

Webinar Transcript : Fostering Self-Advocacy Skills for Students with LDs

- Hello and welcome to this webinar called "Fostering Self-Advocacy Skills "in Students with LD". My name is Alison Parker and I'm happy to be here today to talk about this important topic. I want to start by introducing myself and the organization where I work. I'm the Clinical Manager of the Regional Assessment Resource Center or RARC. Our vision at RARC is for students with neurodevelopmental disabilities. That's learning disabilities, ADHD, and ASD to thrive in post-secondary education. We are funded by the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities to provide services to support students in post-secondary including transition support, research, training, and psychoeducational assessments. We are located in Kingston, Ontario at Queens University and we provide services to post-secondary institutions all across southern Ontario.

And we also have several online transition programs that are open to students and families anywhere in Ontario. We're really happy to be partnering with the LDAO for this webinar. When RARC first opened just over 20 years ago, one of the main focuses was updated psychoeducational assessments for post-secondary students with learning disabilities. College and university students with LD need an updated assessment for them to understand how they learn and for accessibility services staff to be able to plan academic accommodations for those students. But what we know about our students with LD is that it's more than just needing some accommodations. There are other pieces to that puzzle for our students. Learning skills, study skills, independence, executive functioning, self-advocacy, these are all skills that are essential to their success in and out of school and all skills that our students may struggle with. And not only do we want to see these students succeed in post-secondary, we need them to get there in the first place. Over the years at RARC, we've developed several transition programs that start before post-secondary school. Some that start in grade 11 or 12, and also some that start in grade seven and eight. Because it takes time to build and develop these skills that are so essential to that eventual success at college and university. We focus on many things in those transition programs and in this webinar, I'm going to be focusing specifically on self-advocacy for students with learning disabilities throughout elementary and secondary school. Here are the topics I'll cover in this 30 minute session.

What is self-advocacy and what it means for a student to be a self-advocate. What are the barriers and building a blocks to advocacy? We'll discuss the advocacy continuum and concept of shared advocacy. And then we'll talk about setting advocacy goals and what you can do as parents or guardians to encourage self-advocacy at home and in the classroom. I also want to draw your attention to the companion webinar by my colleague Dr. Beth Pollock called "Learning Disabilities, What They Are "and How They Impact Students". My presentation is going to build on some of the topics she discusses. So if you haven't watched that one yet, I do recommend going back to watch it first. I wanna take a moment as we get started for everyone to think about where their child or student is now in terms of being an advocate. What are their strengths in advocacy and what are their opportunities for growth? In particular, could they describe their LD or learning profile to you? Do they know what's on their IEP? Have they read it before? Does your child use their accommodations at school or at home and do they ask for them if they're not provided? Would you consider your child to be a good self-advocate? Being a



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self-advocate isn't easy for most of our students, and that's very normal and very developmentally appropriate for adolescents in particular. Let's think for a moment what we mean when we're expecting a child to be a self-advocate. What does that mean to you? Probably something along the lines of we want them to be able to confidently and accurately express their needs to teachers and others and help come up with and implement a solution to any obstacles they may run into.

Let's look at some examples of times when we might expect a student with LD to be a self-advocate. Maybe it's a student who is supposed to use a computer for their work and the program is not working. Or they're supposed to write their test in another room, but the supply teacher doesn't know that. Or perhaps everyone is working on an assignment, but they're staring at the paper and they have no idea what they're supposed to be doing even though everybody else seems to understand. Do any of those scenarios resonate with your child's experience or a situation that they might find themselves in? What would we expect a good self-advocate to do in those scenarios? We probably expect them to alert the teacher that something is wrong and that they need some assistance, and then hopefully the student could also help figure out a solution to that problem. Now let's break that down a little further. In each scenario I gave, first, the student needs to identify that something's gone wrong and needs to be fixed. That they need this computer program to do their work. It's not working, and that's a problem. They can't just do the assignment by hand because they have challenges with getting their thoughts on paper or that they write their tests in another room because they need a reduced distraction environment, and the substitute teacher may not know that, but it's important enough to say something rather than staying quiet and writing the test in the classroom. Or that they have trouble understanding written instructions and they need some extra help compared to their peers when it comes to deciphering the assignment requirements. And instead of muddling through, it would be a better idea to clarify the instructions from the get go. In all of these scenarios, there's a piece of self understanding and awareness that's needed here before students can effectively advocate for themselves.

