



National Development Team **for inclusion**

**Supporting people with learning disabilities  
to develop sexual and romantic  
relationships**

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## Introduction

The National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi) has a vision of a society where all people, regardless of age or disability, are valued and able to live the life they choose. Through the work we do with people with learning disabilities, we have become aware that one area where people with learning disabilities face particular challenges to living the life they choose is around building relationships – including romantic or sexual relationships.

The rights of people with learning disabilities to develop relationships is supported by law, policies and guidance. The Human Rights Act conventions include the right to marry and have children, and the right to respect for a private and family life. Valuing People Now emphasises the importance of enabling people with learning disabilities to form all kinds of relationships and includes an action for services to support people to develop and sustain relationships, including sexual relationships (Department of Health, 2009). Recent service model guidance emphasises the right for people with learning disabilities and/or autism who display behaviour that challenges to the same opportunities as anyone else to live satisfying and valued lives including being able to develop and maintain relationships (ADASS et al, 2015).

Despite laws, policies and guidance it is clear that people with learning disabilities continue to face barriers to building and developing relationships. In order to understand more about the reasons for this and what can be done to support people to develop relationships, NDTi have conducted a short review of the evidence and information available.

In particular we have focused on the following two key questions:

- 1. What are the barriers or challenges to people with learning disabilities developing sexual/romantic relationships?**
- 2. What works to support people with learning disabilities develop sexual/romantic relationships?**

We conducted searches of:

- a. The research evidence in this area
- b. The resources that are available to support people with learning disabilities, parents/carers and staff to enable people with learning disabilities to develop relationships

This report summarises the findings of these two searches. Section A presents the research evidence and Section B presents the resources available.

It should be highlighted that the search and review was time and resource limited so this summary should not be read as a comprehensive review of all evidence and resources on the subject.

## SECTION A: The Research Evidence

### Method

A search was conducted of peer reviewed and grey literature from 2000<sup>1</sup>. The search was limited to UK and Ireland as it was felt that evidence from outside the UK and Ireland may not be directly relevant due to both cultural and policy differences. The search focused specifically on learning disabilities rather than disabilities more broadly. In addition the focus was explicitly on sexual, intimate or romantic relationships rather than friendships or relationships with staff and professionals or family.

A systematic approach using identified search terms was conducted using Onesearch, a university based search engine and Social Care Online, a database of information and research on social care and social work.

### 1. What are the barriers or challenges to people with learning disabilities developing sexual/romantic relationships?

The research and evidence reviewed highlighted a multitude of barriers or challenges that people with learning disabilities face in developing relationships. These fit into three broad categories – barriers as a result of society and people's attitudes; barriers related to the support provided to people with learning disabilities; and additional barriers to specific groups of people with learning disabilities.

#### Attitudinal barriers

It is clear from the evidence that people with learning disabilities face a whole range of negative attitudes about their development of relationships.

##### *General/societal attitudes*

A number of authors identify some very deep seated general or societal attitudes towards the notion of people with learning disabilities having sexual relationships including:

- A tendency for people with learning disabilities to be desexualised and deindividualised (Cambridge et al, 2003)
- A tendency towards the infantilisation (treating as a child) of people with learning disabilities (Rogers, 2009)

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<sup>1</sup> Note that one reference from 1999 has been included due to its relevance

- Normal sexual behaviour being perceived as problematic for people with learning disabilities (Cambridge et al, 2003; Cambridge, 2012; Parks and Wilson, 2009).
- The learning disability label dominating sexual identity (Abbott, 2015)

#### *Attitudes and views of parents, staff and teachers*

In addition to general attitudes towards the notion of people with learning disabilities developing sexual relationships a number of studies found evidence of parents', staff and teachers' attitudes inhibiting people with learning disabilities developing relationships including:

