

# 'LISTEN TO ME' – EXPLORING NEW WAYS OF SUPPORTING THE SAFETY OF PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

**James Bannister**

With the establishment of the first national Quality and Safeguards Commission for people with disability being supported by the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), the specific quality and safety requirements for workers and service providers are clearer than ever before. Having established the 'what', the question remains on the 'how' – specifically, how to bring about the cultural change required to ensure the safety of people with disability and how the voice of people with disability leads this change.

NDS has been exploring this issue through the *Zero Tolerance Initiative* since 2013. *Zero Tolerance* takes a human rights-based approach to build understanding of workers at all levels within disability service providers - from volunteers to board members – on their role in supporting cultures in which people with disability are safe and feel safe. Drawing on local and international research and cross-sector consultation, the [Zero Tolerance Framework](#) sets out a curriculum of practical actions for providers and disability support workers. Having articulated these actions, focus then switched to making them happen.

The first step was to partner with advocacy organisations to ask people with disability around Australia their views on safety. Participants across Australia (over a third of whom identified as having an intellectual disability) were asked about specific actions providers can do to make people feel safer. The resultant report [Speaking up about Safety](#) reveals a clear and consistent answer: 'listen to me' - listen to my experiences; respect my choices; include me in decisions about how and when I am supported, and who by.

'Listen to me' is a stark reminder of the uneven power dynamics common to all forms of abuse and violence. Such power imbalances are especially common for people with cognitive or intellectual disability who report incorrect assumptions of capacity and risk averse, paternalistic support. The vast majority of disability support workers are well-intentioned and want to do the right thing, but until the 'choice and control' mantra of the NDIS becomes reality, the power dynamic remains uneven.

Addressing this imbalance has been a key focus for Zero Tolerance. Drawing on [Speaking up about Safety](#) and Schalock's Quality of Life indicators, we developed the [Empowerment Circle](#). This self-reflection tool prompts workers to reflect on how to support people with disability empowered in all areas of their life and the impact of their own actions on the people they support.

The Empowerment Circle underpins [Understanding Abuse](#), a set of training resources which use filmed scenarios with actors with physical and intellectual disability portraying examples of uneven power dynamics, and how even well-intentioned actioned can impact negatively on people with disability.

The scenarios for all Zero Tolerance resources are drawn from real life experiences. For all new projects we work with advocacy organisations and small groups of people with disability to explore aspects of support. Working closely with Inclusion Australia we have been able to ensure the experiences of people with intellectual disability have been reflected in all our films to date.

We seek to increase the involvement of people with disability with each new learning resource. For [Recognising Restrictive Practices](#) people with intellectual disability provided on-screen commentary on the scenarios alongside other experts. For [Responding to Abuse](#) this extended to people with intellectual disability being full and active members of the project working group with roles in scripting, performing and even aspects of filming. Actors were encouraged to workshop scripts and bring their own experiences and language to their performances to ensure the scripted scenarios feel and look true to life, resulting in our strongest films to date.

Reinforcing films and eLearning with other methods, NDS partnered with VALID to co-present a series of nationwide forums on abuse. Combining [Understanding Abuse](#) and VALID's [Staying Safe](#) resources (powerful yet accessible short films to empower people with disability to 'speak up, reach out and get help') we intentionally brought people with disability and frontline workers together in the same room to deliver the same message; that abuse and neglect are not okay.

This approach is informing work with the Victorian Government to deliver abuse training to group home staff. Face to face workshops are co-facilitated by presenters with disability, combining evidence-based practice and lived experience. Creating this equal platform for conversations about abuse, neglect and rights is a critical part of our ongoing work to create more balanced rights-based cultures.

Feedback has been highly positive. This reinforces that 'listen to me' is more than just a well-intentioned sentiment but represents the solution to the 'how'. After so many years of 'nothing about us without us' this will come as no surprise to people with disability. However, it feels that perhaps Australia is finally listening.



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