

The Efficacy of an Advocacy Training Course for Parents of Children with Learning Disabilities



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Abstract

Evaluated the efficacy of an educational program designed to help parents of a child with a learning disability to become better advocates for their child's education needs. Twenty-seven individuals completed both pre- and post-program questionnaires. Nine of the items appeared on both questionnaires, three addressing each of the specific content areas of the program. The complete program, presented by a psychologist and a LDA staff, was offered three times at one site and twice at another site by a different team. Rankings were significantly higher on the post-program questionnaires than on the pre-program questionnaire. Parents reported significant gains in their knowledge of targeted content areas aimed at improving their advocacy skills.

Rationale

It is commonly accepted that parents are their children's best advocates. For parents of children with learning disabilities or ADHD, this role can be especially difficult to fulfill given the complexities associated with understanding their child's disorder; the policies, procedures, and legislation associated with special education and the rights of parents; and the practical skills necessary to present one's issues competently. Only a few programs have been described that attempt to address some of these issues (e.g., Hixson et al., 1992; McWhirter, 1976); none it seems has attempted to empirically evaluate the efficacy of such a program.

To help parents become better advocates for their child's special needs, an educational program was developed to improve parents knowledge of three major content areas: (1) the nature of learning and attentional disorders; (2) the policies, procedures, and legislation governing the provision of special education services within the school system; and the functional skills for effective representation (e.g., organization, communication). Through time allocated for open discussion, the program also enabled parents to share their experiences—often frustrations—in attempting to better understand their child's needs and the ways in which to meet them. To evaluate the efficacy of the program, pre-course and post-course questionnaires were designed to reflect the content areas targeted and to determine if the course was of value to the parents.

Method

Participants were recruited from two chapters of the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario located in south western Ontario. To be included, the parents had to have a child with a diagnosis of a learning disability, ADHD, or both.

The PACE course consists of 6 sessions, each lasting approximately 2 to 2½ hours, spread over 6 to 8 weeks. With the intention from the outset of developing an empirically-supported, "model program" (Roberts, 1994), a manual was created so that the course could be offered and evaluated in other settings.

A questionnaire was completed prior to the first session and another at the end of the last session. Participants rated the extent to which each item applied to them and were coded accordingly: Not at all (1); Just a little (2); Pretty much (3); and Very much (4). Nine of the items appeared on both questionnaires addressing the specific content areas of the program.

Pre- and post-course rankings were compared using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, a nonparametric test for related samples.

Conclusions

Parents reported significant gains in their knowledge of targeted content areas aimed at improving their advocacy skills and they thought that their participation in the course was a good use of their time. This pilot study suggests that the PACE program is improving the advocacy skills of parents of children with LD or ADHD. The use of a larger sample size with the involvement of additional sites over time will determine the programs replicability and thus its status as an empirically-supported intervention.

Results

Of the 43 individuals who started the PACE program, 27 completed both pre- and post-course evaluations.

Pre- and post-course rankings were compared using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, a nonparametric test for related samples. Rankings were significantly higher on the post-course questionnaires (Mdn = 31.0) than on the pre-course questionnaire (Mdn = 21.0), $z = -4.55$, $p < .001$, $r = -0.62$ indicating that parents reported significant gains in their knowledge of targeted content areas.

To illustrate categorically pre-/post- comparisons, rankings of *Not at all* or *Just a little* were grouped and considered to reflect minimal and insufficient knowledge with respect to the item. Rankings of *Pretty much* and *Very much* were grouped and considered to reflect sufficient knowledge. These data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Ratings on Pre- and Post-Course Questionnaires After Conversion to "Yes" and "No" Categories

Questionnaire Item	Pre-Yes (%)	Post-Yes (%)
Ratings on Items Common to the Pre- and Post-Course Questionnaires		
1. I have a good understanding of what a learning disability is.	44	93
2. I have a good understanding of the different types of learning disabilities.	30	93
3. I have a good understanding of what it must be like to live with a learning disability.	41	89
4. I have a good understanding of the Individual Education Plan (IEP).	30	93
5. I have a good understanding of the Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) Process.	26	85
6. I know what my rights are as a person of a child with a learning disability.	15	89
7. I know where I can get information and resources about learning disabilities.	48	100
8. I feel good about attending and participating in my child's school conferences.	59	96
9. I am able to effectively advocate for the special needs of my child.	30	96
Ratings on Items Unique to the Pre-Course Questionnaire		
10. I am ready to learn new information and skills to help me better advocate for the special needs of my child.	100	-
Ratings on Items Unique to the Post-Course Questionnaire		
10. I am satisfied with the usefulness of the information provided in the PACE course.	-	96
11. This course was a good use of my time.	-	96
12. I would recommend the PACE course to others.	-	100

References

- Hixson, D.D., Stoff, E., & White, P.H. (1992). Parents of children with chronic health impairments: A new approach to advocacy training. *Children's Health Care, 21*, 111-115.
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