“Self-advocacy begins with honest self-appraisal and results in a solid appreciation of who you are and what you can accomplish. The path to becoming an effective self-advocate is almost always complicated by self-doubt, misinformation, low expectations, and repeated frustrations and setbacks. There is no question that this guide can be a powerful tool for teens (and adult readers) in understanding the importance of self-advocacy, appreciating its potential benefits in school and other settings, and preparing to take action.”—Dr. Sheldon H. Horowitz, National Center for Learning Disabilities

Young people face obstacles, both in everyday life and in extraordinary circumstances. They realize, sometimes painfully early, that it isn’t always possible to depend on adults to be sure they are treated safely, fairly, and legally. When teens are faced with unfair, immoral, illegal, and unjust situations, they do not need to be victims—they can learn to effectively speak up for themselves and improve their own lives, as well as the lives of others.

The skill of self-advocacy rarely comes naturally to teens, so Cheryl Gerson Tuttle and JoAnn Augeri Silva offer a set of skills for them to advocate for themselves. This much-needed resource provides both general and specific information, starting with basic methods to facilitate the process. The introduction and first three chapters explain what self-advocacy is; identify when and why it might be necessary for teens to stand up for themselves; provide step-by-step guidance for self-advocating; and offer specific, real-world advice about wisely using media to publicize their cause. Seven issue-specific chapters follow, dealing with the real world, including personal rights, school issues, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, sexuality, legalities, and foster care. Throughout the book are the voices and experiences of teens who have encountered issues and decided to speak up to get what they needed.

Self-Advocacy: The Ultimate Teen Guide encourages young people to vocalize, perhaps publicly, what is bothering them. Drawing attention to themselves is never easy for teens, and speaking out is likely to make them feel vulnerable and uncomfortable. This book gives advice for dealing with adults who teens must work with—and in some cases against—to find a solution to their problems. Teens who learn how to advocate for themselves and then act are not only taking steps to right whatever wrong they have been facing but are also preparing themselves for a successful adult life.

Cheryl Gerson Tuttle has more than thirty years experience in education, counseling, and advocacy. She is coauthor of five books, including Learning Disabilities: The Ultimate Teen Guide (Scarecrow, 2003), and author of Medications: The Ultimate Teen Guide (Scarecrow, 2005).

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IT HAPPENED TO ME

Series Editor: Arlene Hirschfelder

Books in the It Happened to Me series are designed for inquisitive teens digging for answers about certain illnesses, social issues, or lifestyle interests. Whether you are deep into your teen years or just entering them, these books are gold mines of up-to-date information, riveting teen views, and great visuals to help you figure out stuff. Besides special boxes highlighting singular facts, each book is enhanced with the latest reading list, websites, and an index. Perfect for browsing, there’s loads of expert information by acclaimed writers to help parents, guardians, and librarians understand teen illness, tough situations, and lifestyle choices.

For Penny Paquette, who kept me going.—CGT

For Anthony.—JAS
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We would also like to thank the young people who were willing to share their stories to encourage other teens to advocate for themselves. Finally, we want to thank our family and friends for their continued support and patience.
Why would we write a book on self-advocacy for teens?

1. To recognize that young people your age face many obstacles and that you can’t always depend on the adults around you to fight your battles.
2. To show that you do not need to be a victim when you are faced with situations that are unfair, immoral, illegal, and unjust.
3. To let you know that you can speak up for yourself.
4. To help teens like you who want to improve their own lives and the lives of others.
5. To give you the tools to succeed when you decide to challenge the status quo.

For all of these reasons and more, we’ve put together a book we hope you will find full of information and resources.

For most of you, school is the most time-consuming and important part of your life. Your school principal expects you to show up every day, to obey school rules, and not to cause trouble. In class, teachers expect you to pay attention and to learn the subjects they teach. School administrators expect you to pass the courses you take and to pass the standardized tests more and more states require before students can graduate from high school. Living a successful life, however, will depend not only on what you learn in your classrooms but also on what you learn about yourself. Your teen years will shape you in more than academic ways. What you encounter and what you might have to overcome in school and in your activities out of
school will help you prepare for independence—that is, the rest of your life. Like many teens, you may depend on your parents to be your advocates. They meet with teachers at conference time to make sure you are getting the education you need. If you receive special education services, they attend meetings and work with your teachers to develop your educational plan and discuss your academic plans after high school. They meet with your doctors to make sure that your medical care is appropriate. They might talk with their friends and business associates to try to get you a good summer job. When you have a problem, they help make sure that your rights are upheld. In return, they expect you to take your schooling seriously and to do the best you can.

Some of you already have had to take on the responsibilities we mention because you have lost one or both parents or because you are in foster care. If you are reading this book, you already may have experienced some form of discrimination or injustice that you want to resolve. If so, now is the time to determine how to take over some “adult” responsibilities in an effective, meaningful way.

The best way to learn to be independent is to find out how to take care of yourself. If you don’t already, you will need to master the basics: how to manage your money, how to shop, how to cook, how to do laundry, and how to do many other things that will help you be successful and independent. However, taking care of yourself involves much more than knowing how to do everyday things. Taking care of yourself means standing up for yourself and making sure you get what you need and are entitled to in life. That’s what this book can help you do. In the first three chapters, we explain what self-advocacy is step by step and why it might be necessary to speak up for yourself, how to go about self-advocating successfully, and how to wisely use the power of the media if you publicize your cause.

Then, we devote seven individual chapters to some issues you face as a teen that might require you to advocate for yourself: learning disabilities, physical disabilities, school
issues, personal rights, sexuality, legal issues, and foster care. You may choose to read the whole book or choose to read just the first three chapters and the issue-related chapter that applies to your situation.

