



Empowering parents: Examination of the impact of a family advocacy organization in a system of care

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The partnership

Parent advocacy and parent-professional partnerships have come to be viewed as “crucial” for the wraparound process to work (VanDenBerg & Grealish, 1996). The growth in offered parent support/advocacy groups (Osher et al., 1999) makes it especially important to identify the characteristics and components of family support programs that best benefit families.

ParentVOICE is a family support agency in Mecklenburg County, N.C., that provides a range of free services and supports for families in which a youth lives with mental health issues. ParentVOICE provides empowerment-based support through provision of parent advocacy, education for families and professionals, and caregiver and youth support groups. Many of these services and supports are provided to caregivers; however, ParentVOICE also targets youth with support groups and a photovoice program.

With recent reductions in federal funding for systems of care, which has supported family organizations, it has become increasingly important for ParentVOICE to evaluate itself and develop a sustainability plan (Lazaer, Anderson, & Boterf, 2007). Since ParentVOICE relies on local funding that requires evidence that it helps children and families with mental health challenges, ParentVOICE approached faculty at UNC-Charlotte for assistance in evaluating the impact of their programs. Through this partnership, ParentVOICE has worked to enhance their capacity to (a) collect and manage meaningful data, and (b) use the data from the project to affect positive changes in their programs.

In 2006, ParentVOICE and UNC-Charlotte researchers developed an impact survey to measure the organization’s effectiveness. This measure was piloted in 2007 (n=34); therefore, the data analyses were limited due to the small sample. The impact survey was also implemented in 2010 and 2011 with larger samples.

Scale	2011 Mean	2011 SD	2010 Mean	2010 SD
Empowerment Scale				
• <i>Formal Participation</i>	3.34	1.11	3.40	1.06
• <i>Informal Participation</i>	3.93	0.89	3.96	0.82
• <i>Skills and Knowledge</i>	4.39	0.60	4.37	0.55
• <i>Attitudes of Control and Competence</i>	4.25	0.80	4.39	0.55
ParentVOICE Impact	4.13	0.90	4.11	0.92
Caregiver Efficacy	3.50	0.49	3.47	0.53

Table 1. The 2010 and 2011 Impact Surveys were made up of three scales. The information from these results help ParentVOICE report to the county’s Area Mental Health, a major source of funding, the effect it has on families. The scales help assess power and sense of control over one’s decisions (Empowerment Scale), the impact of the organization’s services and supports (PV Impact Scale), and parents’ ability to understand and advocate for their child’s needs (Caregiver Efficacy). As you see here, the impact on these domains did not change significantly from 2010 to 2011.

The 2011 survey

ParentVOICE worked with UNC-Charlotte to add a qualitative component to the 2011 annual Impact Survey, including questions about the agency’s monthly adult and youth support groups. The addition provided an entirely new dimension to the information that the annual assessment could provide up to this point. Below are two excerpts from the data report provided to ParentVOICE that allowed the agency to see opportunities for it to expand its services:

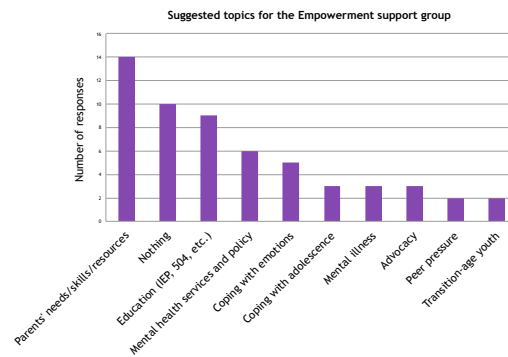


Figure 1. The qualitative survey asked a lot of questions about the support group, including whether the time, day, and location were convenient. It also examined what topics parents would like to discuss at future Empowerment support groups. The table above is a visual representation of the data parents shared with ParentVOICE staff: The big message was that many parents were content with the topics already discussed (the **Nothing** category); however, some suggested sharing more information on how to navigate the system as well as on how to advocate for their child to identify and access the right resources.

What does your child like about attending A.C.T.I.V.E. Youth?

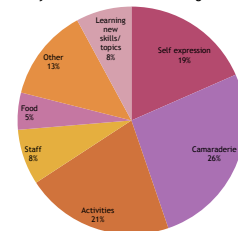


Figure 1. Of those who were currently involved with the Empowerment group, 19 participants shared that their youth had attended ACTIVE Youth within the past year. The chart below outlines what these parents reported their youth liked about the group. **Camaraderie** was the most frequently cited element of the group. Many respondents noted that spending time with other youth their age with whom they can relate was most important.

Small wins: concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance (Weick, 2000) that have led to changes in ParentVOICE service provision.

- ParentVOICE must provide monthly reports on its “scope of work” to Mecklenburg County Area Mental Health (AMH), its primary funder. ParentVOICE’s reports to AMH help justify the funds it receives from the county, and the Impact Survey has helped provide information for monthly reports.
- ParentVOICE also predicts each year how many families it impacts and in what way the agency touches their lives. The Impact Survey helps ParentVOICE determine whether or not it meets these predicted outcomes. The information from the three different quantitative measures on the Impact Survey (see Table 1) provides these results for ParentVOICE.
- UNC-Charlotte researchers and ParentVOICE used Geographical Information Systems paired with Impact Survey data to determine an ideal location for new support groups. Using the GIS and other data, the research team is able to see what populations remain under served.
- The qualitative survey results encouraged ParentVOICE staff to think more broadly about service provision. They now are starting to offer more education opportunities that target the topics in which parents voiced interest (e.g., Missing Persons, Gang of One workshops; see Figure 1).
- The Impact Survey process has been streamlined from its inception. During the 2010 survey, the UNC-Charlotte team provided the opportunity for parents to win a \$50 gift card as incentive for completing the survey. This coincided with a dramatic increase in sample size of the respective Impact Survey. Noting this as a valuable outcome, ParentVOICE provided the gift card incentives for the 2011 Impact Survey.

Lessons learned

Overall, UNC-Charlotte and ParentVOICE have had a positive working relationship. It is through the following successes and challenges that the relationship between UNC-Charlotte and ParentVOICE persists still today.

The Impact Survey process has led to further collaborations.

- ❖ Photovoice, where youth create multimedia projects that empower them by providing a mechanism to spread their message to the community at large.
- ❖ ParentVOICE also enlisted the help of graduate student researchers at UNC-Charlotte to help revamp their A.C.T.I.V.E. Youth support group.

Despite these successes, there have been challenges:

- There has been particular struggle around the ParentVOICE database that tracks the agency’s contact with the families. UNC-Charlotte researchers helped develop and streamline the database that tracks the involvement of families with the agency. However, because of staff turnover, ParentVOICE has not been able to utilize the database. This leaves the agency without the capacity to extract information, limiting the data analyses that can be conducted by the UNC-Charlotte team.