



# Advocacy in Action



## Youth Ambassadors Across Canada

Active Living Alliance  
for Canadians with  
a Disability



The Youth Ambassador Advocacy Kit is designed to enable young Canadians to become more active—both physically and as advocates for change in their communities.

**Book 1, *Accent on Active Living***, focuses on what we mean by *active living*. It tells you what this approach to life involves, and how you can benefit from learning more about it.

**Book 2, *Advocacy in Action***, shows how you can contribute to your goal of an active lifestyle by learning how to change or remove the barriers to active living that might keep you from realizing your dreams.

**Book 3, *Taking the Path: Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope***, helps you plan your life and reach your goals. Although this process is designed to help you become an advocate for active living, you can also use it to help you plan your career, your education, and the rest of your life's goals.

**Book 4, *An Advocate's Agenda***, is your personal advocacy manual. It is designed to help you track the people you contact, the activities you pursue, and the results you achieve as you move through your active life.

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This Youth Ambassador Advocacy Kit has been developed as part of the Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability's Youth Ambassador Program ([www.youthambassadors.ca](http://www.youthambassadors.ca)). The Active Living Alliance is a national network of organizations and individuals dedicated to promoting full community participation through active, healthy living. For more information, please visit [www.ala.ca](http://www.ala.ca) or call us toll free: 1-800-771-0663 (TTY 1-888-771-0663).

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## Introduction

Welcome to ***Advocacy in Action***, the second booklet of a four-booklet series, the *Youth Ambassador Advocacy Kit*. This kit has been developed to enable young people with disabilities to pursue “active living”.

As you learned in Book 1, active living is an approach to life that every Canadian should follow. It is especially important that young people with disabilities learn about it and make it part of their lives as early as possible.

Sometimes, however, it is difficult to be as active as you’d like, because of barriers in your community. In many cases, however, you can actually remove some of those barriers. How? By drawing them to the attention of the people in charge. That’s what we mean by “Advocacy in Action”.

This booklet will help you to become aware of the types of advocacy that you could try in order to remove barriers in your community.



## What is the connection between advocacy and you?

You probably have many advocates in your life: for example, your parents, friends, perhaps even a leader in your community. But from your point of view, the best advocate to have is you. No-one knows your needs, your ambitions, and your dreams better than you. And no-one can be as effective when it comes to turning those dreams into reality.

Better yet, in the course of advocating for yourself, you may find that you are also advocating for others. If you manage to remove a barrier—for example, to using a public swimming pool—that barrier is removed for others too.

Becoming an advocate is what this booklet is all about. You'll learn why being an advocate is not only useful but fun. You'll learn how to take the first steps towards being an advocate. You'll also read about other young people like yourself who tried advocating and enjoyed seeing how they could bring about change.



## A is for active living—and also for advocating

*“Yes, I’ve realized there are many more things I can do (being suspended 30 feet in the air was GREAT!). We just have to get things more adaptive in Newfoundland. They offer trips to the ocean, sailboats, horseback riding, and skiing, but my health conditions prevent me from doing so.”*

Gillian, an Alliance Youth Exchange participant

### What is an advocate, anyway?

Advocates are people who see something that needs to be changed and are willing to help create that change.

For example, over the past 25 years, many Canadians saw that people with disabilities were unable to take part in their community’s social and recreational programs because those locations had too many barriers.

These people took action to make their community leaders and organizations aware of how easy it could be to remove those barriers.

- Sometimes they did it by working on their own: perhaps by calling or writing to the people in charge of such programs.
- Sometimes they formed groups with other people, so that their voices would be stronger. In fact, that’s how the Active Living Alliance started, but that’s another story...

### But I’m not part of a group like that...

You don’t have to be part of a group to be a good advocate—and sometimes one young person, speaking up alone, can be more effective than a group that speaks on your behalf. That’s because, when it comes down to it, people want to help, and dealing with one person is often easier. Once you’ve broken down that barrier, others can follow!

This book will show you the many ways in which you can become an advocate.



# Why should you be an advocate?

*“We are speaking for ourselves: No one else can do as well...”*

famous self-advocacy quote

## If the world were perfect, there would be no need for advocates

But the world isn't perfect! There will always be room for making changes!

In many countries, big changes have been put into place by advocates who wanted to make day-to-day life easier and more productive for people with disabilities. Thanks to their efforts, those communities have begun to see that everybody has a right to participate fully in all aspects of life.

In Canada, that right is protected by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The Charter is a binding legal document that protects every Canadian's rights. It protects you against discrimination based on disability and guarantees your right to take part in the income-earning and social systems that are part of Canadian life.