- Evidence of parents (Garbutt et al, 2010; Hollomotz et al, 2008), teachers (Garbutt et al, 2010) and staff (Hollomotz et al, 2008; Grieve et al, 2008; Yool et al, 2003; Abbott and Howarth, 2005; Abbott and Howarth, 2007) being resistant to people with learning disabilities having sex or relationships at all
- Evidence of staff (Kelly et al, 2009; Lafferty et al, 2006 in FPA, 2014 Fitzgerald and Withers, 2011) and family (Lafferty et al, 2006 in FPA, 2014; Fitzgerald and Withers, 2011) holding the view that relationships should be limited (e.g. kissing/holding hands is ok, but sex is not) or ended
- Evidence of family members and staff not acknowledging or respecting sexual rights (Healy et al, 2009)

#### *Conservative/traditional attitudes around homosexuality*

Several studies highlight that there is a particular issue around attitudes towards non-heterosexual relationships. There is evidence of:

- Traditional/conservative views of staff about homosexual relationships (Healy et al, 2009; Grieve et al, 2008; Yool et al, 2003; Cambridge and Mellan, 2000; Abbott, 2015; Abbott and Howarth, 2005; Abbott and Howarth, 2007)
- Families not accepting homosexual relationships (Lafferty et al, 2006 in FPA, 2014)

#### *Individuals' attitude towards relationships*

In addition, several studies picked up on the attitudes of others impacting on the attitudes of people with learning disabilities themselves towards sexual relationships finding evidence of:

- Individuals viewing sex as dirty or inappropriate (Fitzgerald and Withers, 2011)

- Conservative/traditional views around individuals' own sexuality (possibly mirroring the traditional views of carers) (Healy et al, 2009)
- Traditional views and negative attitudes towards homosexuality of others (Burns and Davies, 2011)

### Barriers relating to the support provided

Where attitudinal barriers have been overcome, there are additional barriers related to the support provided for people with learning disabilities or for the people supporting people with learning disabilities.

#### *Lack of information, resources or training*

The limited information, resources and training available to support people to develop relationships was identified for individuals with learning disabilities, staff, teachers and parents including:

- A lack of accessible information for people with learning disabilities (Garbutt et al, 2010; Kelly et al, 2009)
- A lack of information or resources for families (Garbutt, 2008; Garbutt et al, 2010; Lafferty et al, 2006 in FPA, 2014; Wright, 2011)
- A lack of training for teachers (Garbutt et al, 2010; Wright 2011), parents (Garbutt et al, 2010; Wright, 2011) and staff (Abbott, 2015; Abbott and Howarth 2005; Abbott and Howarth, 2007)

#### *Limitations of sex education*

A number of gaps or deficiencies in the sex education provided for people with learning disabilities are identified in the research including:

- Sex education not always being taught in special schools (Garbutt et al, 2010)
- Parents not talking to their children about sex and relationships (Wright, 2011)
- A lack of evidence based sex education resources or tools (Grieveo et al, 2006)
- Sex education focusing on what sex is, rather than having sex in a relationship to feel good (Garbutt et al, 2010; Abbott and Howarth, 2007)

In addition one study found that sexual knowledge does not necessarily lead to safe sexual practice (Yacoub and Hall, 2008).



### *Practical issues of facilitating a relationship*

People with learning disabilities face particular barriers in the practicalities of facilitating a relationship even when it is accepted (Wright, 2011), including:

- A lack of places for people to meet (Garbutt et al, 2010)
- A lack of support to meet people (Abbott and Howarth, 2005; Abbott and Howarth, 2007; Abbott, 2015)
- A lack of independence due to difficulties using transport (Garbutt et al, 2010)
- A lack of privacy – for example not being allowed to invite people into their rooms, not having a lock (Hollomotz et al, 2008; Withers et al, 2001; Cambridge et al, 2003; Abbott and Howarth, 2005)
- A lack of suitable space – including having a single bed (Hollomotz et al, 2008; Cambridge et al, 2003)
- Being dependent on others to fulfil sexual desires or needs (Parks and Wilson, 2009) which can cause ethical dilemmas for staff – for example around “facilitated sex” and access to pornography (Yacoub and Hall, 2008)

### *Lack of clear policies or clarity over legal issues*

A further issue that was identified was the uncertainty of staff of their role due to:

- A lack of clear policies around relationships and sex (Healy et al, 2009; Lafferty et al, 2006 in FPA, 2014; Abbott and Howarth, 2005; Abbott and Howarth, 2007)
- Lack of clarity over legal issues (Healy et al, 2009; Grieve et al, 2008)

These both result in discouraging staff from supporting people to develop relationships.

