



**GUIDE FOR POLICE ON HOW TO INTERACT
WITH PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES**

PUBLICATION PREPARED BY PARTNERS OF THE BE.SAFE PROJECT

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Introduction

The publication "Guide for police on how to interact with people with intellectual disabilities" was created as a result of intellectual output O5 in the project "Be.Safe - Educational support for persons with intellectual disability suffering internet crime and violence" financed by the Erasmus+ programme.

Anyone can be a subject to cyber violence, and this type of crime is becoming an unfortunate element of everyday life. However, given that people with disabilities are much more likely to become victims of violence, and in particular persons with intellectual disabilities, it is easy to conclude that people with intellectual disability are much more prone to cyber violence than many, if not any, other group(s).

This document intends to give police officers some general information about intellectual disability, advice on accessibility, and guidance on how to communicate with people with intellectual disabilities.

1 - What is intellectual disability?

About three out of every 100 people have **intellectual disability** and as a law enforcement officer, there is a chance you will come in contact with a person who has an intellectual disability.

In order to provide readily accessible services, there are some helpful tips and strategies to use whenever in contact with someone who has an intellectual disability.

Identify intellectual disability

Intellectual disability is a term that describes people who have certain limitations in mental functioning and in other areas of life such as communicating with others, taking care of themselves and social skills. These limitations will cause a child to learn and develop more slowly than a typical child. Children with intellectual disabilities may take longer to learn, speak, walk and take care of their personal needs such as dressing or eating.

(Definition taken from the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities: <http://www.nichcy.org>.)

What are the 4 levels of intellectual disability?

- **Mild Intellectual disability (IQ 50-70)**

About 85 percent of people with intellectual disabilities fall into the mild category and many of them even achieve academic success. People with mild intellectual disability are slower than typical in all developmental areas, they have no unusual physical characteristics and are able to learn practical life skills. They can attain reading and math skills and are able to blend in socially. People with mild intellectual disability can function in daily life.

- **Moderate Intellectual Disability (IQ 35-49)**

People with moderate intellectual disability have fair communication skills but cannot communicate on complex levels. They may have difficulty in social situations and problems with social cues and judgements. These people can take care of themselves but might need more instruction and support than the typical person. Many can live an independent life, but some of them need support and live in a group home. About 10 percent of people with intellectual disabilities fall into the moderate category.

- **Severe Intellectual Disability (IQ 20-34)**

Only about 3 or 4 percent of those diagnosed with intellectual disability fall into the severe category. These people can only communicate on the most basic level. They cannot perform all self-care activities independently and need daily supervision and support. Most people in this category cannot live an independent life and will need to live in a group home setting.

- **Profound Intellectual Disability (IQ less than 20)**

People with profound intellectual disability require round the clock support and care. They depend on others for all aspects of day-to-day life and have extremely limited communication ability. Frequently, people in this category have other physical limitations as well. About 1 or 2 percent of people with intellectual disability fall into this category.

Intellectual disability involves impairments of general mental abilities that impact adaptive functioning in three domains, or areas. These domains determine how well an individual copes with everyday tasks:

- The **conceptual domain** includes skills in language, reading, writing, math, reasoning, knowledge, and memory.
- The **social domain** refers to empathy, social judgement, interpersonal communication skills, the ability to make and retain friendships, and similar capacities.
- The **practical domain** centers on self-management in areas such as personal care, job responsibilities, money management, recreation, and organising school and work tasks.

Why do people with intellectual disabilities become victims of cybercrime?

Factors such as impaired cognitive abilities and judgement, physical disabilities, insufficient adaptive behaviors, lack of knowledge on how to protect themselves and living and working in high-risk environments increase the vulnerability to victimisation.

Many victims with intellectual disabilities may not report crimes because of their dependence on the abuser for basic survival needs (if abuser is someone from family, neighbour, friend).

When victims do report crimes, police and court officials may not take the person's allegations seriously or be reluctant to get involved. Additionally, people with intellectual disability often do not have access to the types of support and resources they need to prosecute. They have very few ways to get help, get to a safe place or obtain victim services or counseling.

How can I recognize someone who has an intellectual disability?