The United Nations (UN) is also on your side. Its *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) states:

*“We will take all measures to ensure the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including equal access to health, education and recreational services, by children with disabilities and children with special needs; to ensure the recognition of their dignity; to promote their self-reliance; and to facilitate their active participation in the community.”*



## If the Charter protects our rights, why do we still need advocates?

Many people don't know how to use those rights to create change in their communities and in their personal lives.

- More than one million Canadians have disabilities but half are *not* physically active.
- Of the 535,000 Canadian youth with disabilities, slightly more than half can participate in community sports programs.
- Half of these young people say they would like to be more physically active but don't have the resources or support.

### What's standing in their way? Barriers!

Your disability is only a small part of who you are. It shouldn't be an excuse to limit your participation in a community's life. *You have the right to challenge all the barriers that could stand in your way*—for example:

- ❑ **Knowledge and attitude barriers:** Lack of understanding of your abilities can keep people from including you in their activities.
- ❑ **Systemic barriers:** A systemic barrier is a discriminatory policy or lack of a social support that results in the exclusion of people with disabilities. An example would be failing to offer different ways to complete a test at school.
- ❑ **Physical barriers:** For example, lack of wheelchair-accessible entrances, family change rooms, and so on that make it difficult for you to participate.



# Beating the barriers

## Inclusion is the key!

*“Inclusion is meaningful participation, where every participant belongs, is accepted, supports and is supported by their community.”*

Adapted from Donna Goodwin, *Moving to Inclusion*,  
Active Living Alliance, 1994

In inclusive communities, there are no barriers. Activities such as community programs, events and meetings are open to all.

## So where barriers still exist, how do we remove them?

We can break them down by advocating for change. We can contact the people responsible for the programs that have these barriers and suggest ways in which they can remove them. We can also raise our communities' awareness about the need to include people with disabilities in the planning process when new projects are getting started.

## Being an advocate for these kinds of changes works!

We know this because many people in communities across Canada have already proven that they can introduce such changes. These advocates included parents, friends, lawyers, politicians, support workers and—most important of all—people who themselves have a disability.

## That's where YOU come in!

You can be an advocate. You can speak out about who you are and what you need. People in your community will listen to you.

But if you don't speak up, someone else will—even though they may not really understand what you need to participate.

It's better to be your own advocate!





## But I don't know how to be an advocate!

*“Advocacy is something that each and every one of us knows how to do. We began advocating as babies, crying out for what we needed and we didn't stop crying until we got what we wanted!”*

Fran Cutler  
Speaking to 2005 Alliance Youth Exchange Delegation

### Fran's story...



*I've been a keen runner (keen, not talented) for 15 years and I ski, kayak and hike in the hills around Ottawa.*

*I can't see well enough to read signs so I have these amazing little telescopes and hand-held magnifiers that help make up for limited detail vision.*

*I've often had to practise advocacy to get the most out of the activities I love. I asked the instructor in my strength training class to design the progress tracking forms so I could fill them out myself. She came up with a sheet which had bold black type on white paper instead of the pale print on a green background. When the rest of the class saw the new form, they all wanted one too. I asked all of my aerobics leaders to wear red shirts so that they stand out against the pale gym walls.*

*Advocacy was frequently necessary during my 30 years with the CBC as a radio producer and later as Head of the Employment Equity Office. I had to find assistive devices which would help people with various disabilities to be productive—and convince their bosses it was worth investing in good employees.*

*When I retired, I turned my advocacy towards the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), Voiceprint and the Active Living Alliance.*

*I'm happiest when I can break down barriers, large and small, to full participation at work and at play.*



## But what can I do to become an advocate?

There are three different kinds of advocacy:

- ❑ **Self advocacy:** Speaking up for yourself. For example, you discover that you can't attend a meeting at City Hall because the room is not wheelchair-accessible. You write a letter to the mayor asking City Council to install ramps, so that people who have difficulty using stairs can still attend public sessions of the Council's meetings.
- ❑ **Individual Advocacy:** Someone speaks up for you. For example, the manager of a recreation department is concerned about your inability to take part in some of the community's evening recreation programs because there is no public transportation. He brings this up at the city's next planning meeting.
- ❑ **Cooperative advocacy:** One or more groups of people get together to speak up for change. For example, three groups that represent people with different types of disabilities ask a sports equipment company to stock equipment designed for people with disabilities.

## In short, advocates are leaders

They may not have deliberately started out to be leaders, but when they see how advocating for change can make a difference, they become leaders.