### *Protection from abuse versus enabling relationships*

It is evident from the research that there is a significant issue for both parents and staff in negotiating the balance between protecting their children or service users from abuse or exploitation and enabling relationships with a resulting tendency towards overprotection causing a barrier to the development of relationships. The evidence found:

- Uncertainty of parents (Garbutt, 2008; Rogers, 2009) and staff (Fitzgerald and Withers, 2011; Cambridge et al, 2003) around the balance between enabling/supporting positive relationships and protecting their child from abuse or exploitation

- Parents and teachers worrying about safety of people with learning disabilities (Garbutt et al, 2010)

### Barriers for specific groups

In addition to barriers for people with learning disabilities in general, additional barriers were identified for specific groups of people with learning disabilities.

#### *Women*

Particular issues identified for women with learning disabilities include:

- A lack of control over their reproduction/use of contraception (including disproportionate use of Depo-Provera) (Fitzgerald and Withers, 2011, McCarthy, 2009)
- A lack of information about contraception (McCarthy, 2009)
- A gender blind approach adopted by services with a resulting tendency for women's sexuality to be ignored (Fitzgerald and Withers, 2011; Williams and Nind, 1999)

#### *Men*

Particular issues identified for men with learning disabilities include:

- Different standards imposed on men with learning disabilities than other men – e.g. the use of pornography (Yacoub and Hall, 2008)
- A focus in research and practice on the pathological sexual behaviour of men with learning disabilities – particularly around their abuse and exploitation of women with learning disabilities and high risk behaviour – to the neglect of their wider sexuality and needs (Cambridge and Mellan, 2000)

#### *Lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) people*

Additional barriers identified for people with learning disabilities who are LGBT include:

- The invisibility of homosexuality in the learning disability community (Burns and Davies, 2011) and even less visibility for lesbians than gay men (Elderton and Jones, 2011; Abbott and Howarth, 2005; Abbott and Howarth, 2007)
- The dual issue of a lack of acceptance of sexuality in the learning disability community, and a lack of acceptance of learning disability in the LGBT community (Abbott, 2015; Elderton and Jones, 2011; Abbott and Howarth, 2005)

- LGBT support groups for people with learning disabilities that were set up are struggling from lack of funding (Abbott, 2015; Elderton and Jones, 2011)
- A lack of confidence of staff in supporting LGBT people (Abbott and Howarth, 2005; Abbott and Howarth, 2007)

## 2. What works to support people with learning disabilities develop sexual/romantic relationships?

In the studies reviewed there was a relatively limited amount of research which focused on researching *what works* to support people with learning disabilities develop relationships. However, many of the authors of the studies which identified the barriers or challenges made recommendations in response to their research findings. This section therefore is divided into two sections. The first section is based on what evidence has been found and the second section is authors' recommendations – it should be noted that the recommendations are informed by research but not necessarily evidence based.

### Evidence based findings:

The research studies identified the following factors that contribute to supporting the development of sexual/romantic relationships:

#### *Attitudes*

- The promotion of positive attitudes towards appropriate sexual expression (Healey et al, 2009)
- Liberal, accepting and positive attitudes of staff (Wright, 2011; Yacoub and Hall, 2008)

#### *Sex education*

- Ongoing and specialist sex education (Healy et al, 2009; Wright, 2011)
- A tailored individualised one-to-one sexuality educational intervention (Dukes and Maguire, 2009)

#### *Appropriate and accessible space*

- Living somewhere that provides privacy (Hollomotz et al, 2008; Cambridge et al, 2003)
- Having a safe space (Hollomotz et al, 2008)
- Supporting people with transport (Elderton and Jones, 2011; Withers et al, 2001)

