Module 7

Supporting *Self-Advocacy* and Success in Student Learning

The goal of this module is to provide practical strategies and teaching tips that contribute to the development of self-advocacy for students with learning disabilities.

● Key Ideas in this Module

In this module we will:

■ Explore benefits and barriers to self-advocacy.

■ Learn how to support the students in understanding their learning disabilities.

■ Recommend approaches that support student motivation/determination.

■ Highlight the importance of parental involvement in a collaborative environment.

■ Provide the names of organizations and a list of websites that provide information about learning disabilities.

● Benefits of Self-Advocacy

Studies have shown that highly successful adults with learning disabilities identify the ability to self-advocate as a contributing factor to success. To self-advocate is to take action on one's own behalf. Self-advocacy can lead to self-determination, which is the ability to consider one's options and make choices that affect one's future. Self-advocacy, therefore, can have a positive impact on the lives of students as well as adults with learning disabilities.

Students with learning disabilities must be able to advocate effectively for themselves. Beginning in the early years and continuing throughout their school lives, students with learning disabilities must be supported in learning how to self-advocate. They must learn strategies for problem solving and goal setting, become aware of their strengths and areas of need, understand and accept the implications of their learning disabilities, and take responsibility for self-advocacy. They require frequent opportunities to practise these skills in a positive, supportive environment.

When teachers, students, and student support teams are able to engage in the collaborative process of building self-advocacy skills, students can benefit in many ways.

■ Students can learn to appropriately describe their abilities and needs as well as the assistance and adaptations they require to support their learning.

■ Students can be actively involved in setting realistic goals for their education.

■ Students who learn to self-advocate tend to stay in school longer, pursue post-secondary education, and become successful in the workplace.

Barriers to Self-Advocacy

Students with learning disabilities may not self-advocate effectively for a number of reasons.

- They may lack knowledge of themselves as learners and have difficulty describing their abilities, their needs, and the conditions that best support their learning.

- They may not know who to speak with about obtaining assistance or adaptations, what to ask for, how to ask for it, or how to best utilize supports.

- They may lack the ability to articulate personal strengths and needs. This may be the result of difficulties with expressive language or social skills, or a lack of practise in communicating their needs.

- They may have limited confidence and low self-esteem. As a result, they may be reluctant to ask questions in class or ask for extra assistance. They may not want to be perceived as being "stupid" or a "trouble-maker".

- They may be passive about their involvement in their education and feel that the future of their education is beyond their control. They may rely on parents and teachers to advocate for them.

- They may encounter people (at home, at school, in the community, in the workplace, and so on) who do not understand learning disabilities or why adaptations or assistance may be appropriate.

Supporting Self-Advocacy in Students with Learning Disabilities

There are many ways in which teachers and other members of student support teams can help students develop self-advocacy skills. These include the following:

- Involve students in decision making about their education.
  - Involve students in student-specific planning and in implementing Individual Education Plans (IEPs). (Student input and involvement should increase as students progress through the school years.)
  - Provide opportunities for students to make choices and make plans.
  - Encourage students to participate in performance evaluations, develop self-monitoring skills, and take increasing responsibility for learning (e.g., goal setting, rubrics, portfolio assessments, etc.).

- Help students understand their strengths and needs.
  - Talk with students about the concept of learning disabilities and their own strengths and needs.
  - Provide specific feedback to help students understand how they learn best (e.g., "You seem to remember better when you get a chance to 'see' the information.")

- Help students learn to describe their thoughts. Model the process by describing your own thoughts. Encourage students to talk about what they are thinking and rephrase their ideas to clarify their learning strengths and needs.
- Analyze and explain the results of assessments so students can understand their abilities and needs, as well as the implications of learning disabilities on their education and in their lives outside of school.

- Model and teach appropriate self-advocacy skills.
  - Young students first learn about self-advocacy by observing parents, teachers, and others advocating on their behalf. From an early age, these children can benefit from discussions about their learning strengths and needs as well as observations about the ways in which they learn best. Involve them in conversations about program planning. Even if they seem too young to participate, they can learn about the concepts of collaboration and problem solving by listening.
  - The skills involved in self-advocacy can be demonstrated, role-played, practised, and evaluated. Students may require extensive guidance through the middle years until high school, when there are increased expectations for independence.
  - Help students prepare for meetings, conversations with teachers, or other situations where they may be involved in planning their educational future. Model and role-play appropriate interactions.
  - Help students prepare, manage, and seek out information; effective self-advocates are organized and informed.
  - Provide students with opportunities to meet mentors with learning disabilities. Students may learn a great deal from others who have gone through similar experiences.

- Help students set appropriate and realistic goals in their learning.
  - Students should be actively involved in making decisions about their education, and should be taught ways to set appropriate goals that are tangible and realistic. One possible strategy is to make goals SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-related.

