

Relationships and sex¹

Vision Statement



People with a learning disability have a right to develop loving relationships² and must be free to express their sexual identity. Adults and young people³ with a learning disability also have the right to have consensual sex⁴. Personal and sexual relationships can bring happiness, fulfilment, companionship and a greater sense of freedom to the lives of people with a learning disability.

Our vision is a future where the personal and sexual relationships of people with a learning disability are accepted and barriers are removed. We want to see individuals supported to have positive, healthy, informed and safe relationships.

Current situation

Many people with a learning disability say that relationships are important to them⁵. Yet, only 3% of people with a learning disability live as a couple, compared to 70% of the general adult population⁶.

People with a learning disability face various barriers to having personal and sexual relationships. Meeting people is more difficult and social isolation is common. And the balance between risk and rights for people with a learning disability engaging in intimate

or sexual relationships is often biased towards restricting their choices, both within family settings and other living arrangements.



Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people with a learning disability may also face 'double discrimination', with their sexual rights denied on the basis of their learning disability, as well as their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The current social attitudes towards people with a learning disability restricts their freedom and privacy to have intimate or sexual relationships. These attitudes also contribute to the lack of inclusive sex and relationships education currently available to people with a learning disability.

What we want

People with a learning disability should be able to fulfil their right to develop positive, healthy, informed and safe intimate or sexual relationships. Mencap believe that for this to happen:

- people with a learning disability must be supported to meet other people and form relationships
- people with a learning disability, as well as family members and staff carers, must have access to high quality, accessible sex education and support to ensure they feel empowered to make informed choices or to support these choices
- people with a learning disability must be allowed to lawfully express their sexuality and to have intimate relationships
- risks around safety and abuse must be balanced against the rights and aspirations of the individual to form intimate relationships

1. Mencap's position on relationships & sex is relevant to people with a learning disability who have the capacity to consent
2. UNCRPD, Article 23
3. This refers to young people aged 16 and over
4. European Convention of Human Rights, Article 8; Human Rights Act 1988
5. Focus groups for Mencap strategy
6. Emerson, E., Malam, S., Davies, I. and Spencer, K. (2005) Adults with Learning Disabilities in England 2003/4

Last reviewed: July 2016
Next review: July 2019