### *Support from services*

- Listening to people about their needs and trusting them to form relationships (Kelly et al, 2009)
- Positive and supportive person-centred approaches (Abbott and Howarth, 2005; Abbott and Howarth, 2007; Yacoub and Hall, 2008)
- Having policies in place (Wright, 2011; Abbott and Howarth, 2007)
- Staff committed to providing accessible information (Wright, 2011)
- Confident and trained staff (Abbott and Howarth, 2007)
- Manager support for staff (Abbott and Howarth, 2007)

### *Support to explore sexual identity*

- A safe space where people feel comfortable, secure and able to be themselves where they can acquire knowledge and develop an understanding about their own sexuality (Elderton and Jones, 2011)
- Self-help groups (in these cases for LGBT people) (Elderton and Jones, 2011; Withers et al, 2001)
- A relationship support service which provides support to maintain friendships and relationships as well as facilitating introductions (Jenner and Gale, 2006)
- Support to form positive identities (Withers et al, 2001)

### **Recommendations by authors:**

Authors of studies identified above have made a range of recommendations that they believe would help to enable people with learning disabilities to develop relationships including:

#### *Attitudes*

- A shift in attitudes of staff, parents and in education settings (Garbutt et al, 2010; Healey et al, 2009)

#### *Access to information, resources and training*

- Accessible, clear, concise information about sex and relationships (Garbutt, 2008; Garbutt et al, 2010; Lafferty et al, 2006 in FPA, 2014) (note however that

Fitzgerald and Withers, 2011 highlight how much these have improved over the last few decades)

- More access to resources for teachers (Garbutt et al, 2010; Wright 2011)
- More training for teachers (Garbutt et al, 2010; Wright 2011), staff (Lafferty et al, 2006 in FPA, 2014; Grieve et al, 2008; Yool et al, 2003; Wright 2011; Abbott and Howarth, 2007) and parents (Wright, 2011)

#### *Sex education*

- Comprehensive sex education (Kelly et al, 2009)
- Sex education that focuses on emotional aspects of relationships (including desire and pleasure) as well as biological (Kelly et al, 2009)
- Sex education to include appropriate behaviour (Lafferty et al, 2006 in FPA, 2014)
- A website on sexuality education for people with learning disabilities (Dukes and Maguire, 2009)
- Positive education around same-sex relationships (Burns and Davies, 2011)

#### *Appropriate and accessible space*

- More places to meet (Garbutt et al, 2010)
- A right to privacy (Hollomotz et al, 2008)
- Having a safe space which is not under constant supervision (Wright, 2011)

#### *Support from staff to enable/facilitate a relationship*

- Staff to support people who want to develop relationships (Elderton and Jones, 2011)
- Staff to support people to meet people in safe ways (Yacoub and Hall, 2008) including going to gay venues (Abbott and Howarth, 2007)
- More person-centred approaches (Parks and Wilson, 2009; Abbott and Howarth, 2007)
- Sexual health in all person-centred plans (Lafferty et al, 2006 in FPA, 2014)

#### *Support for parents*

- More support for parents from professionals (Garbutt, 2008; Lafferty et al, 2006 in FPA, 2014)

### *Service policy and practice*

- A relationship policy for local areas/services (Hollomotz et al, 2008; Abbott and Howarth, 2007)
- Nominated staff member to discuss personal matters (Lafferty et al, 2006 in FPA, 2014)
- Services to ask service users for their perspectives (Fitzgerald and Withers, 2011)

### *A balance between protection from abuse and enabling relationships*

- Positive risk taking (Hollomotz et al, 2008)
- A need for balance between protection and empowerment (McCarthy, 2009)
- Encouraging disclosure when things go wrong (Yacoub and Hall, 2008)
- A focus on empowerment of women to take control of their own sexuality (Fitzgerald and Withers, 2011)
- Assertiveness and self-esteem interventions (Yacoub and Hall, 2008; Cambridge and Mellan, 2000)
- A role for advocacy services (Fitzgerald and Withers, 2011; McCarthy, 2009)

### *Support around specific issues or for specific groups*

- Education, support and advocacy specifically for women around contraception (McCarthy, 2009)
- A supportive forum or group for women or lesbians (Elderton and Jones, 2011)
- A supportive forum or group for people who cross dress (Elderton and Jones, 2011)

## **Summary**

It is clear from this review of the research that there has been a reasonable amount of research conducted in this area since 2000. The barriers identified are fairly consistent and have usually been identified in more than one study. However, most of the research has focused on identifying barriers and making recommendations rather than looking at what works to support people with learning disabilities to develop relationships.

