

INFORMATION SHEET

Difficult sexual behaviour amongst men and boys with learning disabilities



making a difference
to the lives of people with
severe learning disabilities

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This information sheet gives some suggestions about understanding and responding to difficult sexual behaviour. It is specifically about the behaviour of men and boys with learning disabilities who are more likely to present challenges in this area than girls or women with learning disabilities. A wide range of issues are described – not all will be relevant to what is a very diverse group of individuals. It is largely drawn from the training package: ***Men with learning disabilities who sexually abuse: working together to develop response-ability*** co-written with Hilary Brown (Pavilion, 2005).

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www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/cbfresources.

What is difficult?

All sex can be difficult. What is difficult for some people can be seen as positive by other people. Cultural values and religion make it hard to agree on what is acceptable and what is not. On top of this it is not unusual for any sexual expression shown by people with learning disabilities to be seen as a problem. Rarely is it celebrated as a normal aspect of development.

This information sheet looks at areas where the sexual behaviour of a boy or man with learning disabilities may be a problem for himself or to other people. It makes suggestions for the kinds of support which could be offered.

Masturbation

Almost all men masturbate and so we should expect this also for men with learning disabilities. Some cultures however do not value this sexual expression. Often people try to stop men with learning disabilities from masturbating. The intention here is to help boys and men with learning disabilities feel good about masturbation together with having an understanding of privacy.

Many men with learning disabilities have difficulties with masturbation. These include:

Organic causes:

There are specific sexual issues for some syndromes. For example, men with Down's syndrome often find it difficult to have erections and to ejaculate. Men with Prader-Willi syndrome have under-developed sexual organs.

Difficulties caused by medication:

The known side effects of many anti-epileptic and psychotropic drugs include causing problems with erection and ejaculation.

Physical difficulties:

Physical disability can make it hard for some men to masturbate. For some men there may be practical difficulties of touching their penis because they are unable to remove clothes or incontinence pads.

Some men with learning disabilities are thought to become anxious because of difficulties with masturbation. It is hard to confirm this link. Regardless, men can be given support to masturbate. This could include: reviewing medication, giving ideas on technique as a form of sex education (including suggesting the use of a lubricant), helping men access their own bodies by giving them private time with clothing and/or incontinence pads removed.

When asked about masturbating, men with learning disabilities generally feel bad about it and do not think other men do it. To make men feel less guilty (about what may be their only sexual experiences) try to find ways to help them understand it is normal and healthy. One of the most powerful is for valued men in their life to say they themselves masturbate.

General work on masturbation which could happen during school years could include teaching:

Masturbation is good. This may be done by showing pictures / video's to help men understand the normality of masturbation.

Where are good / private places to masturbate? Identify private and public places. For some men this will require responding immediately when they try to masturbate in public. It may involve taking them to a private place at that time.

Day centres and schools often say they are places where people should not masturbate. This is unhelpful as many adolescent boys will masturbate alone in toilet cubicles during their breaks. Some individuals with learning disabilities may not cope with being unable to masturbate for long periods. Rather than constantly trying to stop a man masturbating publicly (and so exposing himself inappropriately to other people) it can be more effective to give the man some private time.

Look for patterns in masturbation. Often men do it when other activities offer little interest. For example, a man may choose to masturbate during a maths lesson because he is bored by the class. However, he may not masturbate during other activities (such as playing a game) because he is interested in this activity. This may show a man is making some choice about when to masturbate. Where this is the case, it should be possible to impose some boundaries on time and place.

When men have an understanding or privacy and are choosing to continue to masturbate in public, it is important to treat the behaviour as unacceptable. This would include helping the men understand how serious it is.

For some men with limited communication, any teaching about technique would need to be very intimate, for example guiding their hands. This should never be done without a wide consultation. It happens extremely rarely but there may be a place for this, particularly if the man is causing himself physical injury or appears very distressed.

Unwanted sexual contact with other people

Some men may expose themselves or touch other people sexually when this is not wanted. Typically this involves other people with learning disabilities, female staff and women and children in the general public. Irrespective of the men's understanding of what they are doing, it should be treated as both unacceptable and serious. Unfortunately such behaviour tends only to be taken seriously when children or women in the general public are involved. There is a danger of men with learning disabilities learning they can *get away with it* with some people.