Follow-up with students to review their success in achieving goals. Self-monitoring and self-evaluation are important skills for students to develop when they are learning how to set realistic goals.

The following are a few online resources that are designed to support students when they are learning to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and to speak up on their behalf.

- Alberta Education. Appendix 3F: "Self-advocacy Checklist for Elementary/Junior High School". *Individualized Program Planning*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Education, 2006. https://archive.education.alberta.ca.
- CanLearn Society. *Self-Advocacy*. Calgary, Alberta: Calgary Learning Centre. www.canlearnsociety.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/LC_Self-Advocacy_N2.pdf.

- Lundy, Kathleen Gould. *What Do I Do About the Kid Who . . . ? 50 Ways to Turn Teaching into Learning*. (2004). www.stenhouse.com/emags/8165-1/pageflip.html.

- **The KIT: Keeping it Together™ for Youth (the Youth KIT)**

  The Youth KIT is a tool that assists students in giving, getting, and organizing their own information as they transition to adulthood. Alongside the Youth KIT, there are two videos available to help you and your mentor use the Youth KIT. www.canchild.ca/en/research-in-practice.

- Morel, Pamela, and Diane Berzins. *Planning for Success: Accommodations, Learning Strategies, and Assistive Technology that Work for Me: A Self-Assessment Inventory*, Sudbury, ON: Cambrian College. www.cambriancollege.ca.

  Adapted from: Alberta Learning. "Self-Advocacy". U*nlocking Potential: Key Components of Programming for Students with Learning Disabilities*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Learning, 2002. pp.41-44. https://archive.education.alberta.ca.

  This section of *Unlocking Potential: Key Components of Programming for Students with Learning Disabilities* was also reprinted in Saskatchewan Learning's *Teaching Students with Reading Difficulties and Disabilities: A Guide for Educators*. Regina, Saskatchewan: Saskatchewan Learning, 2004. www.education.gov.sk.ca/Reading-Difficulties-Disabilities.

● Module Summary

Module 7 provided practical strategies and teaching tips that contribute to the development of self-advocacy for students with learning disabilities. As such, benefits and barriers to learning self-advocacy skills for students with learning disabilities were explored. Suggestions were provided regarding how educators, parents, and others in a student's life can work collaboratively with students to support them in understanding their learning disabilities and helping them build and maintain their motivation/determination to face the challenges they encounter. The names of organizations and a list of websites were provided for more information about learning disabilities.

● Resources

Documents

Alberta Learning. *Unlocking Potential: Key Components of Programming for Students with Learning Disabilities*. Edmonton, Alberta: Alberta Learning, 2002. https://archive.education.alberta.ca.

Saskatchewan Learning. *Teaching Students with Reading Difficulties and Disabilities: A Guide for Educators*. Regina, Saskatchewan: Saskatchewan Learning, 2004. www.education.gov.sk.ca/Reading-Difficulties-Disabilities.

Organizations

- **Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC)**

  www.ldac-acta.ca/

  The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada (LDAC) is the national voice for persons with learning disabilities and those who support them. LDAC supports individuals with learning disabilities to enable them to function as citizens with equitable opportunities, and to develop to their chosen potential. LDAC accomplishes these goals through public awareness about the nature and impact of learning disabilities, advocacy, research, health, education, and collaborative efforts.

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  Phone: 613-238-5721
  Toll-Free: 1-877-238-5332
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  Email: info@ldac-acta.ca

- **Learning Disabilities Association of Manitoba (LDAM)**

  www.ldamanitoba.org/

  The Learning Disabilities Association of Manitoba is a non-profit agency that represents individuals with learning disabilities and their families. Members include parents, professionals, persons with learning disabilities, and interested others. LDAM is affiliated with the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada.

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  617 Erin Street. R3G 2W1
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  Phone: 204-774-1821
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  Brandon and District Chapter
  129B-12th Street
  Brandon, Manitoba

  Phone: 204-727-4669
  Email: ldambdn@mts.net
  Website: www.ldambrandon.org/

Portage la Prairie Chapter

For information on parent support group activities or public information sessions in the Portage La Prairie area, contact the Provincial office at

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Winnipeg, Manitoba

Phone: 204-774-1821
Fax: 204-788-4090
Email: ldamb@mts.net

■   **Dyslexia Champions of Manitoba**

Website: http://dyslexiachampions.org/

■   **Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario**

Website: www.ldao.ca/ldadhd-resources/websites-and-online-resources/

Websites

■   LD OnLine

www.ldonline.org/

LD OnLine provides accurate and up-to-date information and advice about learning disabilities and ADHD. The site has sections for educators, parents, and children and features articles, multimedia, monthly columns by noted experts, first person essays, children's writing and artwork, a comprehensive resource guide, forums, and a referral directory of professionals, schools, and products.