

# Sexuality and relationships<sup>1</sup>

## Vision statement



Just like everybody else, people with a learning disability are sexual beings and have sexual rights which need to be affirmed and defended.

People with a learning disability have a right to explore and express their sexual identity and to develop relationships as they wish<sup>2</sup>. For adults and young people<sup>3</sup>, this includes sexual experiences and consensual sex<sup>4</sup>. Personal and sexual relationships can bring happiness, fulfilment, companionship, love and a greater sense of freedom to the lives of people with a learning disability.

Our vision is a future where the sexual identity, and personal and sexual relationships of people with a learning disability, are recognised, accepted and respected. We want individuals to be empowered to have positive, healthy, informed and safe relationships.

### Current situation

Many people with a learning disability say that relationships are important to them<sup>5</sup>. Yet, only 3% of people with a learning disability live as a couple, compared to 70% of the general adult population<sup>6</sup>.



Many people with a learning disability would like to pursue intimate or sexual relationships, but they face multiple barriers to developing such relationships. Meeting

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people is often more difficult; cuts to social care and other social opportunities means social isolation is common.

In addition, there is a lack of accessible and relevant sex and relationships education, as well as appropriate support. This means that many do not have the skills, knowledge and opportunities to break the cycle of isolation and to protect themselves from the risks they may encounter.

Furthermore, a lack of privacy is also a significant barrier to people with a learning disability exploring and understanding their sexuality and to having sexual relationships. In addition, 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.

People with a learning disability express a range of sexual orientations and gender identities including, but by no means limited to, those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+). This intersectionality can result in '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 often result in them being seen as extremely vulnerable. This can restrict their freedom and privacy to explore their sexual identity and have intimate or sexual relationships.

## What we want

**People with a learning disability should have their sexuality rights recognised, accepted and respected – and 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 should be empowered to explore their own sexual identity and preferences.
- People with a learning disability should be empowered to have (or have access to) opportunities to meet others and form relationships if they wish.
- 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 safe and informed choices. In order to enable decision making, this information should be fully accessible and cover all aspects of sexual wellbeing and relationships.
- People with a learning disability must be allowed to express their sexuality and to have intimate relationships of their choosing.
- Assessments of the risks around safety and abuse must be balanced against the rights and aspirations of the individual to express their sexual identity and form intimate relationships if they wish.

1. Mencap's position on sexuality and relationships is relevant to all people with a learning disability. Being a sexual being is a human right that all people with a learning disability have'
2. World Health Organisation (2006; AAIDD 2008) UNCRPD, Article 23
3. This refers to young people aged 16 and over
4. European Convention of Human Rights, Article 8; Human Rights Act. See also, Article 12
5. Focus groups for Mencap strategy 1988
- 6 Emerson, E., Malam, S., Davies, I. and Spencer, K. (2005) Adults with Learning Disabilities in England 2003/4

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