

KEEPING CONNECTED AND STAYING WELL: THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES DURING THE CORONA VIRUS PANDEMIC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the pandemic we have seen how many people, faced with the prospect of working at home, not being able to meet up with friends or family, or unable to go shopping for food or other essentials have turned to technology to help them achieve these tasks remotely. It has not been clear however, what, if any, support people with learning disabilities have received to enable them to use technology to keep connected and stay well during the pandemic. In order to find out, we conducted an online survey of supporters and also interviewed supporters and people with learning disabilities. We received 106 survey responses and interviewed 44 supporters and 20 people with learning disabilities. Our analysis of the results revealed 8 main findings.

Finding 1: Supporters are blending technological means of support with non-technological means.

Finding 2: As part of a blended approach to support, supporters are using a wide range of technologies. The exact 'mix' of technologies is influenced by a range of factors.

Finding 3: The main reasons supporters gave for using technology with people with learning disabilities during the pandemic were to contribute to good mental health and/or well-being; to help combat loneliness and a sense of isolation; to help overcome boredom through lack of activity and to provide information about the coronavirus and staying safe.

Finding 4: The practices that remote supporters engage in when using technologies to support people with learning disabilities can be characterised as speedy, evolving, creative and fearless.

Finding 5: One of the most significant factors that enables people with learning disabilities to use and benefit from technologies during lockdown is support from someone living with them.

Finding 6: The most significant barriers to enabling people with learning disabilities to use and benefit from technologies during lockdown are The Digital Divide and Lack of In-Home Support

Finding 7: Using technology to support people with learning disabilities during lockdown has had a positive impact on their mental health, well-being, sense of belonging and connectedness.

Finding 8: Using technologies to support people with learning disabilities during lockdown has highlighted the technological capabilities of people with learning disabilities and the potential of new support practices.

The experience of using technology to support people with learning disabilities during the pandemic has led many supporters to conclude that it would be beneficial to continue these practices beyond the pandemic and indeed to develop them further. For this to happen and to be successful however, attention needs to be paid to the significant barriers that this research has identified.

EDUCATION, HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE PROVIDERS AND COMMISSIONERS

1. Collect detailed information about what technologies the people with learning disabilities that they support currently do and do not have access to and what they would like to have access to and be able to use. Create a detailed picture of what the digital divide looks like in their context.
2. Plan how to fund, set-up and distribute technologies to those people with learning disabilities who do not have access to technologies. But don't provide access to new technologies without also ensuring that the person with a learning disability and their in-home supporters know how to use it and can afford to use in the case of mobile phones and data.
3. Develop and embed in the practices and cultures of those organisations that deliver education, health, and social care innovative capacity-building programmes for both people with learning disabilities and their supporters (including family members) so that they can confidently use technology.
4. Review, and where necessary revise the policies and practices of those organisations that deliver education, health, and social care to ensure that they do not place unnecessary barriers in the way of enabling access to technology and effective in-home support. The experiences of those who have been providing remote support (including family members) can usefully inform this review process.

SELF-ADVOCACY GROUPS, ADVOCACY GROUPS, LEARNING DISABILITY CHARITIES, FAMILIES, DAY SERVICE PROVIDERS, TEACHERS, HEALTH, AND SOCIAL CARE PROFESSIONALS

5. Collect, curate and share examples of how supporters have used technology to support people with learning disabilities during this pandemic in order that others may be able to learn from them and adopt or adapt when they develop their own support practices. As part of this initiative, it is important that family members that have been anxious about using technology are connected to family members and other supporters who have overcome these anxieties and can share the successful strategies they have employed.
6. Set up and maintain co-operative, collaborative partnerships between those who provide in-house support (e.g. care homes, supported living; family members) and those who have the experience and expertise to provide remote support (e.g. self-advocacy groups, day services).

ALL THOSE WHO HAVE A ROLE IN SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES:

7. Believe, that with the right support, people with learning disabilities have the capacity to learn to use technology. There are many examples in this report that evidence this capacity.
8. Believe that people with learning disabilities have the right to both access technology and the support to enable them to access that technology.