
Skills for Support (January 2005 – May 2007)

‘It is possible to be in control of your life, with good support.’

People with learning disabilities are increasingly taking up direct payments, and employing their own personal assistants. The ‘Skills for Support’ study set out to discover what people with learning disabilities themselves see as the key qualities and skills of their personal assistants. The project had 3 stages: 1) a survey of PAs; 2) interviews with direct payments users and PAs; 3) video analysis of PAs working with people with learning disabilities. Funded by the Big Lottery, this was a partnership project between the West of England Centre for Inclusive Living (WECIL) and Norah Fry Research Centre. It was an inclusive research study, in which two people with learning disabilities were employed as researchers.

Findings from the Skills for Support survey

Geographical spread: UK. 59 responses from PAs; 59 from people with learning disabilities they support. 75% of these were direct payments users.

- People most commonly had a PA for going out (86%), sorting out money (73%), transport and shopping (71%).
- Nearly all the direct payments users in our sample had taken part in choosing their own PA. About a third of them said they had known the person before. About a quarter had advertised for their PA.
- 78% (46) people said they found having a PA ‘very good’, and 7% (4) ‘good’. In all this accounts for 85% of respondents.
- A third of the PAs had a background in residential care work. This was the most frequent career path.
- About 2/3 of the PAs had a contract and full entitlement to holiday and sick pay.
- Nearly half the PAs were paid between £5 and £7 per hour. About a third were paid between £7-9.
- Just over half of PAs reported having received some kind of training in the past, and this included all those who had some type of professional background.
- About half had not had any training at all since working as a PA, and only 2 of the direct payments schemes in this sample saw it as their function to offer PA training. In 5 cases, the scheme had paid for some training.
- Most PAs said that they helped the person they supported to speak up. But they also said that people were most in control when they were doing things they enjoy:
‘The person I support decides what she wants to do each week. Also, when she is working creatively she is very much in control and confident’.
- Most PAs reported strong job satisfaction. This was due largely to good personal relationships:

'It is like working for a friend instead of having a boss. I enjoy working with my employer and I feel I aid him in leading a more independent life.'

Findings from the interviews and videos

Geographical spread: England and Wales; 14 pairs of people with learning disabilities and PAs; 19 videos (10 hours, 20 minutes of video material)

PAs who work for the person with learning disabilities are providing a new kind of support. It is different because it is more like 'ordinary communication', rather than an institutional relationship, in which the staff have all the power.

- From our videos, we picked out five things that a good PA does well. A good PA should:
 - 1) show respect for the person they are supporting
 - 2) give choices
 - 3) be friendly
 - 4) give good advice
 - 5) support the person to speak up.
- These were the things that good PAs did in their communication with people with learning disabilities:
 - 1) They worked in a person-centred way. Everyone is different, and a PA will need to match their communication style to the individual.
 - 2) Good PAs knew how to step back.
 - 3) They listened to people with learning disabilities, and supported them to become the boss.
 - 4) They used relaxed, friendly body language.
 - 5) They gave the person with learning disabilities time to respond.
 - 6) There was good team work between PAs and people with learning disabilities they supported.
- PAs can keep people safe, and make sure they give good advice, without taking over. They need to balance risks and safety, by working *with* the person they are supporting.
- A PA can also give good support to a person with high support needs, or people who do not use verbal language. The principles of support are the same. But the PA has to get to know the person even more closely.
- The role of the PA is vital, if people with learning disabilities are to achieve more control and independence. More training, support and better conditions of employment are needed.
- Social services departments, as well as direct payments support schemes, should encourage people with learning disabilities to learn how to use a PA, and to support and train their own PAs.

'Skills for Support' produced a training pack, with 5 photo booklets and a DVD about good support. It is for people with learning disabilities to get involved in training their own PAs. Together with the report, the pack is being published by BILD (British Institute for Learning Disabilities) in 2008. The full report is available on the Norah Fry website (www.bristol.ac.uk/norahfry) : Williams, V., Ponting, L., Ford, K. and Rudge, P. (2007) A new kind of support.

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