We encourage you to read on, to find out how learning to self-advocate can help you offset and counter the obstacles you face, and how you can make your life safer, more satisfying, and more rewarding.
Do you know what it means to be an advocate? According to one dictionary, *advocacy* is “the act or process of advocating or supporting a cause or proposal.” Another dictionary defines *advocate* as someone who “speaks out for a cause and works toward a solution.” When you are an advocate for yourself, you plead for and support yourself and your needs. You also work toward a solution for whatever problem you are facing. Because you know best what your needs are, you are the best person to do this. When you advocate for yourself, you are affecting the decisions that become part of your daily life. You might ask, “How can I make myself heard? How can I bring about solutions to problems? Why do I need to plead for or support myself in the first place?”

The United States was founded on the principle of equality and fundamental rights. For the most part, government agencies and other institutions function efficiently. Everyone, including young people, has the basic rights promised by the Declaration of Independence: “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Things can go wrong, though. You probably know of many such incidents. Perhaps a friend was suspended from school for something he or she absolutely did not do. Perhaps you yourself have been unjustly accused of doing something against the rules. Perhaps you have had experiences in which you felt you were treated unfairly and that your rights were being violated.

In cases you may have heard of, young people have objected to the rules most of us follow every day. You may have read...
about the student who objected to reciting the pledge of allegiance in school because the pledge includes the words *under God*. You may have studied about the U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that did away with racial segregation in the public schools. In each of these cases, someone spoke up against rules he or she disagreed with and thought were unfair. Someone pleaded a case and supported an idea, and that action changed minds, policies, and institutions. By speaking up and advocating for their beliefs, those people made a difference in the lives of many others.

There are many reasons you may need to advocate for yourself. When you live in a large society, you interact with many different people with many different opinions. You may have been, or are now, the victim of prejudice or negative attitudes. You may even have negative attitudes about other people. When you were younger, you might have thought “Girls are dumb and can’t play sports,” or “Boys are wild and I shouldn’t play with them.” As you got older and more experienced, you learned that people are more complicated. You have found out that many girls are great at sports, and many boys are sensitive and kind. If you learned this, you overcame the prejudices you had as a child, and your former prejudices did not harm anyone.

However, not everyone outgrows his or her prejudices. Sometimes, prejudices are part of a family’s, a community’s, or an entire region’s deeply held beliefs. When that is the case, prejudice can lead to discrimination, which creates barriers that prevent people from participating fully in society. If a prejudice leads to discrimination against you and creates barriers for your full participation in society, you will need to advocate for yourself. When prejudice affects national issues, like racial segregation in public schools, many agencies work together, often with lawyers, to resolve those issues and change laws. When local issues need to be addressed—for example, special education accommodations, school discipline, even dress codes at school—one person can make a difference.

That person can be you. When something affects you personally, such as racial profiling, your involvement with the
legal system, or your desire to live independently despite your physical disability, you need to speak up for yourself.

**KNOW WHEN YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

Self-advocacy is not something to be taken lightly. For example, if you feel a slight based on a simple misunderstanding or if you don’t get the part you wanted in a school play, you will not need or want to speak up and work against the establishment. There are times when you know that your rights or the rights of others have been violated and you need to take a stand. This chapter and the rest of this book will help you know when those times are.

Here are ways to determine whether the situation you face calls for action:

- When you see that everyone else in your school, community, or religious institution is treated one way and you are treated a different way because of your race, gender, disability, or religion, it is time to consider self-advocacy.
- When you believe you need something special because of a disability, a medical condition, or a special life circumstance to succeed as other students do, it is time to consider self-advocacy.
- When you believe that your treatment in a particular situation is illegal, it is time to consider self-advocacy.
- When you find yourself in trouble or facing a difficult challenge in school, with the legal system, or in your personal life, it is time to consider self-advocacy.

Self-advocacy does not have to be confrontational or unpleasant. Self-advocacy involves knowing your strengths and needs, knowing your rights, identifying your goals, and being able to communicate all of this to others in a way and at a time that will make a difference. Not all incidents or issues need to be dealt with by writing or changing laws. In many cases, simply and firmly, but politely, reminding your employer, your teacher, your friend, or a ticket taker at the movies of your
situation and your needs can be considered self-advocacy. When you do this, you are speaking up for yourself and asking for what you need. Self-advocacy does not have to mean that someone else will get less because you need more. Allowing students of all religions, races, and sexual orientations to participate in all activities does not diminish the participation of those students who consider themselves “normal.” Installing a ramp in a theater or painting bright stripes on stairs to aid people with limited vision are not actions that make it harder for those who do not have limited mobility or vision problems.

**SELF-ADVOCACY TAKES COURAGE**

It takes a lot of courage to advocate for yourself. You have to speak up about what is bothering you. You have to talk, perhaps publicly, about what you are experiencing, and that can make you feel vulnerable and uncomfortable. You have to deal with the adults you are confronting or asking for help to come to a solution to your problem.

In September 2005, students at a New York high school did just that. The education department had installed metal detectors at the entrance of the school because of the area’s high crime rate (see chapter 5). One student organized a protest through a website, and fifteen hundred students walked to the education department’s office demanding to be heard. Their efforts effected a change; an idea that began with one student is having far-reaching results for the rest of the students at the school.

Confronting adults and speaking up for yourself and your group are not easy tasks, but taking them on is better than the alternative. If you become angry without speaking up to make things better, the unfair situation will remain the same and perhaps get even worse.

**THE HISTORY OF SELF-ADVOCACY**

Failing to act can have wide-ranging effects. During the 1960s, teenagers began to be taken seriously because they got involved in broader social issues and youth-related causes: