

Parent Room Advocacy Training Pilot Program Evaluation Summary

November 2016

The Parent Room Advocacy Training is designed to build confidence and empower parents and carers of child/ren with additional needs through peer support and advocacy skill development. The program provides opportunities for parents and carers to learn about their child/ren's rights and getting appropriate services for their child/ren. The goal is to strengthen and develop skills in assisting to make others aware of their child/ren's needs to seek appropriate help for their child/ren. The program also enables parents and carers to build connections with each other to provide peer support. The program was delivered and designed by researchers at the University of Wollongong in partnership with CareSouth and Noahs Shoalhaven. The first pilot sessions were held in May and June 2016, in Wollongong and Nowra. This report describes findings of the program evaluation, combining the pre- and post-program survey with participants' comments after the advocacy training about the benefits they experienced from the program.

Benefit 1: Networking with other parents and carers

Several parents/carers reported that they appreciated the opportunity the Parent Room Training gave them to network with others in a similar situation:

"You are not alone in itit was good talking to other people who had been in a similar situation and talking to other people was good. Different people made comments about how nice it was to feel supported, and trying to do something"

"The peer support was one thing that was fantastic – you know, meeting parents who are in similar situations – it is so helpful to talk to other parents who seem to know what you might be going through."

"If you don't live it you don't understand. Networking part was just as important as information. Information was invaluable as well."

"What I found useful was being able to speak to other parents in a similar situation to mine – didn't matter if it wasn't the same disability – but was good to be able to vent, and also to share with others."

Benefit 2: Increased knowledge and empowerment

Statistical analyses of survey items from the Parent Empowerment Scale were conducted to compare the difference in participants' reported empowerment before and after the Parent Room Training. All items either improved or stayed the same after participating in the training. Nine of the 34 empowerment items related to knowledge and

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sense of competence significantly improved after participants completed the Parent Room Advocacy training; these were-

- When problems arise with my child, I handle them pretty well
- I know the steps to take when I am concerned my child is receiving poor services
- I know what to do when problems arise with my child
- I am able to get information to help me better understand my child
- I believe I can solve problems with my child when they happen
- I know what services my child needs
- I know what the rights of parent/carers and children are under the special education laws
- When necessary, I take the initiative in looking for services for my child and family
- I have a good understanding of my child's disorders

Interviews with parents and carers confirmed that they believed they learnt new skills and increased their empowerment through participating in the Parent Room Training-

"...it reaffirmed [advocacy], and it reminded me of what I could do, and how I can take it to the next level."

"being there gave me the drive to make sure he gets everything he needs."

"it was great for me. I didn't know much about advocacy until [I completed the Parent Room advocacy training program]"

"I will use what I learnt in this program through his whole education. To just keep fighting for what he needs, what we all need"

"It's lit a fire, even more so than before. I was so focused on just me and [child's name], but now I feel like I need to fight for everyone, it's been very empowering."

Benefit 3: Increased confidence

Parents and carers were asked about their confidence levels acting as their child's advocate. Average confidence increased overall and six of these items increased significantly-

- Identify the vision for my child for the next 3 years
- Identify barriers and priorities to help my child achieve this vision

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- Know how to get an assessment of my child's developmental skills/learning skills
- Describe my child's needs to others
- Identify my child's strengths and abilities
- Develop measurable goals for my child

Interviews with Parents/Carers after completing the Parent Room Training also supported the notion that their confidence had increased:

"It has just given me more confidence – even just to be an advocate and let other people know."

"I have the confidence now to say – no – this is there for us and I would stand up for what I know. I used to just do what the principal or whoever told me things, and I would definitely have more confidence – and I can be a better advocate for her."

"This program REALLY helped me with confidence... I just know so much more about our rights now and am SO much more confident about being an advocate."

"Made me more confident in what I can do for my kids."

"...have the tools to be able to write down in my child's eyes what we need – I am much more confident now. I have already used some of the information."

"I am more prepared – so that makes me feel confident."

"Being able to have this information and be educated has helped my confidence."

"Already felt confident before the program, but I am even more confident and willing now."

Thank you to all the parents and carers who participated in the pilot offering of the Parent Room advocacy training program and research study. Findings from this research will be developed into one or more peer reviewed journal articles and conference presentations for dissemination. The Parent Room advocacy training program manual will be distributed for free to not-for-profit organisations. These organisations will be invited to participate in going research using the data collection methods described in this report, to develop the evidence base on the Parent Room advocacy training program, to make the program available to more parents and carers.