Additionally, in all of those situations I mentioned the student would need to put their hand up or go to their teacher to get help and draw attention to themselves. What do we know about so many of our LD students? They would like to fade into the background and be invisible. These students do not enjoy reminding their classmates and their teachers that they're different. We know that students with LD are at increased risk to have low self-esteem. And I'm sure that's not a surprise to you either. So many of our students believe that their stupid and unable to succeed academically. They'd much rather do poorly, struggle in silence or act out in class rather than be singled out in front of their peers. When we run parent programming, we ask for the parent's goals for the sessions. And improving their child's self-esteem is always one of the top priorities. Dr. Pollock also talked about this in the previous webinar that I mentioned. Learning disabilities, what they are and how they impact students. When you have low self-esteem, putting yourself out there to ask for help can be really daunting and it's key to all of this. Until students have that self-awareness, confidence and self-esteem to know that they're not stupid,

they just learn differently. Self-advocacy will not be a priority for them. Self-advocacy on its face might seem like an easy and straightforward skill, but we're asking a lot of our young people and it's really normal for them to push back. And it's more than just self understanding and self-esteem. There are other barriers to self-advocacy. There are so many reasons that students might struggle with this. It's difficult for our students to understand their needs and communicate that verbally.

Many of our students struggle with anxiety, or social or peer pressure. It can be hard for students to see the connection between their academic goals and the role that self-advocacy plays in meeting those goals. Our students may have underdeveloped executive functioning skills or maybe slower to mature. A lot of our students unfortunately, have a history of negative teacher response and being told no in the classroom. And of course, sometimes there is parental overdoing or overprotection and our students start to take a backseat in their education. It's something for us as parents and also for educators to appreciate that we're asking a lot of some of our students. It's worth it and they can get there. But we also need to understand why it takes time and why they may be under-prepared or hesitant to take on the role of self-advocacy. When we're just looking at the classroom, it can feel like our students are missing a lot of self-advocacy skills. If they don't speak up, they hesitate to ask for help, if they'd rather be a class clown than say they don't understand. However, when we start to think and dig deeper, we realize our young people often have some secret self-advocacy skills that we may not have noticed. How many of your kids have advocated that they should get a cell phone or advocated that they should stay up late or go out with friends or go to a sleepover? Or that they don't want to eat this for dinner, or do their chores, or they wanna spend all day Saturday playing video games? A lot of our children are actually pretty good at asking and arguing for what they want, which ties back to the self-confidence piece. Most students don't want to stick out as different from their classmates. For so many of our students, school is not necessarily a fun place to be. Learning is tough. They struggle to keep up with their peers, and what looks easy for everyone else is really hard for them. So many of our LD students believe themselves to be stupid and unable to learn.

We want them to understand they're not stupid or lazy. They just learn differently. We can talk about their diagnosis and give them words and understanding as to why some academic skills are harder for them than others. We can teach them how accommodations address those specific impairments by giving them another way to approach a task. It's not cheating. It's just using a different strategy. We also wanna make sure our students are experiencing some success in the classroom. That they see themselves as academically capable. As they develop their understanding and confidence in themselves see themselves as able to succeed academically, they can start to connect the dots and understand why these accommodations are there and how they help. With that confidence and success, most students find that it feels better to get an A or a B and really master a concept even if you stick out a little bit, rather than struggle and not know what's going on. As that starts to happen that our students start to want these supports and accommodations in place, that it's worth it for them to speak up for themselves, it

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becomes a bit easier to be that self-advocate. So let's start by looking at the building blocks. What do we need in place to develop self-advocacy skills? We need that self understanding and confidence piece that I've been talking about. We need positive teacher relationships. And we also need practice. Students need repetition and practice, practice, practice with these skills. In terms of self understanding, students need to know about their diagnosis, their strengths, their weaknesses, and really understand that their brain just works a bit differently. Our students need to be able to talk about their LD, even if just with their parents. And confidence will start to flow from that. Students need to believe in themselves, believe that they can be successful with the right accommodations and support and be willing to do things a little differently from their peers in the classroom.

