INTERVIEWING PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

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Topics

• Intellectual Disability Rights Service (IDRS)
• Intellectual disability
• Identifying a person with intellectual disability
• Difficulties for people with intellectual disability relevant to interviews
• Interviewing a person with intellectual disability effectively
IDRS and its services

**IDRS** is a disability advocacy service and specialist community legal centre working with and for people with intellectual disability in NSW. Our services are:

- Legal advice, casework and referral
- Criminal Justice Support Network (CJSN)  
  - support at court and police stations
- Parents with Intellectual Disability Project  
  - care and protection work
- Education  
  - for client group and for legal and justice professionals
- Law reform and policy work; advocacy for systemic change
What is intellectual disability?

A disability that affects the way a person learns, understands and undertakes activities of everyday living. It is characterised by:

- IQ of 70 or below
- Limitations in at least 2 areas of ‘adaptive functioning’ including:
  - communication
  - self-care
  - home living
  - social skills
  - self direction
  - use of community resources
  - functional academic skills
  - health and safety
- Arises during the developmental period (under age 18)
- Lifelong, permanent condition; not treatable
IQ Score Distribution - Normal Distribution Curve

Image courtesy of quiz-curve.gif
# Levels of intellectual disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>IQ Range</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Borderline</td>
<td>71 - 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild*</td>
<td>50 - 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>35 – 50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>20 – 35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>less than 20</td>
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* Around 85% of people with intellectual disability
  
  - ‘mild’ is misleading and suggests the disability is insignificant or minimal in its effects.
Causes of intellectual disability

For many the cause is unknown, but some causes include:

- Chromosomal or genetic anomaly, e.g. Down Syndrome
- Problems during pregnancy, e.g. rubella, drug or alcohol use
- Difficulties at birth, e.g. extreme prematurity, brain damage from inadequate oxygen supply, etc
- Environmental causes, e.g. lack of health care
- Physical causes, e.g. acquired brain injury prior to age 18
## Mental illness and intellectual disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intellectual Disability</th>
<th>Mental Illness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low IQ (lower than average intelligence)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Person often in average or above range of intelligence</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lifelong, permanent condition, not ‘treatable’</td>
<td>Highly treatable, often episodic, can be temporary or long-term condition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Present at birth or during childhood (below age 18)</td>
<td>Often begins in adolescence or early adulthood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primarily affects thinking and learning</td>
<td>Primarily affects perception and emotion</td>
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Identifying intellectual disability

Indicators a person might have intellectual disability:

• Self-identification as having a learning difficulty
• Receives the disability support pension
• Attended a special school as a child
• Works in a supported workplace
• Lives in a group home
• Slow communication
• Difficulty reading and writing
• NSW: receives support from Ageing, Disability & Home Care
Identifying intellectual disability

Best assessed by a psychologist with relevant experience

Options:

• Ask the person directly
• Ask other people
• Ask other questions
• Refer to an appropriate professional for assessment
• Refer to an agency that can facilitate an assessment

Appropriate course depends on the particular case
Intellectual disability affects everyone differently

The effects of the disability and therefore the person’s abilities will depend on many things:

• Level of disability or IQ
• Personality
• Education
• Family and professional support
• Social support and network
Possible Areas of Difficulty

• Receptive and expressive communication
• Reading and comprehension
• Long, unusual or complicated words
• Abstract concepts eg time, distance
• Higher level thinking eg irony, euphemisms, metaphors
• Sequencing
• Adapting to new situations
Possible Areas of Difficulty

• Appropriate social behaviour
• Impulse control
• Interpreting verbal and non-verbal cues
• Problem solving
• Concentration / attention span
• Over-ready compliance
Interviewing Effectively

General Points

• Find out in advance the person’s communication and support needs and make reasonable adjustments

• Interview in person wherever possible

• Respect the person and make no assumptions about abilities

• Talk to the person, not at them or through others

• Explain things slowly

• Use simple language and short sentences

• Deal with one idea at a time
Interviewing effectively

Create a favourable environment
• Avoid loud or busy environments
• Minimise disruptions eg phone calls
• Allocate more time and allow regular breaks

Body language
• Relaxed body language
• Maintain eye contact (unless culturally inappropriate) and do not obscure your face when speaking
• Be aware of your non-verbal cues eg frowns, shrugs, nods

To start
• Build rapport
• Establish ground rules about checking understanding regularly
• Focus on what the person has to do
• Let the person tell the story in their own words and time, first
Interviewing effectively

Listening

• Be patient, to maintain trust

• Inconsistencies or incorrect statements may indicate memory problems rather than deliberate falsehoods

• Agitation may be due to frustration at not understanding

• Allow free recall – then clarify

• Allow more time than usual for responses to your questions

• If you have difficulty understanding, repeat what you do understand and let the person’s reaction guide you.
Interviewing effectively

Questioning

• Keep questions open and non-directive

• Avoid double negatives and compound questions

• Clarify as much as necessary whether questions you ask are about the event time or now

• Seek specific information by:
  - asking for a comparison or demonstration
  - asking the person to relate the information to something known
  - asking client to relate the information to another event or situation
Interviewing effectively

Facilitating

- Pen and paper for diagrams / pictures
- Permission to say ‘rude’ words – eg about sexual assault

Checking understanding

- Do not assume the person will tell you if they don’t understand
- Check understanding by asking the person to explain back in their own words – do not ask “do you understand?”
- Make sure the person knows you are checking to make sure you have explained well enough
Interviewing effectively

Reinforcement

• Reinforce the important information
• Write down the main points – keep it short

Documents

• Size of print should be 14 or 16 point
• Font should be easy to read eg Comic Sans

Review and Correction

• Provide opportunity to review information and correct errors
Interviewing effectively

Use a support person

A support person can:

- Help you adjust your communication
- Help the person to stay calm
- Explain things clearly to the person

Follow up

If relevant and possible, follow up afterwards to remind the person of things (s)he has to do
Support Persons

Criminal Justice Matters in NSW

• For people with intellectual disability who are accused, victims or witnesses of crime:

  Criminal Justice Support Network
  Tel:  1300 665 908

Interviews with Victoria Police

• For people with a cognitive disability or mental illness who are accused, victims or witnesses of crime:

  Independent Third Person Program
  Tel:  1300 309 337
Support Persons

Criminal Justice Matters in Qld

• For accused persons with disability:
  
  Justice Support Program
  Tel: 0422 039 258

For Other Matters

• Local disability advocacy services – for referrals

• People with Disability Australia (PWD) – for referrals
  Tel: 1800 442 015

• An appropriate person in the life of the person with disability
IDRS Contact Details

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