

# Advocacy and Building Relationships

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I've worked as a children's librarian for five years. Over the last two, I've served with ALSC's Advocacy and Legislation Committee. Yet I have to admit, I am still learning the role of a librarian advocate. I'll be honest, it often feels overwhelming, and I am not sure that feeling will ever dissipate.

There is a lot to think about. From local to state and federal stakeholders, I sometimes feel my perch at the kid's desk isn't the place where real advocacy happens. How can I rally support for libraries at all levels? It's not just a question for a librarian who serves on an advocacy committee. I am sure it's a question we all ask ourselves.

For now, I'll keep it simple and highlight the fact that we advocate library services every day. We do it through the relationships we build with families. We do it from our desks, in community centers, and schools. This is advocacy we do without thinking about it. It's become obvious to me that advocacy, at its core, is the building of relationships.

That realization really hit it home for me. It's helped me become more intentional in my everyday advocacy. Relationship-building is an essential aspect of our work with children and their families. We provide excellent customer service (although many of us may not wish to call it that). We spend time getting to know our readers, their interests, and their needs.

We engage families in play and model good early learning practices. We assist children and their caregivers in frantic searches for books about specific frogs or birds or sharks or dinosaurs. And we love doing it!

Think about how most of those interactions end. The family leaves with a sense of satisfaction and the knowledge that the library is a resource that works for them.

Do they come back? Not always, but they often do. One thing is for sure, your attention to their needs provided for an experience that deepened their confidence in the library. It may have even positively influenced their future support.

This is important because these families are our stakeholders. Building relationships with them matters. This is a vital part of the larger advocacy picture. Wow! We're feeling less overwhelmed, right?

Indeed, ALSC speaks to the process of building relationships with stakeholders through its Everyday Advocacy initiative ([www.ala.org/everyday-advocacy](http://www.ala.org/everyday-advocacy)). I know, sometimes the language is geared toward policymakers. That's important. Today, I'd like to challenge us to consider relationship-building within the framework of the families we serve.

So let's start now: be visible and remain attentive. Here are some tips, modified from Everyday Advocacy and focused on the families you serve.

Start now. It's never too late. Introduce yourself to each family you meet. Reintroduce yourself the next time. Learn about their interests and their

needs and be responsive to them. Always remember that gaining their trust will take time, and that's OK.

Be visible and show up for your community. Say hello. We do this all the time at schools and community centers, cultural events, and daycares. I mean, we even do this while grocery shopping or grabbing coffee outside of work.

Be attentive. Listen to the families you serve—they know best what their needs are. It takes practice and isn't easy, but it's integral to building trust with our families, gaining their public support, and the ongoing success of our profession. We can always learn to do it better.

The process of becoming a librarian advocate will probably never be complete. We'll have to take risks and learn to better connect with policy stakeholders at many governmental levels. We'll stare down that slightly more daunting task; we can lean into our strengths and be intentional with the way we build relationship with the families we serve every day. It's advocacy, too, and it makes a huge impact. &

*This article refers to the ALSC Everyday Advocacy Initiative and was inspired by their tools for Engaging Community. You can check it out at [ala.org/everyday-advocacy/engage](http://ala.org/everyday-advocacy/engage).*

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