

# The Right to a Relationship

## Research Findings

People with learning disabilities want to have relationships. They are the same as people without learning disabilities: having different relationships – friendships, romantic and sexual relationships – is an important part of their lives. However, unlike people without learning disabilities, institutional and attitudinal barriers prevent many people with learning disabilities from exercising and enjoying this fundamental human right.

### Research Questions

Focusing on the experiences of people living in Oxfordshire, our project set out to answer the following questions:

1. What barriers, resulting from the way support services are commissioned and delivered, do people with learning disabilities experience in developing and sustaining intimate relationships? Which of these barriers are unintended or intentional?
2. How common are these barriers among people with learning disabilities?
3. What commissioning and support practices help people with learning disabilities to develop and sustain intimate relationships?
4. What policy and/or practice changes are needed to address these barriers and promote the supportive practices identified?



Our aim is to provide evidence to make a convincing case for change within services and people's lives, and to use knowledge gained through the research to campaign for change.

## What We Did

This was a co-produced research project with self-advocates, supporters from My Life My Choice and researchers from NDTi working together in all stages of the project.

Doing research together taught us lots of new things. We believe this kind of approach is important so that local authority managers and providers are interviewed and challenged by people with learning disabilities who can share their lived experience of the issues being explored, not just professional researchers.

We used different methods to collect the data between May 2018 and January 2019:

- focus groups with 53 people with learning disabilities
- interviews with 7 people with learning disabilities
- an online survey to which 84 people responded (40 people with learning disabilities; 17 family carers; 22 support staff; 8 commissioners)
- interviews with three local authority managers and two service providers



## What We Found

**Our research found that people with learning disabilities experience many barriers in developing and sustaining intimate relationships.**

## Key Barriers

### Limited opportunities to meet potential partners.

There are some clubs and events but people often do not have the support to get to these.



### Some staff and family members prevent people from being in a relationship.

Sometimes this happens on purpose but sometimes it is not intended.



Rules of what is allowed and not allowed. Not all services have clear policies about how to support people's relationships, and even if they do these are usually not written with people with learning disabilities.

Lack of support to go out, go on dates, visit friends and girlfriends/boyfriends.

People with learning disabilities are sometimes not treated as adults who have the right to relationships by people around them: sexuality is still taboo and many people are overprotective.

Lack of knowledge and skills. Some services do not give staff training on how to support people in intimate relationships.

### Lack of money and transport:

to go out, visit partners and go on dates.



### Limited knowledge about sexuality and keeping safe.

Although there are accessible resources and services, people providing services, families, and people with learning disabilities are often not aware of these.



### Unsupportive friends and housemates can make it difficult.



Intimate relationships are not seen as a priority when commissioning services, unless there are concerns about risks and safeguarding.



## What Helped?

We also found things that helped people to be in an intimate relationship:



## Providers

Sometimes providers struggle with supporting people to have intimate and sexual relationships because:



# Recommendations



There should be **a more coordinated approach in supporting couples** to ensure that the support provided meets their needs as individuals and as a couple.



**Relationships should be clearly addressed in person-centred plans, including Education, Health, and Care plans, especially around transition.** This can help make sure that funding and support are available and help young people prepare for what they aspire to.



**Staff should have training in supporting people with intimate relationships.**

This training should not be just a one-off, it needs to be updated and refreshed regularly. There should be a network to help to co-produce, organise, and deliver this training and allow the sharing of good practices.



**Adults with learning disabilities of any age should have access to sex education and relationship training.** Also, schools and colleges should do more on sex and relationship education. Knowledge can help people be safe.



**People with learning disabilities need to know and understand their rights.** They also need to learn what to do when providers or carers say that they are not allowed to do something that, in fact, they are.



**Local offers should extend to personal and intimate relationships** and signpost people with learning disabilities, families, and services to available social events, activities, and services. This would also highlight where gaps are and help the local authority and partner organisations to target funding and activities.



**Sexual health and family planning services should be easy to use** for people with learning disabilities, and offer accessible information.



**Providers and staff need to take the time to get to know people and open up conversations about relationships.** They should find out about what people like, what they are interested in, and what they want from their lives. This can build trust and help with embarrassing and personal conversations.



**Getting the right staff with the right attitude is important.** Supporting relationships should be seen as part of a support worker's role and form part of the job interview for staff.

## Next Steps...

Based on our recommendations, we also suggest the following activities and future research:



Work with organisations to review their policies, find out how they actually support people with intimate relationships, and come up with ways of improving this.



Write clear guidance for people with learning disabilities about their rights in the area of intimate relationships. We will work closely with the British Institute of Human Rights to make this happen, and explore other things we and they should be doing.



Identify, quality-check, collate available resources about intimate relationships and sexual health, and make them accessible for people.



Conversations with the Tizard Centre at the University of Kent, Supported Loving, and Mencap's Sexuality and Relationships Manager (who have all done similar work) about developing a charter about people with learning disabilities' rights to have sexual relationships.



Work with families and find out what help they need to support this area of people's lives.

**Further Reading**  
[www.ndti.org.uk](http://www.ndti.org.uk)

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