Work with men should try to help them understand the seriousness of the behaviour. For many this will mean ensuring there are meaningful consequences to what they have done. For some it will mean putting restrictions on their opportunities to minimise the risk of further abusive behaviour. This could include having all male staff, or increased levels of supervision. In England and Wales, decisions to put restrictions on a man with learning disabilities aged 16 or over must comply with the Mental Capacity Act 2005. Parents of boys under 16 have the power to impose restrictions.

Sexual contact with other people with learning disabilities

Attitudes to men with learning disabilities having any sexual contact with other people with learning disabilities vary extremely. Some people will want to stop any sexual contact regardless, while others will see it positively without considering carefully the consent of the people involved. Responses may also differ depending on whether the contact is with another man or a woman. This can make it very difficult for men to understand what is and isn't acceptable. The focus of support and responses should be on the consent of the people involved – whether this is for hand holding, cuddling or more intimate sexual contact.

The Sexual Offences Act 2003 sets out when sexual acts are a crime. It recognises that people with learning disabilities can be particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. The age of consent is 16 regardless of the genders of the people involved.

Different sexual contact requires different levels of understanding. So some people with learning disabilities may be able to consent to hugging (with no physical risks) but not intimate sexual acts (with risks the person may not be able to understand even with support).

When trying to establish the relative consent of the people involved consider:

- Who initiates the contact?
- Does the person have the skills and power to say no?
- Is there awareness of the intentions of the people involved? A woman with learning disabilities may believe a man is her boyfriend when the man has no interest in such a relationship.

Particularly because of the vulnerability of people with learning disabilities, a lack of resistance should not be seen as consent. Where there is doubt about the ability of an adult with learning disabilities to consent to sexual contact a formal capacity assessment should be undertaken. There has been some guidance from the Court of Protection about what this should cover (see D Borough Council & AB [2011] EWHC 101 (COP)).

Sometimes it will be necessary to draw clear boundaries about what touch is and is not acceptable and to intervene where necessary. For example, to decide it is in the best interests of two individuals with severe learning disabilities to be able to hold hands but not to sit on each other's laps.

Often people with learning disabilities *get into trouble* for any sexual contact which can undermine their understanding of consent and abuse. Sex may happen in the toilets of day centres and social clubs. Thus people with learning disabilities learn to be secretive about sex (very different to being private) which can enhance their vulnerability to abuse. Where people have the capacity to consent to sexual relationships it is important to support and value sexual opportunities. This could include ensuring adults have double beds and not putting unnecessary obstacles in people's way to have overnight guests.

Difficult sexual behaviour and the possibility of the man having been sexually abused

It is sometimes assumed that if a man with learning disabilities is showing some kind of abusive/ unacceptable sexual behaviour he has been sexually abused himself. There is little clear evidence for this link. That said we know men and boys with learning disabilities are at increased risk of sexual abuse than other men and so there needs to be consideration to this having happened.

Where men are displaying unexpected sexual behaviour it is worth asking how did they know to do this? Men with learning disabilities have fewer opportunities to learn about sex than other men so may be more dependent on learning from experience. Ask the question does he know this because it has happened to him?

Sexual suppressant medication.

Medication may be suggested to respond to difficult sexual behaviour. This should be strongly resisted because of the lack of evidence it is effective with men with learning disabilities together with having very worrying side effects (for example, breast development).

Access to a sexual partner

Another common suggestion when a man with learning disabilities has unacceptable or abusive sexual behaviour is this would be resolved if he had a sexual relationship (typically with a woman). There is no evidence of this being helpful. Consideration should instead be given to the risk of any sexual partner being sexually exploited.

Access to prostitutes is sometimes similarly unhelpfully suggested. The law is clear that carers should not support men to access any sexual opportunities where they are unable to make their own informed choices about this.

Pornography and other sexual stimuli.

