



**Towards
Inclusive
Practice**

Including Everyone.

Inclusion, power, and trust.



A project by:



Inclusion Australia

Introduction

As part of the Towards Inclusive Practice project, people with an intellectual disability worked together as Inclusion Advisors to talk about ways that government can be more inclusive and accessible. This included conversations about peoples' experiences of being part of meetings, consultations and using government services.

Power and trust were common themes in these conversations.

Inclusion Advisors spoke about the power that people who work in government roles have.

This contrasted with experiences of powerlessness when interacting with government bodies, departments, or representatives.

Inclusion Advisors also spoke about how negative experiences of this power can affect their trust in government.

In this guide and the accompanying videos, we explore the relationship between power, trust and inclusion.

There are also helpful tips from Inclusion Advisors on how to recognise and address power imbalances and build more productive trusting relationships with the disability community.



Who has the power?

If you are a government employee or work for a large organisation you may be surprised to hear others talking about the power you have.

You may work in a large bureaucracy, with clear reporting lines up to those in more senior positions. Your idea of who holds the power in your own organisation probably includes the Secretary, CEO or maybe the Minister.

Whilst it is true that these senior roles carry more responsibility, that does not mean that you do not have power in your own role.

Everyone sees their own power differently. Inclusion Advisors said that power can mean:

- Having the ability to change things
- Having the ability to make decisions about things in your life
- Being able to persuade or influence other people
- Being able to do what you want



We all have different thoughts and ideas on who is powerful and who is not. You may not think you are powerful, but someone else might see you as having power.

What power do you have?

Government as decision makers

As a representative of government or another large organisation you have different kinds of power. Some you will be aware of; some may be more hidden or subtle.

Many government departments have specific responsibilities for decisions that directly affect people's lives. This includes making decisions about:

- funding or other income that people receive
- housing and accommodation
- eligibility and priority for services
- preferences about location and nature of services

Some government bodies, for example those responsible for guardianship and administration orders, have specific decision making powers which can directly impact on peoples rights and freedoms.

For people with an intellectual disability, the roles and responsibilities of individual departments or organisations may not be clear. This can lead to a broad perception of government and authority as a single entity – those 'with power' compared to those without.

As a result many people are cautious about not doing anything to rock the boat when dealing with government. This can result in acquiescence; behaving in a way and saying things that people believe is what government wants to hear. This is covered in more detail below.

Government as holders of information

Government departments also hold significant power as information brokers.



Think for a moment about the anticipation and activity that accompanies a government budget. Journalists seek to be the first to find out about new taxes or funding increases. Individuals and organisations want to know about any changes that will affect them for better or worse. The same is true of Ministerial announcements and press releases. Government departments and officers are often aware of details long before those affected. For the public this may be the first time that they hear a policy, project or funding change. Governments go to great lengths to plan such announcements, often keeping details secret from the public until the last minute. In these situations, 'knowledge is power'. Finding ways to include people and organisations early and share information quickly and accessible formats can be important ways to address some of this power difference.

Your power as a representative of government

As a government employee, it can be helpful to reflect on how you might be perceived by others. For example, people may have had previous experiences with others from your organisation, which can influence how they view you and your work – even if you are meeting for the first time. This may be positive and mean people approach you with a level of trust. However, it can also mean that people start from a position of distrust.

In such cases, your personal actions can be very powerful.



The way you dress, the way you act, your body language, the way you communicate, and the way you react can all make people see you as having power over them.

Acquiescence

Where there are real or perceived power differences there is a risk of people with an intellectual disability telling you what they believe you want to hear. This includes agreeing with you, even when they may not want to. We call this **acquiescence**.