## **SECTION B: Resources and Support Available**

### **Method**

A systematic search using identified search terms was conducted using Google and Social Care online. In addition the publications and resource sections of websites of key organisations were searched.

The search has focused on resources which are available to support individuals with learning disabilities to develop relationships and resources which support parents/carers and staff members to enable and support people with learning disabilities to develop relationships. Resources which are aimed at teachers and school based sex education have not been included here. We have aimed to primarily include free resources and resources that are available online, but where resources do cost we have highlighted this. The list below is not exhaustive and several of the links signpost on to other resources or sources of information.

The resource available for this search means that we have not been able to assess the quality of the information listed here and NDTi does not take responsibility for the information provided.

### **Information for people with learning disabilities**

This easy read booklet produced by Dorset People First and Dorset Primary Care Trust contains information about relationships and sex:

[http://peoplefirstdorset.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/love\\_sex\\_you.pdf](http://peoplefirstdorset.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/love_sex_you.pdf)

Lanarkshire Sexual Health website has links to free easy read sexual health leaflets:

<http://www.lanarkshiresexualhealth.org/resources/?category=31>

The Easyhealth website has a section with links to accessible leaflets on sex and relationships. Some of these leaflets cost:

[http://www.easyhealth.org.uk/listing/sex-and-relationships-\(leaflets\)](http://www.easyhealth.org.uk/listing/sex-and-relationships-(leaflets))

Change produce a range of accessible booklets including on friendships and relationships, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans and sex and masturbation. There is a cost to all of these:

<http://www.changepeople.org/shop/products/friendships-and-relationships>

4YP Bristol website provides easy read information on sex and relationships for people with learning disabilities:

<https://www.4ypbristol.co.uk/learning-difficulties/>

The Norah Fry Research Centre has produced photo-stories aimed at people with learning disabilities around same sex relationship issues:

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sps/migrated/documents/jan.pdf>

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sps/migrated/documents/phil.pdf>

### **Dating support for people with learning disabilities**

Mencap have produced an easy read guide on dating:

[https://www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Dating%20tips\\_factsheet.pdf](https://www.mencap.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Dating%20tips_factsheet.pdf)

BILD have a section on their website with links to information on dating and dating support:

<http://www.bild.org.uk/information/relationships/dating-to-sex/>

There are a number of dating agencies for people with learning disabilities:

<http://www.luv2meetu.com/>

<http://www.starsinthesky.co.uk/>

<http://www.heartventure.com/>

<http://www.matesndates.org.uk/>

Including a dating agency for people with learning disabilities from Asian communities:

<http://www.luv2meetu.com/hum-tum.html>

And a dating agency for people with learning disabilities who identify as LGBT:

<http://www.starsinthesky.co.uk/105/lgbt>

Some groups which have been set up to support people with learning disabilities who identify as LGBT or want to explore their sexuality:

<http://www.matesndates.org.uk/mingle/>

<http://lgbt.foundation/get-support/Groups/other-groups-we-support/better-things/>

<http://www.vasa.org.uk/news/entry/new-lgbt-group-for-adults-with-a-learning-disability>



## Leaflets and guides for staff and parents

This leaflet published by Fife Council and NHS Fife has been designed for staff to use with people with learning disabilities. It covers a number of subjects including relationships, privacy, staying safe and confidentiality:

[http://publications.1fife.org.uk/uploadfiles/publications/c64\\_MakingChoiceKeepingSafe\(Fife\)easyread.pdf](http://publications.1fife.org.uk/uploadfiles/publications/c64_MakingChoiceKeepingSafe(Fife)easyread.pdf)

This booklet published by NHS Forth Valley is for parents, carers or anyone involved in supporting a child or young person with a learning disability through growing up and puberty including sections on feelings and attraction and sex:

