

Summary

The right to a relationship: Addressing the barriers that people with learning disabilities face in developing and sustaining intimate and sexual relationships

About the DRILL Programme

DRILL (Disability Research on Independent Living and Learning) was an innovative 5 year, UK wide programme led by disabled people, for disabled people and funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

Launched in 2015, the programme was managed by a partnership of Disability Action Northern Ireland, Disability Rights UK, Disability Wales and Inclusion Scotland.

The aim of the programme was to build better evidence about approaches which enable disabled people to achieve independent living. The findings from the projects it funded can be used to inform future provision across a wide range of policy areas, and give a greater voice to disabled people in decisions which affect them.

This is one of a series of summaries of the project supported by DRILL. Final reports, toolkits and summaries of all the projects are available from the DRILL website at www.drilluk.org.uk.

Overview of the project

This project looked at the barriers people with learning disabilities experience in developing and sustaining sexual relationships.

It looked at the policy and practice changes needed to address these barriers.

Approach

The project carried out focus groups with 53 people with learning disabilities. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with 7 people with learning disabilities, 3 local authority managers and 2 service providers.

An online survey was also conducted, with 87 respondents; 40 of which had learning disabilities, 17 were family carers, 22 support staff and 8 commissioners.

Findings

People with learning disabilities had limited opportunities to meet potential partners. Some events run by and for people with learning disabilities were available, but there was a lack of support to get to these.

Some support staff and family members made it very difficult for people to be in, and stay in, a relationship. Not all services had clear policies on how to facilitate people's relationships.

There was a lack of support to go out, go on dates and visit partners, or potential partners.

There was a lack of knowledge and skills from support staff, who were often not given training.

People with learning disabilities have limited knowledge about sexuality and keeping safe. There are accessible resources, but people are not often aware of them.

Unsupportive friends and/or housemates can make it difficult for people to be in a relationship.

A lack of money to go out, or to visit partners, and to go on dates was an issue.

Services don't usually see intimate relationships as a priority.

Austerity and cuts to services often mean that people do not get the support they need to facilitate intimate relationships.

Findings (continued)

Sometimes services do not fully understand the legislation around capacity and consent, and providers want to avoid taking any risks.

Recommendations

The project outlined many recommendations, some of which are listed here. All recommendations are included in the full report, which is linked below.

- There should be a more coordinated approach in supporting couples to ensure their needs, as individuals and as a couple, are met
- Relationships should be part of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). They should set out how and when young people are going to get sex and relationship education
- Staff should have ongoing training in supporting people around intimate relationships
- Adults with learning disabilities should have access to sex education and relationship training
- More information should be provided to and by services about the rights of people with learning disabilities.
- Sexual health and family planning services should be more accessible for people with learning disabilities; and offer information in accessible formats
- Social events and activities designed for people with learning disabilities should be held and promoted
- Work should be done with organisations to review their policies on how they support people with intimate relationships
- A charter about people with learning disabilities' rights to have sexual relationships should be developed.

Final report

[The right to a relationship: Addressing the barriers that people with learning disabilities face in developing and sustaining intimate and sexual relationships](#)

Please click on report name to read the full report.

Project partners

**National Development
Team for Inclusion**



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