

Improving teachers' confidence in supporting the mental health needs of children with learning disability

Background:

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Up to 40% of children with learning disability (LD) suffer from a co-morbid mental illness (1). Recent studies have established that teachers are the most frequently accessed source of mental health support for children with learning disabilities and their families (2). While this is undoubtedly a privileged position, teachers' confidence to take on that role can be lacking.

Aims and Methodology:

Our team approached teachers and teaching assistants from a primary and a secondary school for children with learning disability, and asked them to complete a questionnaire rating their confidence in various areas related to supporting their pupils' mental health needs. The questionnaire also collected qualitative data to inform the content of a planned educational intervention (Table 1).

Table 1 : Areas of low confidence for teachers (as emerged from thematic analysis of qualitative data).
Recognising symptoms of mental illness in children with LD
Differentiating symptoms of physical and mental illness
Managing symptoms of mental illness within the school environment
Accessing support from sources outside the school

We also interviewed a number of senior teaching staff from both schools, to allow further development of the educational intervention.

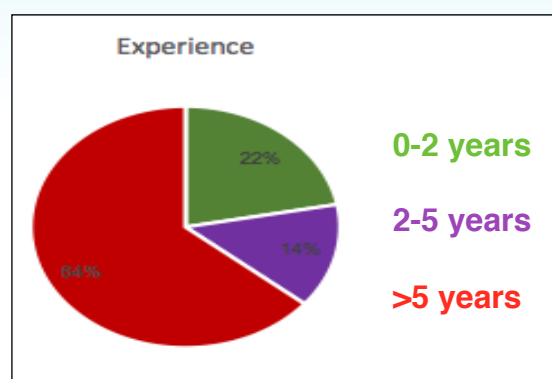
We then delivered a 90-minute educational session at each school, discussing mental illness in children with learning disabilities. The session focused on prevalence, aetiology, manifestation and management strategies and was adapted for our non-clinician audience.

Following the session, we asked our audience to complete the confidence questionnaire for a second time, to establish if there had been an improvement in their confidence in this area.

Results:

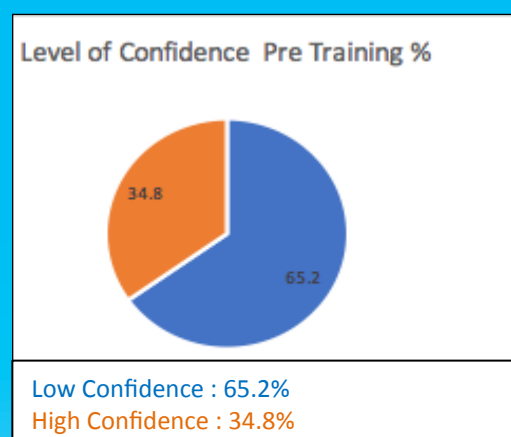
A total of 67 attendants returned the survey questionnaires, they had a mixed level of teaching experience (Chart 1).

Chart 1



Responses to the initial questionnaire (Chart 2) suggested that two thirds of teaching staff lacked confidence in the areas addressed by the teaching session.

Chart 2



This number reduced significantly following the session (Chart 3 and 4), with the second questionnaire identifying that only one fifth of teaching staff continued to lack confidence.

Chart 3

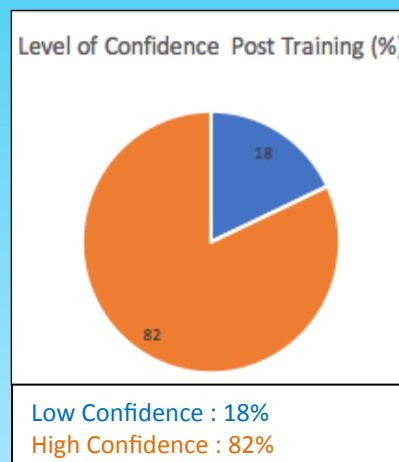
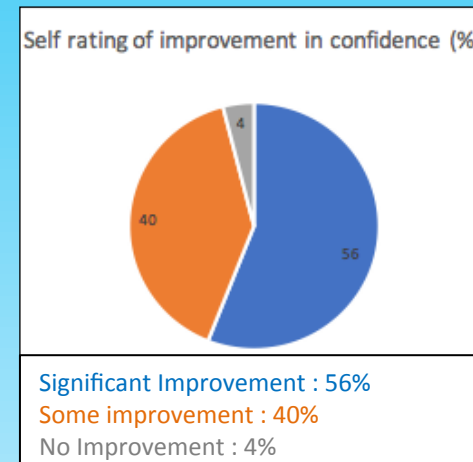


Chart 4



Conclusions:

Our Pilot Quality Improvement project demonstrated that a simple training intervention is sufficient in improving the confidence of teaching staff in supporting the mental health needs of their pupils.

Reflection - This project marks only the beginning of a mammoth task ahead requiring building links with various agencies who can deliver appropriate care in this area.

Next steps - to evaluate effectiveness of this improved confidence level in supporting children.

References:

- Emerson E. Prevalence of psychiatric disorders in children and adolescents with and without intellectual disability. Journal of Intellectual Disability Research 2003;47(Pt 1):51-8.
- Emerson E and Hatton C. 2007. The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents with Learning Disabilities in Britain. Institute for Health Research, Lancaster University.