[http://www.centalsexualhealth.org/media/7961/preparing\\_for\\_puberty-1-.pdf](http://www.centalsexualhealth.org/media/7961/preparing_for_puberty-1-.pdf)

These photo stories follow four couples in different types of relationships, working through how the relationship develops, getting to know each other, risks and sexual health information. They come with guidance notes for educators and carers to use on an individual basis or within small groups:

<http://www.centalsexualhealth.org/professionals/photostories/>

This toolkit produced by the Highland Learning Disabilities and Relationships Group is for staff or parents/carers to use with people with learning disabilities and covers many aspects of relationships:

<http://www.nhshighland.scot.nhs.uk/Publications/Documents/HLDRG%20Staff%20Carer%20Toolkit%20for%20people%20with%20learning%20disabilities%20and%20or%20autism%20spectrum%20condition%20Part1.pdf>

This workbook published by NHS Forth Valley is designed to assist teachers, parents, carers and other professionals in delivering sexual health, relationship and parenthood education to young people with a learning disability:

<http://www.centalsexualhealth.org/media/7591/ASN-workbook.pdf>

FPA produce some “Talking Together” workbooks for parents to use with children with learning disabilities. There is a cost for these:

<http://www.fpa.org.uk/shop/12/product-list>

This resource published by the Norah Fry Research Centre is for staff to use to support people with learning disabilities to explore issues around homophobia and heterosexism:

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/sps/migrated/documents/challenging.pdf>

## Websites

The BILD website has a large section of information and resources about relationships including sections on sex, dating and sexual health. This contains links to other websites, resources and leaflets. Some of these cost:

<http://www.bild.org.uk/information/relationships/>

## Review of resources

This review of sexual health and relationships resources for people with learning disabilities aimed at professionals published by Health Scotland is useful as the resources have been peer reviewed but it should be noted that it may be a bit dated as it was published in 2008, and most of the resources cost:

<http://www.healthscotland.com/uploads/documents/11496-AReviewOfResourcesforPeopleWithLearningDisabilities.pdf>

## Training

There are a number of organisations that provide training for people with learning disabilities around sex and relationships:

<http://www.changepeople.info/training-services/sex-and-relationships-training/>

<http://www.peoplefirstmerseyside.co.uk/training/relationships/>

<http://www.fpa.org.uk/specialist-sexual-health-services-people-learning-disabilities/sexual-health-and-relationships-training>

There are a number of organisations that provide training for staff working with people with learning disabilities:

<https://www.ldw.org.uk/training-and-events/our-training-courses/personal-relationships-and-sexuality.aspx#.VzMGsoQrLIU>

<http://www.talkinglife.co.uk/products-page/learning-difficulties-courses/tl0098-sexuality-personal-relationships/>

<http://thesmartenterprise.co.uk/disability-training-surrey/training-programme/lets-talk-about-sex-and-learning-disabilities/>

<http://www.respond.org.uk/what-we-do/training/>

<http://www.fpa.org.uk/specialist-sexual-health-services-people-learning-disabilities/sexual-health-and-relationships-training>

The FPA website also says it can provide training for parents.

It should be noted that these training courses are very likely to cost.

### **Policy and legal guidance**

The Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland has produced guidance for professionals and carers when considering rights and risks in sexual relationships involving people with a mental disorder including a learning disability. It should be noted that as this is produced in Scotland some sections relate specifically to Scottish law:

[http://www.mwcscot.org.uk/media/51782/updated\\_consenting\\_adults.pdf](http://www.mwcscot.org.uk/media/51782/updated_consenting_adults.pdf)

There are several examples of policies on sex and relationships available on the internet. Here are examples from Lothian, Gloucestershire and Brighton and Hove:

[http://viascotland.org.uk/webfm\\_send/182/making-choices-keeping-safe.pdf](http://viascotland.org.uk/webfm_send/182/making-choices-keeping-safe.pdf)

<http://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=35612&p=0>

<http://www.brightpart.org/documents/healthy/Personal%20Relationships%20and%20Sexuality%20Policydraft%205%20final%204%209%20083.pdf>

FPA can provide support to organisations to develop a sexuality and relationships policy:

<http://www.fpa.org.uk/training-courses/expert-training-and-consultancy-learning-disability-sex-sexuality-relationships>

### **Summary**

This search has shown that although one of the barriers identified in the evidence review was a lack of information and training, there are a range of resources available, a number of which are free to access. It should be stressed however, that as we have not been able to assess the information found either for quality or for breadth of coverage it may be that there are gaps in particular topics covered in the information, or geographical gaps in availability of dating agencies or training.