Sex has several dimensions for men. Firstly, there is the physical side of rubbing the penis or other sensitive parts of the body. There may be an emotional aspect to the relationship with another person involved. There may also be sexual fantasy involved, for example through the use of pornography. Fantasy may play a smaller part in the sexual lives of men with learning disabilities compared to other men. This is because fantasy is a cognitive activity. That said some men with learning disabilities use pornography. Their access to this may however be very limited (e.g. because of the difficulties of buying this independently or using the internet). They may however have access to arousing images which are more easily available, for example, holiday brochures or TV magazines.

It is sometimes suggested for men with learning disabilities who have problem sexual behaviour to be supported to access pornography. The suggestion is it would *relieve their sexual frustration*. There is no evidence this would help. Instead it risks reinforcing the idea of other people being sexual objects.

One possible line to draw is accepting men's use of legal materials they access independently and use privately, but not providing men or boys with learning disabilities with pornography.

Very occasionally men with learning disabilities appear to be aroused by things other than adult women or men. This includes images of children but could also be specific objects or textures. Care needs to be taken in thinking the men's interests are so strange or unusual because men with learning disabilities may be less able to keep their interests secret (other men don't, for example, have people checking the contents of their bedrooms). Whatever is thought of these varied sexual interests, we know they are extremely resistant to change (for example, by the failed attempts to turn gay men straight). Therefore rather than trying to change a man's interests, work may instead need to focus on avoiding them having a negative impact on him or other people, for example, by ensuring his interests are kept private. Specialist support should be sought if it is believed a man is sexually interested in children. Please see the Organisations list below for further information about specialist support.

Resources

Thompson D. & Brown H. (2005) Men with learning disabilities who sexually abuse: working together to develop response-ability. Pavilion Tel 01273 623222
www.pavpub.com

McCarthy, M & Thompson, D. (2007) Sex and the 3 R's – A sex education package for people with learning disabilities. Pavilion Tel 01273 623222
<http://www.pavpub.com/p-85-sex-and-the-3rs.aspx>

Lindsay W. (2002) Research and literature on sex offenders with intellectual and development disabilities. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities* 46 (supplement 1) 74-85.

McCarthy, M & Thompson, D. (2010). *Sexuality and Learning Disabilities: A handbook*. Pavilion Tel 01273 623222
<http://www.pavpub.com/p-103-sexuality-and-learning-disabilities.aspx>

Now they are Growing Up: A series of booklets for parents of people with learning disabilities covering masturbation. Available from Oak Field School and Sports College
Tel 01159153265

<http://www.oakfieldsportscollege.org.uk/uploads/BodyWorks.pdf>

Stewart D. & Bustard S. (2011) *Living your Life: A sex education and personal development resource for special educational needs*. www.brook.org.uk

You, Your Body and Sex, Jason's Private World & Kylie's Private World. Three DVD resources for working with people with learning disabilities.

www.lifesupportproductions.co.uk

Organisations

The **Ann Craft Trust** supports people with learning disabilities who may be abused.
Tel: 0115 9515400

www.anncrafttrust.org

Respond can provide support for people with learning disabilities who are either the victims or perpetrators of abuse.

Tel 0808 808 0700

www.respond.org.uk

The **Lucy Faithfull Foundation** works with perpetrators of child sexual abuse and has experience working with men with learning disabilities.

Tel: 0808 1000 900

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

The **National Clinical Assessment and Treatment Service** provide a service to children and young people up to the age of 21 where concerns exist about sexually harmful or abusive behaviour.

Tel: 020 7428 1500

www.nspcc.org.uk

Local support

Help may be available from the local community team for people with learning disabilities, social workers, community nurses, psychologists and psychiatrists variously have an interest / experience working on sexual issues.

About the Author

David Thompson has a wide experience of working with people with learning disabilities. He spent over ten years working directly with men with learning disabilities on sexual issues and this was the focus of his PhD.

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The Challenging Behaviour Foundation

We are the charity for people with severe learning disabilities who display challenging behaviour. We make a difference to the lives of children and adults across the UK by:

- Providing information about challenging behaviour
- Organising peer support for family carers and professionals
- Giving information and support by phone or email
- Running workshops which reduce challenging behaviour

To access our information and support, call 01634 838739, email info@thecbf.org.uk, or visit our website: www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk

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Or email us to get involved at support_us@thecbf.org.uk