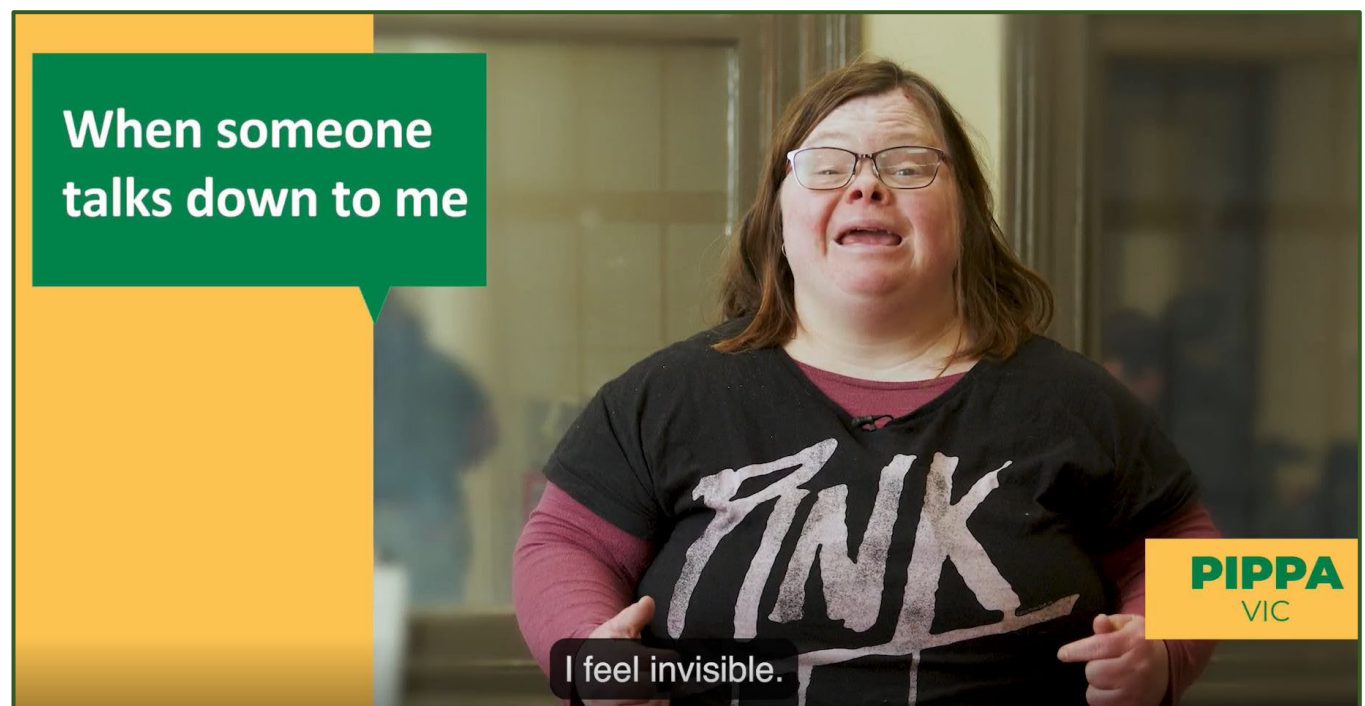
If acquiescence happens during a discussion or consultation, the information or feedback you receive may not be correct or reflect what a person with an intellectual disability believes or wants to happen.

It is important to be aware of the potential for acquiescence and watch for signs when meeting or consulting with people with an intellectual disability. This requires skill and is an important reason for working with experienced disability organisations when undertaking consultations. It is recommended that people working in frontline roles seek advice and training to better understand acquiescence.

More information can be found in *Communication - It's not a spectator sport*, a guide by Speak Out Advocacy co-designed by parents with an intellectual disability.

The guide has helpful information on acquiescence and other useful tips on working with parents with an intellectual disability:

www.inclusionaustralia.org.au/resource/communication-its-not-a-spectator-sport/



What does powerlessness feel like?

People with an intellectual disability often experience feelings of unequal power when dealing with government and community services.

Inclusion Advisors working on the Towards Inclusive Practice project had a lot to say about feelings of power and powerlessness.

Things that make people with an intellectual disability feel powerless include:

- Not being listened to
- Speaking to parents, carers, and family members and not the person themselves
- Making assumptions without asking
- Not being in control
- Being misunderstood.



