



It's My Right!

fpa's Sexual Health Week

4-10 August 2008

Working with people with learning disabilities in the areas of sexuality, sexual health and sex and relationships. With Claire Fanstone, Training Manager, fpa.

People with learning disabilities have traditionally faced discrimination. Denying that a person with a learning disability is a sexual being is to treat them less fully as a person. Avoiding this area of work, for whatever reason, can contribute to the discrimination people with learning disabilities face. This is not only an ethical but a professional practice issue.

If service users cannot recognise what is non-consensual or abusive behaviour and consequently are unaware of their right to signal (verbally or otherwise) "No", they are at greater risk of being sexually abused.

It is essential that staff find ways of exploring appropriate public and private behaviour (for example, shows of affection, masturbation or seeking consent in relationships) to enable service users to understand their rights and the law.

Top tips for practitioners

New interactive CD-ROM for people with learning disabilities

A must have for every professional working with learning disabilities. *All about us* is a new CD-ROM from fpa for people with learning disabilities to assist their personal development and knowledge around sex, sexuality and relationships. Costing £19.99, *All about us* can be used by people on their own or with the support of a carer, parent or professional. Email fpadirect@fpa.org.uk.

Just starting out?

Supporting people with learning disabilities in this area is the same as supporting them to do most other things. Sometimes practitioners are reluctant to talk about issues to do with sex and relationships, because they don't know where to start or feel that they don't know enough themselves. Remember that you don't have to know everything – there are other organisations to help you.

www.me-and-us.co.uk www.growingandlearning.co.uk www.bild.org.uk www.elfrida.com

Mencap Learning Disability Helpline 0808 808 1111 www.mencap.org.uk

Worried about legal issues?

Sometimes legal issues can stop staff from carrying out this work. People think it is not okay to provide sex and relationships education because some people with learning disabilities do not have capacity to consent. It is always okay to educate people. *The Sexual Offences Act 2003* says it is illegal for people to be involved in sexual activity with people with learning disabilities who will never be able to consent and with people who are more susceptible to abuse. It is also illegal for any care worker to engage in sexual activity with anyone that they care for.

But this does not mean that you cannot provide education for people with learning disabilities. Remember that sex and relationships covers a wide range of subjects and topics, not just sexual activity. Think about some of the topics you could cover in your work:

Friendships
Relationships
Contraception and STIs
Body parts
Personal hygiene

Masturbation
Self awareness
The law
Communication
Pregnancy

Good and bad touch
Gender
Negotiation skills
Decision making
Sexual relationships

Puberty
Periods
Self image
Self esteem
Homosexuality

Legally, you can teach people about any of these areas. You should never make physical contact with a person when teaching them about masturbation, touch or sexual relationships. Demonstrators, explicit images and storyboards are fine to use with the client when appropriate. You should document what you use and why you are using it.

**For more information about the law read fpa's book *Learning disabilities, sex and the law*.
See: www.fpa.org.uk.**

Every organisation working with people with learning disabilities should have a policy that addresses sex and relationships. This protects both staff and people with learning disabilities. If your organisation does not have a policy it's difficult for you to feel supported in this work. You should talk to your line manager about this.

A good policy to have a look at is one produced by NHS Lothian. See www.mcks.scot.nhs.uk.

How to deliver information about sex and relationships

We know people learn more when they are having fun and when they feel that their needs are being met by the work being delivered. We would always recommend that you try to make your work experiential. This means that the people you are working with will learn through experiencing an activity or exercise with you. Work with people with learning disabilities often needs to be quite repetitive and you need to think about a structure for your sessions.

An old hand at this work?

There are many very experienced practitioners working in this area around the UK. We see examples of good practice wherever we go.

Teresa Day is a Health Promotion Specialist for Sexual Health and Learning Disabilities employed by the Isle of Wight NHS Primary Care Trust and has been recognised for her pioneering and innovative work helping people with learning disabilities to understand and cope with issues around their sexuality. She has developed a system called SHIELD (Sexual Health Innovative Education for Learning Disabilities) which provides a complete learning, teaching and support package for those who work with people with learning disabilities including health workers, teachers, social services staff, outreach staff, volunteers and clients. Teresa won the Learning Disability Nurse of the Year in the Royal College of Nursing and Nursing Standard Nurse Awards 2008.

If you want to discuss Teresa's work with her, her contact number is 01983 814287.

If you are an experienced practitioner you might be looking for some new ideas to inject some originality into your work. fpa offers some more advanced training courses looking at programme planning and delivery aimed at experienced practitioners. Visit: www.fpa.org.uk/training.

Contact

For more information about any of the learning disabilities work carried out by fpa contact Claire Fanstone on 0207 608 5277 or email clairef@fpa.org.uk.

For sales information on the *All about us* CD-ROM email fpadirect@fpa.org.uk.