

Training can help people with intellectual disabilities better identify abusive situations, study finds

January 29 2021, by Owen Wachter



A study of a VCU-led intervention finds it helps people with intellectual and developmental disabilities better discriminate between healthy and unhealthy relationships. Credit: Virginia Commonwealth University

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities experience sexual assault, abuse, violence and are victims of crime at exponentially higher rates than the typically developing population. Yet there are few abuse prevention interventions designed for people with disabilities.

The [Partnership for People with Disabilities](#), part of Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Education, has been working with a team from the VCU School of Social Work to change that through an instructional intervention called Leadership for Empowerment and Abuse Prevention. A new study finds that the intervention is improving participants' ability to discriminate between healthy and unhealthy relationships, and providing them a greater understanding of how to take action in unhealthy situations.

Parthy Dinora, Ph.D., interim executive director at the partnership and principal investigator on the study, "Testing the Efficacy of a Healthy Relationships Training Intervention for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities," said that very few abuse prevention interventions are evidence-based, indicating that the practical applications of the study findings are significant.

"Participants demonstrated an increased ability to describe abuse and were more prepared to tell someone that they trust when confronted with an unhealthy situation," she said. "The entire team saw these as critical skills for addressing potential abusive situations."

The study's [intervention](#) was taught by a trainer with a disability and a co-trainer. The curriculum was designed with input from people with [disabilities](#), as well as experts in the areas of health, domestic violence and [sexual assault](#), [social services](#), disability inclusion and special educators. Results indicated that participants significantly improved their ability to identify scenarios that were abusive or exploitative, with the strongest improvement occurring even three months after the training

concluded.

"I'm really proud to be a part of this project," said Casey Leon, a LEAP trainer who has over 20 years of experience supporting people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. "Not only are you training people to speak up for themselves, but you're reinforcing that their feelings matter. That has a significant impact. People continue to talk about it for months afterwards and connect to the empowering and affirming messages of the content."

The study, which was funded by the Department of Justice's Office on Violence Against Women, has reached over 200 adults with intellectual and [developmental disabilities](#) through 15 disability support agencies in central Virginia. Even though the Department of Justice funding is ending, the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health & Developmental Services has awarded a one-year contract to continue the training.

Rose Sutton, a trainer with a disability, said the program has made a huge impact on her and her family personally.

"I was raised in a time when talking about relationships was a private, behind-closed-doors matter," Sutton said. "As a LEAP trainer, I've become more confident in myself. We openly discuss body part names, and private and public spaces. We emphasize that everyone deserves respect, and that you can say 'no.'" I've even used this curriculum for my special-needs teens, to help them learn what healthy relationships are, as well as what constitutes an unhealthy relationship."

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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