

This guide has been adapted from the Parent Link Program with the permission of Elizabeth Foy, Senior Clinician in Social Work and Manager, Family Support, and the staff of ROADSS and Training and Development, Divisions of The Spastic Centre of New South Wales. A very special thank you for sharing your knowledge and expertise.

INFLUENCING DECISIONS

A PARENT GUIDE TO LOBBYING

There may be times when you may not be happy with the services your child or school is receiving. You are your child's best advocate and this guide may assist or encourage you to have a say in the planning, management and evaluation of the services your child receives.

WHY WE NEED TO LOBBY

Over the past twenty-five years a large number of community groups have been established in Australia. These groups have lobbied all levels of Government for funds. Governments now expect community groups to lobby, and effective lobbying is an important tool for groups needing to attract funding.

Today, lobbying is a normal part of getting funds. It is not about being greedy or being selfish.

Governments now offer different funding arrangements such as:

- Funding for individuals with specific needs
- Service agreements in which groups and organisations must be accountable through meeting service standards
- One-off purpose grants

So lobbying is a common practice. It goes on even when groups do not have a specific issue. Keeping up good relations with the people who make the decisions is important. It can raise your profile in the community and lay the groundwork for the time when you need support on a particular basis.

LOBBYING AND THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

Visiting a politician is one of the most powerful things you can do whilst campaigning for your issue. It carries much more weight than signing a petition, making a phone call or even sending a letter.

Ministers have more influence over Government policy and legislation than do backbenchers. Ministerial staff can provide useful information. They may also be able to influence the Minister (remember that TV show!).

When Parliament is sitting, your local member will rarely be in his office and the Electorate Secretary attends to matters. This person can be very important in your cause.

VISITING A POLITICIAN

(Adapted from information from the Australian Council for Overseas Aid)

You should know your issue thoroughly before you visit a politician. Know the facts and figures.

Before the meeting

- Know the politician** Find out their name, party, electorate and any committees they are on or positions they hold that might be relevant to your issue. You can get this information on the Federal or State Parliament web sites.
- Know your objectives** Be clear about what you want the politicians to do, e.g., raise the issue at party meetings or in parliament, speak at a public meeting etc.
- Bring others with you** If you can organise representatives of other groups or other parents also concerned about your issue, that's great. It shows you have wider support. Also bring someone with personal experience of the issue if you can. Individual experience gives colour to what can otherwise be just dry facts.
- Try not to go alone.** Others can give you confidence and might be able to think of counter-arguments when you are stumped for words. On the other hand, don't bring too many people. About three is ideal.
- Making an appointment** Tell the politician's office how many will be coming, who they are and what groups they are from. Find out how long you are likely to have. Confirm this on the day with the politician, following the introductions. Half an hour is normal.
- Plan your talk** Perhaps have different people focus on different components of your presentation. Plan the outline and give a tentative time frame. Make sure all your delegation understand and agree to it.
- Be aware that the politician may also want to talk a lot and may even try to side-track things. Allow at least the last third of your time for talking about what you want the politician to do.
- Plan your leaflet** You should leave a leaflet with the politician when you depart. It should contain a quick summary of the issue, perhaps including some counter-arguments and a list of what you want the politician to do and when you want it done by. One double-sided A4 page is ideal, well presented and typed, of course.
- Rehearse** You will feel more comfortable if you rehearse. Memorise the outline of the talk. Make sure you know the facts you need, or at least the important ones. Learn the counter-arguments.

At the meeting

Preamble

Thank the politician for the opportunity to meet with them and air your concerns. Make the introductions. Confirm how much time you have.

Be confident

Remember a politician is a jack-of-all-trades. You will normally know far more about your issue than they will.

If you don't know, say so

On the other hand, if you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Do not try to make things up. Offer to get back to them with the information, and if they want it, do so.

Do not get side-tracked

Side-tracking can come from within your own delegation, accidentally or from the politician, perhaps deliberately, especially when they do not want to make a commitment. Don't let it happen. Remember your outline and objectives and politely but firmly, bring things back on track.

Be polite and patient

Politicians can be incredibly frustrating at times. They might be ignorant, insensitive, prejudiced and even downright rude. You must resist the urge to be rude, no matter what the provocation. Be polite, and patient at all times. If you turn them against you, they will be unlikely to help your cause.

"Small talk"

Politicians, like all of us, respond well to people showing interest in their own issues and concerns. You might consider making a favourable comment about an issue that the politician has been involved in.

Thank them for the visit

Regardless of the outcome, thank them for the opportunity to meet with them and to air your concerns.

After the meeting

Debrief

After the visit, talk it over with your delegation. Discuss what worked, what didn't and how you could do better next time.

Follow up

Quickly organise and send any information you promised to the politician. Make sure they honour their commitment to you. If you don't hear anything within a reasonable period of time, phone or write and keep on it until it is resolved, one way or the other.

Communicate with your group.

Tell them the results. Tell them how the politician feels and what they are doing about it.

Organise the next delegation

Do it now while you are still keen! Remember, they will get easier and you will get better!

WRITING TO A POLITICIAN

There are particular ways to write to Members of Parliament, depending on their positions.

Commonwealth Government

1. Writing to the Prime Minister

The envelope is addressed: The Honourable John Smith, MP, Prime Minister
Start the letter: Dear Prime Minister
End the letter: Yours faithfully

2. Writing to a Minister who is in the Senate

The envelope is addressed: Senator the Honourable John Smith, Minister for...
Start the letter: Dear Minister
End the letter: Yours faithfully

3. Writing to a Minister who is in the House of Representatives

The envelope is addressed: The Honourable John Smith, MP, Minister for...
Start the letter: Dear Minister
End the letter: Yours faithfully

4. Writing to a Senator

The envelope is addressed: Senator the Honourable John Smith
Start the letter: Dear Senator Smith
End the letter: Yours faithfully

5. Writing to a Member of the House of Representatives

The envelope is addressed: Mr John Smith, MP
Start the letter: Dear Mr Smith
End the letter: Yours faithfully

State Government

1. Writing to the Premier

The envelope is addressed: The Honourable John Smith, MP, Premier of ...
Start the letter: Dear Premier
End the letter: Yours faithfully

2. Writing to a Minister who is a Member of the Legislative Council (Upper House)

The envelope is addressed: The Honourable John Smith, MLC, Minister for...
Start the letter: Dear Minister
End the letter: Yours faithfully

3. Writing to a Minister who is a Member of the Legislative Assembly (Lower House)

The envelope is addressed: The Honourable John Smith, MP, Minister for...
Start the letter: Dear Minister
End the letter: Yours faithfully

4. Writing to a Member of the Legislative Council (Upper House)

The envelope is addressed: The Honourable John Smith, MLC
Start the letter: Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms Smith
End the letter: Yours faithfully

5. Writing to a Member of the Legislative Assembly (Lower House)

The envelope is addressed: Mr/Mrs/Ms Smith, MP
Start the letter: Dear Mr/Mrs/Ms Smith
End the letter: Yours faithfully