In Dr. Pollock's previous webinar, she discussed talking to our kids about LDs, the impact on their self-esteem and how to build self-esteem. We want to dispel any myths they have about themselves and nurture their strengths, especially their non-academic strengths. It could be sports, the arts, music, helping others, cooking, gardening, building with your hands. We want to really appreciate and develop these strengths and get your kids exposed to other kids and adults with LDs or neurodevelopmental or other disabilities. Whether there are groups in town or at your school or even just through media and other representation. There are lots of public speakers and personalities that are open about their LDs or other disorders. It's not easy to magically impart that self-understanding and confidence, but you really wanna make it a focus with your children because it impacts self-advocacy skills in a really big way. Another piece of the puzzle we have here is positive teacher relationships. We know how hard it is for teachers to manage oversized classrooms. Students are at such different academic and behavioral levels all in the same class. It's not an easy task for our teachers, and sometimes that trickles onto our students where they may not be getting that attention or understanding that they need from their classroom or special education teacher. But it's hard for students to advocate in those situations. If they don't have that trusting relationship, it's hard to take a risk and ask for help. And for students who have had a string of negative responses from teacher over the years, it's understandable that they're not eager to put themselves out there again. As parents, I really encourage you to develop that positive relationship with your child's teacher and then involve your kid as much as possible. See if the teacher is able to meet before the school year starts, invite your child to the IEP meeting if you're able, and really encourage a positive relationship there.

In the classroom it can be busy, chaotic, and you don't have a private space to talk. It can be hard for students to talk about their learning needs in that environment. So if it's possible for students or students and parents together to talk to their teacher at a separate time to really set a positive tone and discuss their needs, it can help to build that trusting relationship. And the last one we have here is practice. We want to make sure our kids have the skills they need to advocate when the time arises and that they've been able to use these skills and practice them many times. It can be intimidating to talk to teachers or other school staff, but with practice it can get a lot easier. We're going to look now at the self-advocacy continuum, and this is a way

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that we like to look at advocacy skill development. If we look at the two extremes, we have external advocacy on the far left when someone else is doing all the work and self-advocacy on the far right when an individual is able to completely advocate for themselves. And in the middle we have what we called shared advocacy, where in this case it's students and their parents who are sharing this role in advocacy. When we think about the early grade years, maybe when your child first started to struggle with reading, writing, or math, grade one, two, three. At this stage, it's the parents and school working together to get some supports in place. Interventions, an assessment, an IEP. This is done by the professionals and our young student isn't taking a leading role in this.

Flip forward a decade, when our kids are 18 and they're off to college, university, or the workplace, they're expected to be able to fully speak for themselves. Their college accessibility department, the resident's office, professors, bosses. They don't wanna talk to mom and dad, uncle, cousin, grandma. They wanna speak to the students themselves and legally they can't disclose much information anyways without express consent from a student, but we don't need to go from one extreme to the other. Students can work their way to self-advocacy through shared advocacy. It's at this shared advocacy stage that students are starting to find their voice. Practicing speaking up about academic and LD related issues, and parents are starting to take a step back. Instead of jumping to solve problems or make arrangements with teachers, they're inviting their kids deeper into the conversation and seeing if they're ready to start tackling some of these issues themselves. Parents or guardians are still involved, but they're taking a bit more of a backseat or staying in the shadows while the student gets to take a leading role. Or maybe they're dividing up the advocacy roles and each taking on a few tasks. Students are able to start practicing advocacy while their parents are still close by and able to step in as needed. When you think about your child, where do they fall on this continuum? Where your child is will depend on their skills, maturity, personality, experiences at school, and their individual strengths and weaknesses. In the early grades, it's very appropriate for parents and teachers to be doing external advocacy.

