of their own culture, we need to increase both self-awareness and cross-cultural awareness. There is no book of instructions to deal with cultural diversity, no recipe to follow. But certain attitudes help to bridge cultures.

1. **Admit that you don't know.** Knowing that we don't know everything, that a situation does not make sense, that our assumptions may be wrong is part of the process of becoming culturally aware. Assume differences, not similarities.
2. **Suspend judgments.** Collect as much information as possible so you can describe the situation accurately before evaluating it.
3. **Empathy.** In order to understand another person, we need to try standing in his/her shoes. Through empathy we learn of how other people would like to be treated by us.
4. **Systematically check your assumptions.** Ask your colleagues for feedback and constantly check your assumptions to make sure that you clearly understand the situation.

5. **Become comfortable with ambiguity.** The more complicated and uncertain life is, the more we tend to seek control. Assume that other people are as resourceful as we are and that their way will add to what we know. “If we always do, what we’ve always done, we will always get, what we always got.”
6. **Celebrate diversity.** As a company find ways of sharing the cultures of your diverse workforce, i.e., in 2002 Deutsche Bank carried out multiple initiatives around the theme of “tolerance: diversity, identity, recognition” which they called “Initiative Plus 2002.” They encouraged employee projects and organized an annual colloquium of global experts.

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<http://www.culturocity.com/articles/whatis-cultural-awareness.htm>



**Discussion Rules**

1. You cannot change other people. We can share ideas, resources, and opinions, but we can't make other people think the way we do. This community forum is all about finding common ground.
2. Compromise. Talk about the goals underlying your ideas and plans. When you see why people want to do things, you often find you are working toward the same goals in different ways. Meet somewhere in the middle.
3. Practice acceptance. When we accept others' differences, we give them a gift. This is great role modeling for our children.
4. Realize your contribution. Just by being here and participating in this discussion, you are making a difference in the lives of your children and the future of your community. Well done!

## Project North Star ~ Discussion Notes ~ Positive Advocacy

<i>Discussion</i>	<i>Notes</i>
<p><b>Resources for Unauthorized Experts</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local organizations (in MN, MCGT and MEGT, Pacer Center, etc.)</li> <li>• National non-profits (NAGC, SENG, etc.)</li> <li>• Books (see Further Investigation)</li> <li>• Websites (see Further Investigation)</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Supporting educators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding time and budgeting constraints</li> <li>• Sitting on committees</li> <li>• Helping as able, if not during the school day, then with other needs or activities</li> <li>• Remembering that educators are the experts in education</li> <li>• Knowing that no one understands all cultures—help in a positive way</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Supporting Families</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand the immediacy of the situation—this is my child right now</li> <li>• Communicate about time and budgeting constraints</li> <li>• Communicate about efforts and progress</li> <li>• Enlist help— families are a valuable community resource. Not “us” or “them”, but “all of us”</li> <li>• Family members can be your go-to experts on a student’s cultural identity and how to honor that in the classroom</li> <li>• Remembering that families are the experts on their children</li> </ul>	

**Discussion Questions for Reading #1**

1. Thinking about Kendrick's article, what does becoming an 'unauthorized expert' mean? How does the lack of certification change the impact you can make with your knowledge? Should it make a difference?
2. How does understanding the school system benefit parent advocates? How does this make families more effective in their advocacy efforts? How can this information be collected and shared?
3. In what ways does having informed parent advocates help educators do their jobs more effectively?
4. Are you aware of local, state, or national organizations that can help you with your advocacy efforts? (Many of these organizations also offer academic and/or social opportunities for children.)

**Discussions Questions for Reading #2**

5. How does interacting with people of other cultures affect your awareness of and reflection on of your own culture? Is this different for your child or students?
6. Quappe and Cantatore talk about projecting our own behavioral rules on others. This is part of what educators are taught to do—teach behavioral rules. How can educators honor the behavioral rules of multiple cultures in one classroom? How can families participate in this sharing of rules?
7. The authors state that gathering feedback on our own behavior from people from other cultures helps us gain perspective on our ingrained behavioral rules. What are some guidelines you might set up for sharing this kind of feedback? (See Practical Strategies section for some ideas.)
8. Quappe and Cantatore view cultural diversity as an opportunity to expand a 'sense of identity' and problem solve new solutions and strategies. They refer to an organization, and this is useful thinking for schools. Can it be expanded to a community?

**Discussion Questions that Synthesize Readings #1 and #2**

9. Do your cultural behavioral rules limit you as an advocate, or do you work with others who seem limited by the differences between sets of behavioral rules?
10. How can cultural differences be acknowledged and honored in the advocacy process?

## Practical Strategies

### Positive Advocacy and Self-Advocacy

Advocacy skills are important in helping a large system meet an individual's needs. Advocacy can be as small as one student asking for more time on a test, or as large as a group visiting Washington D.C. to talk with lawmakers. Advocacy for gifted education spans this entire range.

Positive advocacy is nothing new—it's just a way of looking at a person's or group's efforts in a new way. People do not seek change when they are happy with the way things are. In education, parents feel the need to advocate for their children when the school system is not currently meeting a need. This need is of immediate concern for the family, and so change is sought with some urgency. When a classroom has 24 other students, a school has 500 other students, and a district has 8,000 other students, immediate change can be tricky. This is where good communication and a commitment to teamwork are essential.