Government workers are often seen to hold all the power and may not be aware of the way they are seen by others. Some people with an intellectual disability feel so disempowered they want to disengage altogether. This can result in people with an intellectual disability not getting important supports or services that meet their needs.

When someone feels powerless, they might:

- Feel worthless.
- Retreat and go into their shell.
- Give up.
- Pretend nothing is wrong.
- Give the answers they think you want to hear.



Power and Trust

Trust is having confidence in another person and their actions. Building trust between people with an intellectual disability and government is important.

Building trust can take a long time. If something happens to break a person's trust, it can take a long time to recover.

Trust can be broken very quickly. Use this guide to help you think about power in your relationships and how you can use it positively to build trust.



What makes people feel powerful?

Many people with an intellectual disability have limited opportunities to speak up and have their voices heard.

Many of the Inclusion Advisors said the Towards Inclusive Practice project was the first time they had felt heard and respected for sharing their views and experienced.

Some things that make people with an intellectual disability feel powerful include:

- Being asked for their opinion.
- Being listened to.
- Having a say.
- When their opinion is acted upon.
- Achieving something.
- Being successful.



Power and trust films

Inclusion Advisors from around Australia worked together to develop these short films on the importance of Power and Trust. This includes some of the concepts in this guide and more.

They feature Inclusion Advisors talking about aspects of power and powerlessness and make suggestions about things you can do in your own work to be more empowering of others.



There are four films in this series

- (1) **What does power mean to you?** In this film, people talk about what power means to them and their experiences of inclusion
- (2) **When do you feel powerless?** In this film, people talk about experiences of feeling powerless and what it means for inclusion
- (3) **When do you feel powerful?** In this film, people talk about how being included makes them feel powerful and respected
- (4) **What will you do to be more inclusive?** In this film, people with an intellectual disability challenge you to think power and inclusion in your own practice.

Watch the films on your own or as teams to talk about your own practice.

Top Tips for addressing power imbalances

Inclusion Advisors developed these tips to help you think about power and powerlessness in your work. You will see many of the ideas explored in more details in other Towards Inclusive Practice resources.



- Think about who you are meeting or consulting with. Ask what support people need to be part of the group and offer to pay for any support needed.
- Organise supports ahead of time; some supports may not be available last minute. If you can't get the person's preferred support, contact them and ask what they would like to do.
- Think about how many people you are meeting with. Many people with an intellectual disability feel more comfortable in smaller groups. A good sized group is 5-7 people.
- Do what you say you are going to do for example sending meeting notes or updates by a certain time or giving feedback. If you can't make this happen, send an update.
- Provide documents in Easy Read. Make sure people have copies of any documents ahead of time so they can prepare for the meeting.
- Always provide meeting information and questions ahead of time so people are not surprised and do not feel pressured to come up with an answer.

- Think about the way you dress, act and talk. Does it match the occasion? Would a less formal approach be more appropriate?
- Spend time getting to know the people in the room. Introduce yourself and any colleagues.
- Use approaches that give everyone a chance to speak or ask questions, for example Traffic Light Cards (see our Inclusive Meetings guide).
- Icebreakers are a nice way of making everyone feel equal and included.
- Address the invited person, not their support person. They will choose to introduce their support person if they would like to.
- Show that people have been listened to. Acknowledge comments and suggestions by restating them, writing them on a whiteboard, or taking your own notes.
- Answer people's questions as best you can. If you do not know the answer, let them know. If you need to find out the answer, tell them when you will get back to them with an answer and make sure you do this.
- Do not rush the meeting or topics within the meeting. Allow at least one 10-minute break every hour. Allow people time to think and respond to questions.
- Check in with people during the meeting to make sure they understand what is being discussed and be clear when you are moving to a new topic. Ask if everyone is ready to move onto the next topic before you begin.
- Limit the meeting to a maximum of two hours with breaks included. People may feel they have to stay when they feel tired.
- Communicate clearly and keep it simple. Do not use big words, acronyms or jargon.



These ideas are explained in my detail in the other guides in this series.

They are not meant to be prescriptive. We encourage you to think about them in context of your own role and how you can build these tips into your practice.