By grade seven or eight developmentally, it would be appropriate for students to be in the middle of the continuum at shared advocacy where they're doing maybe half the work of advocating and parents are doing the other half. Your grade seven or eight child may not be there yet, but it's a reasonable goal for most students at that age to be working towards. And throughout high school, students can be working to being self-advocates, that by the time they graduate grade 12, they've already had a year or two of practice in that role. Now, what do shared and self-advocacy look like and how do you know if your child is ready? Here are some readiness markers you might see that tells you your child is ready to take on shared advocacy goals. If they're aware of their diagnosis, strengths and weaknesses, they may not be able to tell it back to you or explain it to someone else, but they've had conversations about it. If they've read their IEP, there's lots on there that they don't need to remember or may have questions about, but they've seen it, they've read it, and they've had a chance to ask about it. If your child understands why they have accommodations and generally uses them without complaint. If they

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can ask for help from a trusted teacher, classmate, or peer. And if there's a problem at school, they can let their parents know. They're not necessarily ready to deal with it themselves in the moment, but they can let you know after the fact so that you can help solve it. These are not the only things that mean a student is ready for shared advocacy, but it's a good place to start. And if your child doesn't meet these criteria, then you may want to plan some goals and conversations around this to help get them ready. If your child is ready to take on shared advocacy, here are some goals you can work on together.

For your child to be able to know and name their diagnosis, as well as some strengths and weaknesses. For them to be able to use their most frequent accommodations without reminders. This often means using assistive technology, different learning strategies, and asking to take breaks if they're getting distracted. For your child to be able to meet with a new teacher at the start of term to talk about their IEP. We get our grade nine students to do this in our transition program and it works really well. Teachers are almost always happy to meet with a student and generally quite impressed that students know about their IEP and their accommodation needs. The last one we have here is being able to give feedback about your IEP or accommodations that are working or not working. This can be in conversation with parents or students can write a note or even make notes directly on the IEP that can be passed along to the teacher. Now, let's fast forward a few years once we've met all these goals and look at self-advocacy readiness. After a student has worked towards shared advocacy, they may be ready to move on to self-advocacy. What might that readiness look like? It would mean that they know their diagnosis and learning profile in more depth.

They're able to explain to teachers or other people about their strengths, weaknesses, and what's on their IEP. That they're comfortable with their peers knowing they have a learning disability. Being a self-advocate sometimes means advocating in front of others. So having the comfort level and confidence to do that is important. Like in shared advocacy, they need to know when there's a problem and something has gone wrong. But now at this stage, they're able to address it themselves in the moment, which leads to the next one. That they can ask for help from anyone. Not just trusted peers and teachers, but a supply teacher, new classmates, student teachers, and other teaching staff. This is not an exhaustive list. There are lots of different skills that form the foundation for self-advocacy. But these are the sorts of building block skills students need to rely on to be self-advocates. Not all students are ready to do this in early high school, but it's certainly something they can be working toward. And here are what some goals might look like around self-advocacy. Attending an IEP or accommodation meeting. When students go to college or university, they'll be meeting with an accessibility advisor in order to arrange their accommodations, and this is great practice for that. Reading your own assessment report. Most students will need a reassessment for college and university and they'll be 18. That is their medical information. So it's good to have practice reading it over and being able to ask questions about it.

Scheduling and attending appointments with school staff, guidance counselors, resource teachers, post-secondary planning appointments, whoever it may be. For students to be able to

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take control of their educational journey. And I also have on here the goal of being able to respond to peers or classmates who may ask about your LD or using accommodations. Of course, this is private information and students don't need to disclose this to anyone, but that being said, classmates are observant. They may ask why student writes an exam in a different room or uses a computer. Even if it's asked with the best of intentions. So it's useful for students to start to think about how they want to respond and how much information they want to give. And maybe even write out a script for how they want to handle those conversations when they arise.

Other goals you'd put on the list for shared or self-advocacy. At this stage, we've talked about barriers and building blocks for self-advocacy and the self-advocacy continuum and some reasonable goals for our students. What can you do as parents or guardians to help achieve those goals and encourage your children to be self-advocates? One of the places you can start is self-advocacy at home. Part of this is because it's generally a safe place to practice advocacy skills, but also as parents and family members, that's where you are. You have limited control over what's happening in the classroom, but you can set up an environment at home that encourages and promote self-advocacy where students can practice skills and take them into the classroom. We know that many of our kids are already good at asking for what they want. See what you can do to harness that and translate those skills into other areas. Students can hone their advocacy skills on non-school related things like in social situations with friends and family members or in sports or other clubs. They can practice on others, speaking up and talking to authorities, ordering food at a restaurant, making a doctor or dentist appointment. These are all great ways to practice finding your voice. If they have a topic they want to discuss with a teacher, you can role play a conversation at home and practice how it might happen. You can also practice school related advocacy on things like homework time. Homework is often a hot topic in families and especially for students with LD who often take more time to complete projects and homework.