Think of the last time someone criticized your work on any task in a negative, non-constructive way. How did you feel? What did you say? Did that experience change the way you performed the task in question? Did it change the way you felt about that person or your task?

Now, think of the last time someone would not help with or didn't have time for something that really mattered to you a great deal. Did you walk away or pursue the subject? Did you persist in trying to get attention and help? Did you get more upset the more you asked?

These are the two sides of educational advocacy on the personal level, school and family. The immediate need of every child to get the time, help, resources, and challenge required to be a successful and engaged student is not something that can be addressed in a five-year plan. On the other hand, making sweeping and sudden changes for one student can have a ripple effect in a classroom, school and district that lessens the efficacy of the system for everyone.

The important things to remember:

- Everyone on both sides is there for the children.
- People don't know what they don't know—communication is key.
- Understanding the system is the only way to know what changes can be made without harming others' educational experiences. Remember, the system is probably working for most kids.
- Acknowledging the immediacy of the need of the individual student is more effective when talking with families than talking about all students. Educators need to have the big picture to be most effective, but families need to focus on their kids' needs right now.
- Respect and kindness make people more willing to help you.

The goal in modeling positive advocacy is to raise positive advocates who can ask for what they need while respecting the needs of the larger population. Over time, children should take on more and more of the responsibility for their own advocacy.

## Follow-up and Extension on Readings and Discussion

The following excerpts, links, and research questions are included to begin to broaden and deepen your exploration of the topic. These, again, are suggestions, not required reading and research. This section is included for those whose interest was sparked, and who seek more information. This is not a comprehensive list of resources by any means. As you explore these suggestions, you will find many, many more. Follow your interest, build on previous knowledge, and share with your community!

### Shared Wisdom

#### Self-advocacy stages in children—what can we expect, and when?

##### *Pre-school years*

- Use words
- Take turns
- Share toys, sometimes
- See adults communicating in a positive, respectful manner

##### *Early elementary*

- Watch and listen
- Understand the composition of the educational team: family member, educator, other school staff, any outside professional involved in academic or social/emotional well-being
- Ask for pre-established accommodations or challenges
- Communicate with family and teacher, sometimes
- Student attends conferences, as appropriate

##### *Upper elementary*

- Be involved in designing, changing, or asking for accommodations or challenge
- Choose from acceptable options
- Begin to send emails to teachers about past due or current work, with supervision
- Design personal planner system and try it out (this can and should change over the course of the school career)
- Student attends most conferences and meetings
- Be aware of increasing social pressure to conform—celebrate differences

##### *Middle school*

- Fighting for independence to the point of refusing help or accommodations if they are imposed, not chosen, is a major pitfall at this stage

- Weekly check-ins with family and teachers are a must
- Student should begin to send all emails to teachers, but may need someone to hover while it gets done. Family member(s) on educational team should be copied
- Student attends all conferences
- Choose from acceptable options, in more areas
- Present a case for an option that is not offered (some people ask for power points and references.) Adults reserve the right to say no anyway
- Student does the majority of the legwork on optional activities, like filling out forms, researching dates and cost, etc.

### ***High School***

- Weekly check-ins continue, unless or until student has a proven track record
- Choices about courses, post-secondary options, etc., require consultation with one or more trusted adults
- Student leads conferences, coordinates schedules, does all emailing, fills out forms (but not signature line)
- Greater responsibility equals greater freedom

### ***Your Role***

- Pick your battles
- Unconditional support
- Translate for teachers
- Translate teacher-speak to teen
- Provide resources
- Enlist help, as needed
- Help your child look forward and plan ahead
- Know that not all kids develop the skills to juggle multiple tasks (classes, extra-curriculars, and responsibilities outside of school) at the same rate. Some of our brightest thinkers have trouble remembering where they left their shoes...
- Have courage. You're doing great

## Further Investigation

### Websites

- SENG ~ [www.sengifted.org](http://www.sengifted.org) ~ source of discussion group format
- Harvard Family Research Project ~ [www.hfrp.org](http://www.hfrp.org) ~ research and strategies
- NAGC ~ [www.nagc.org](http://www.nagc.org) ~ national community
- MCGT ~ [www.mcgt.net](http://www.mcgt.net) ~ parent community
- MEGT ~ [www.mnegt.org](http://www.mnegt.org) ~ educator community
- Hoagies ~ [www.hoagiesgifted.org](http://www.hoagiesgifted.org) ~ lots of resources listed here
- Wrightslaw ~ [www.wrightslaw.com](http://www.wrightslaw.com)

### Books and Other Publications

- A Parent's guide to Gifted Children ~ Source of some topics  
Webb et.al. (Great Potential Press)
- Gifted Parent Groups: The SENG Model ~ Source of facilitation techniques  
Arlene DeVries, James Webb (Great Potential Press)
- A Guide to Cultural Awareness of Minnesota ~ source for some communication style ideas  
e-publication  
([http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/agencywide/documents/defaultcolumns/dhs16\\_158118.pdf](http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/agencywide/documents/defaultcolumns/dhs16_158118.pdf))