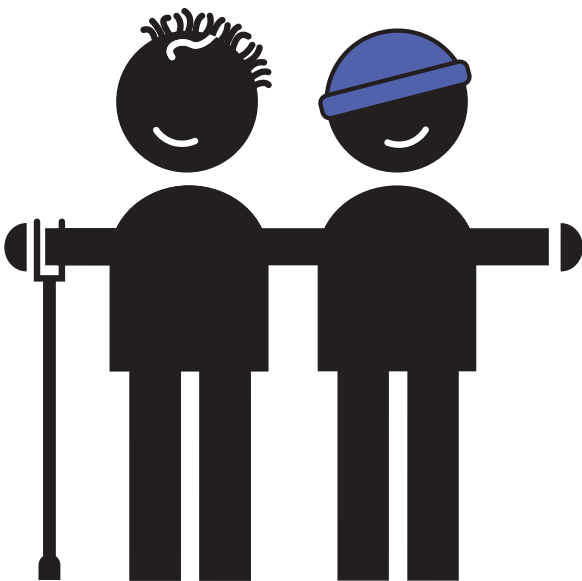
## What is a self-advocate?

Self-advocates:

- Speak out for what they believe in
- Say what they think and feel
- Know and understand their rights
- Ask for what they need
- Take responsibility for their own lives
- Fight against discrimination and stereotypes
- Work with others to bring change

### Reasons to Advocate

- ❑ **To protect your rights:** *You are self-advocating to protect your right to privacy when you* ask your teacher to refrain from telling other students the details of your disability.
- ❑ **To improve services:** *You are advocating to improve services when you* ask your community centre to make staff more aware and creative about including youth with disabilities in their programs (perhaps by setting up a presentation on the Active Living Alliance).
- ❑ **To remove barriers:** *You are advocating to remove barriers when you* work with a school's intramural planning team to include activities and sports that allow students of all abilities to participate.



## Start with your own interests

Advocacy is not hard to do: there is no minimum age. You don't have to have a laptop computer or fabulous writing or speaking skills.

You can rely on your own unique talents and interests to speak out for what you want, what you believe in or what you think needs to be done.

Use the skills and interests you already have. This will make your first advocacy attempts much more successful.

**Now stretch your mind a bit more.**

**For the following suggestions:**

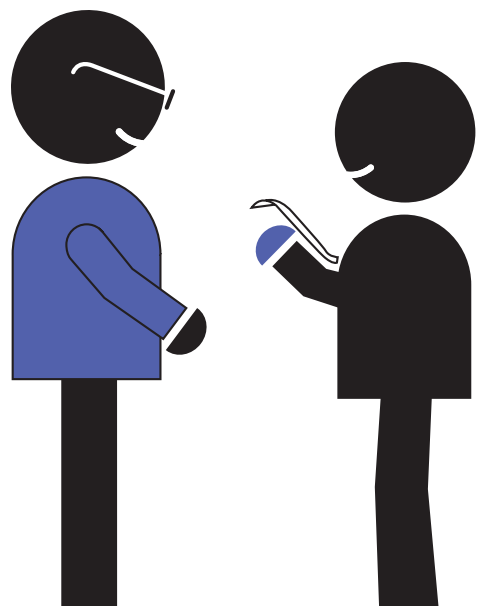
- Put a check beside the things you have already done.
- Put a star beside those you know you would be good at.
- Put a question mark beside those you might try someday.

**I like to perform for a crowd, so I might try to make a presentation to:**

- A school assembly
- My school board
- My community recreation centre
- An active living conference

**I like to talk one-on-one, so I might try to meet:**

- My school principal
- My Phys. Ed. teacher
- My city mayor
- A leader at my gym



## More ideas for getting started

### I like to write letters, so I might write to:

- My Member of Parliament (MP)
- My Provincial Member of Parliament (MPP)
- The editor of my community newspaper

### I like to perform for a smaller group, so I might try giving a talk to:

- A few teachers
- A Scout or Guides group
- An elementary school class
- A church Sunday school group
- A daycare class

### I like to write, so I might try writing an article for:

- My school newsletter
- My community paper
- A youth magazine
- A website
- An agency's newsletter

### I like to work with a computer, so I might try creating:

- A flyer to raise awareness about active living
- An email campaign to remove a barrier
- A website
- My own newsletter



## Once you have tried a few advocacy activities...

You might find you really enjoy it.

If so, you will want to read Book 3 in this series, *Taking the PATH*.

It describes a simple process that you can use to reach all your goals—including your advocacy goals.

*“I’m going back to my community to get a few things changed!”*

Previous Alliance Youth Exchange Participant

