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# WHO'S CHALLENGING WHO? Evaluation of an intervention to improve staff empathy towards adults with learning disabilities and behaviour that challenges

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The Royal Mencap Society**

## About this briefing

Behaviour that challenges, displayed by people with learning disabilities, are actions that place the individual or other people at risk of harm. Negative responses from support staff can make behaviour that challenges worse or more likely to occur. *Who's Challenging Who?* (WCW) is a staff training intervention designed to improve empathy towards adults with learning disabilities who display behaviour that challenges. CEDAR and the Centre for Trials Research conducted a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to analyse the effectiveness of this intervention. This briefing presents the results from the evaluation.

## Context

Around 1 in 6 people with a learning disability known to services display behaviour that challenges. These

## Implications for Practice

- Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are highly valued as a means of assessing effectiveness in health research. This evaluation demonstrates that RCTs can also be used effectively to evaluate social care. More research of this type is needed to underpin policy and practice change in social care.
- The co-production and delivery of the *Who's Challenging Who?* training by individuals with learning disabilities was one of the key successes of the intervention. People with learning disabilities can (and should) be actively involved in the co-production of social care training that incorporates their experience. They can also deliver high quality training, with minimal support.
- Changing staff attitudes in social care and other contexts is best achieved by direct contact with devalued groups. Trainees benefitted from the experience of being trained by individuals with learning disabilities.
- WCW fits well with the principles in the Department of Health and Social Care's report: 'Right to be heard': The Government's response to the consultation on learning disability and autism training for health and care staff (5 November 2019) which recommends mandatory learning disability and autism training for all health and social care staff.
- Employment and a fair wage can increase the confidence and empowerment of people with learning disabilities. Measures should be taken to increase access to employment for this population.

behaviours can have a direct impact on the quality of health and social care that individuals receive. Adults with behaviour that challenges are more likely to experience abusive practices and be given unnecessary psychoactive medication. Carers may experience increased stress. The cost of support services for people with behaviour that challenges is also high. Research on why behaviour that challenges occur indicates that care staff attitudes and beliefs might play a role in making problems worse. Interventions to alter staff attitudes could therefore reduce instances of behaviour that challenges, improving the quality, and potentially lessening the cost, of care.

There is a lack of research evidence about *how* to change care staff attitudes towards people with behaviour that challenges. The evaluation of WCW seeks to address this gap.

## The evaluation

Researchers conducted an RCT of staff employed in residential settings who received the WCW training. Outcomes were measured against a control group who had not yet received the training. Data were collected at 6 and 20 weeks after the randomisation on outcomes including staff self-reported empathy for people with behaviour that challenges, empowerment, emotional exhaustion and positive work motivation. Qualitative data were also collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 trainees and the trainers.

The WCW staff training intervention was co-produced with people with learning disabilities and delivered by a person with learning disabilities. This innovative approach was evaluated as part of the RCT. WCW was designed to increase the ability of trainees to empathise with individuals displaying behaviour that challenges and to empower adults with learning disabilities to take part in the improvement of their own support and services.

## Findings

- Those receiving WCW training demonstrated improved empathy for people with behaviour that challenges at 6 and 20 weeks after the training, but improvement was not large enough to reach statistical significance. The impact of WCW training on staff empathy was stronger in settings that

## Further information

Further information, all academic papers, an easy-to-read results summary, and a package of videos of the trainers' experiences can be found at: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/cedar/whoschallengingwho/>

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included a smaller proportion of individuals with behaviour that challenges. Trainees also reported an increase in positive work motivation.

- Research data showed that the trainers with learning disabilities were able to deliver consistently high quality training.
- The experiences of the trainers with learning disabilities were overwhelmingly regarded as the most important part of the training, though there was evidence of unconscious bias with a perception that the trainer with learning disabilities was not the lead trainer.
- Trainers with learning disabilities demonstrated increased confidence from being a trainer, and empowerment because they were paid a fair wage and respected by the wider training team. They also reported a feeling of catharsis in being able to share their personal experiences.

## Contact the researchers

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