Maybe you can come up with a solution with your child, yourself or the teacher on reasonable homework expectations and how much time to spend on homework each night. And get your child involved in that conversation. Can they explain what about their LD makes homework more challenging and what's a good solution? Or maybe there are other conversations or problem solving around things like assistive technology use at home. And as I've mentioned before, get students involved in their IEP. Read it together or enlist some help from the school and see what's on there. If it's out of date or doesn't match your child's experience, this is a great opportunity for them to speak up and give feedback. Your child can give you a note to take to school, or if they're able to speak directly with their teacher, they can attend an IEP meeting. When students are ready to advocate at school, start small and focus on building the comfort level with the teacher. I always recommend starting with the easiest teacher.

Find a private unrushed time. Students can talk about what's going well, what's on their IEP, expectations around accommodation use. Maybe they can talk about a specific upcoming

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assignment or test, how they want to prepare, or what accommodations they will be using. As a parent, you can always reach out to the teacher privately ahead of time to let them know or set the stage, and then you know that your child is going to get a yes from the teacher. They will be able to have this positive experience and advocacy, achieve some success, and this will help the process get easier over time. So much of advocacy at this age is comfort and practice, so a good relationship with the teacher, a private setting, and an unrushed time. Things like asking for help before a project is due, not after, is a great way to develop that comfort and practice. For a lot of students, they may not be ready to advocate in front of their peers, and that's okay. Discretion is key for so many of our students, and I wouldn't focus on self-advocacy in front of the whole class right now. Almost everything that students need to communicate with their teacher can be done in private.

When a student is much more comfortable and the teacher's attention isn't pulled in 12 different directions. As they get comfortable speaking with their teacher in private settings, that comfort level often starts to spill over in less private settings as well. And if your child is not ready for this, you can model this at home. Sit down with your child and talk about a problem or assignment that they need teacher support or accommodations for. Your child can dictate a note to you or write one themselves that can be passed along to the teacher, or you can both go speak to them together. With practice and success, they'll be able to develop more and more comfort to have those conversations with their classroom or special education support teacher. And of course, as students get more comfortable advocating, as parents, you can start taking a few steps back. Even if it's not smooth every time or if there are some bumps along the way, your child will be building their advocacy, problem solving, and resiliency skills as they go. I wanna take you back for a moment to my examples of self-advocacy. A computer not working, the supply teacher not knowing that you write your test in a different room, not understanding assignment instructions. Handling these sorts of challenges and advocating all flows from the practice and comfort built up by advocacy at home and getting comfortable talking to your teacher about your learning needs.

In all our experience with young people with LD over the years, that's what we find time and time again. It's rarely actual advocacy skills. Our kids know how to speak up for what they want. It's so much more about being comfortable having an LD and learning to talk about it. These are exactly the skills we teach in our transition programs, and the feedback we get from parents and teachers about the progress made by students is remarkable. Remember, it's very normal and developmentally appropriate for children and adolescents to shy away from self-advocacy. And it's often not a priority for our students who already feel different and singled out from their peers.

That being said, it is an important skill to develop. And in many cases allows these students to flourish at school. When you start by focusing on self-understanding and confidence, you build their comfort level around having an LD, which opens the door to self-advocacy. Choose some appropriate goals with your child on shared or self-advocacy. Where are they on the continuum now, and what skills can you work on together? Practice at home, practice with

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your favorite teachers, and take those small steps to build their confidence to becoming a self-advocate.

Thank you for watching this webinar. I hope it was helpful to you and that you've come away with some ideas, goals, and strategies for your family. If you'd like to learn more about the work we do at RARC or about our transition programs, please visit our website, www.queensu.ca/rarc, or send us an email. Thank you.