## CONCLUSION

This review has highlighted that people with learning disabilities face a number of barriers to developing sexual or romantic relationships, in particular:

- **Attitudinal barriers** – the attitudes of parents, staff, teachers and indeed wider society can be a significant barrier to people with learning disabilities developing relationships. There is evidence of a resistance to people with learning disabilities having relationships at all, or a view that they should be limited. The evidence found that there was a particular issue around conservative attitudes towards non-heterosexual relationships. Furthermore there was evidence to suggest that the conservative attitudes of others influenced how people with learning disabilities felt about sex and their own sexuality.
- **Barriers related to the support provided** – where attitudinal barriers can be overcome, people with learning disabilities face further barriers either related to the support and information provided to them, or the support and information provided to the people who support them. Limitations of sex education were highlighted as well as limited accessible and available information for both individuals and parents/staff. There are also practical issues around facilitating a relationship such as a lack of private space, limited support to go out and meet people and difficulties using transport. Additionally, it is clear that staff and parents struggle in their role – in negotiating the balance between protection from abuse or exploitation and enabling and supporting relationships. This is exacerbated by a lack of policies around relationships and sex and a lack of clarity over legal issues.
- **Additional barriers for specific groups** – the evidence also highlighted the different experiences for men, women and LGBT people. This includes particular issues around contraception and control for women, and the dual issue of LGBT people with learning disabilities facing both a lack of acceptance in the learning disability community and a lack of acceptance in the gay community.

Although a lack of information was highlighted as a barrier in the research evidence, the review of the resources available found that in fact there are some resources freely available on the internet. These include easy read/accessible websites, leaflets and photo stories for people with learning disabilities and information, guides and toolkits aimed at parents and staff. While there is a cost for some of these, there are a number which are free to access. There is also some information particularly aimed at providing support around dating, as well as what appears to be a growing number of dating agencies for people with learning disabilities. There is some limited information on legal issues and several examples of policies that a number of areas have adopted. Finally, there are a number of organisations providing training around sex and relationships aimed at people with learning disabilities, staff and parents.

From conducting the review of the research therefore:

- we know that people with learning disabilities face barriers to developing positive and fulfilling relationships; and
- we have a good idea of what these barriers are.

From conducting the review of the resources available:

- we know that there are resources available to support individuals, their parents, staff and services.

What this review has **not** told us is:

- a) the **extent** to which the resources, training and support are being used;
- b) the **quality** of the resources and training available; and
- c) the **impact** of these resources on people with learning disabilities and their relationships.

### Recommendation for further work

In response to the findings from this review we think there is a need for further research or evaluation which focuses on “what works” to support people with learning disabilities to develop positive and fulfilling sexual and romantic relationships. For example:

- What is the impact of having access to easy read information on the relationships that people with learning disabilities form?
- To what extent do guides and toolkits aimed at parents and staff lead to more positive relationships for people with learning disabilities?
- What is the impact of having a relationship policy in place?
- Does training for individuals, parents or staff lead to more positive relationships for people with learning disabilities?

If you are aware of any research or evaluation which has looked at any of these questions we would love to hear about it - please contact Naomi Harflett, NDTi's Research Manager at [naomi.harflett@ndti.org.uk](mailto:naomi.harflett@ndti.org.uk)

Or if you are interested in working with us to explore these questions, please get in touch with Sue Turner, NDTi's Learning Disability Lead on [sue.turner@ndti.org.uk](mailto:sue.turner@ndti.org.uk)

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