Communication

The individual may:

- Have limited vocabulary or speech impairment
- Have difficulty understanding or answering questions
- Have a short attention span

Behavior

The individual may:

- Act inappropriately with peers or the opposite sex
- Be easily influenced by and eager to please others
- Be easily frustrated
- Be less likely or able to report victimisation
- Think that how they have been treated is normal and don't realise that victimisation is a crime
- Be unaware of how serious or dangerous the situation is
- Think that the abuser is a "friend"
- Have difficulty with the following tasks:
 - Giving accurate directions
 - Making changes
 - Using the telephone or telephone book
 - Telling time easily
 - Reading and writing

Police contact

The individual may:

- Not want their disability to be noticed
- Not understand their rights
- Not understand commands
- Have the tendency to be overwhelmed by police presence
- Act very upset and/or try to run away
- Say what he or she thinks others want to hear
- Have difficulty describing the facts or details of the offence
- Be confused about who is responsible for the crime and "confess" even though innocent
- Not be considered as a credible witness, even in situations where such concern is unwarranted

2 - Barriers for Persons with Intellectual Disabilities

Increased vulnerability

- **People with intellectual disabilities are particularly discriminated against because of the stereotypes they are subject to.** These stereotypes result in discriminatory practices preventing people with intellectual disabilities from enjoying their rights on an equal basis with others.
- **People with intellectual disabilities lack knowledge about their rights, what constitutes discrimination and how to lodge a complaint.** This results in an underreporting of cases of discrimination affecting them. People with intellectual disabilities also have difficulties in recognising dangerous situations. This makes them more vulnerable in becoming a victim of crime. People with complex support needs, children and women with intellectual disabilities are especially more likely to be discriminated against.
- **People with intellectual disabilities are more isolated than the average.** Many will live in isolated places, institutions, or with their families, with limited social contact outside of their place of residence. Many are under partial or plenary guardianship and do not have control over some of the most important decisions affecting their lives. As they rely upon the support they receive, they are often afraid to report having been discriminated against or having been a victim of crime when the perpetrator was one of their supporters.

For the above-mentioned reasons, people with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be victims of discrimination and crime.

Lack of accessibility

People with intellectual disabilities often cannot participate in society because of a lack of accessibility. **There is a general lack of information available in easy-to-read as well as in other formats (e.g. augmentative and alternative communication).**

This can have several consequences. For instance, procedures for reporting an offence or a crime are often too complex, leading to people with intellectual disabilities not being able to initiate them on their own. Investigations may also be led in ways that are not accessible for those with intellectual disabilities, for example:

- the way questions are asked
- how a victim's rights are explained to them
- complex administrative forms

This makes it harder for a victim with an intellectual disabilities to take part in the procedure in a meaningful way.

These examples are particularly widespread when it comes to access to justice. People with intellectual disabilities are often not involved at all in a trial that concerns them or are only involved in an inadequate manner.

Sometimes, inaccessibility is not caused by the procedure itself, but by the people involved. When victims with intellectual disabilities want to report an offence or a crime, they can be placed in situations that will affect them negatively. For example, victims with intellectual disabilities may not receive the attention and the respect they would deserve. They may not be believed and/or be treated like a child. It also happens that a police officer in charge of their complaint will not directly interact with them but will instead speak to a family member or supporter accompanying them.

Very often, police officers or other professionals working in the justice system do not display this kind of behaviour on purpose, but it is rather due to a lack of training on how to interact with people with intellectual disabilities.

The following chapters will provide you with different tools to be able to better communicate with victims with intellectual disabilities and ensure they get the support they deserve.

3 - Preventive actions that police can do to avoid the occurrence of crimes

Implement programs to support people with intellectual disabilities to become full members of society and to help them to adopt behaviours to avoid, prevent and identify risk situations, contributing to their safety:

1. Promote training sessions for professionals from organizations for people with intellectual disabilities to promote a culture of violence and abuse prevention;
2. Sensitize the police in contact with the population to the issue of disability and the need for special protection to guarantee their security rights and promoting the participation of people with intellectual disabilities as a full members of society;
3. Promote inter institutional cooperation between organizations working in the field of disability and the police;
4. Contribute to the improvement in the care and referral of people with disabilities providing the police with specific communication and information tools accessible to the population with intellectual disabilities.
5. Police can regularly visit institutions frequented by people with intellectual disability and conduct information sessions, using the materials produced in SafeLabs project, on the dangers of incorrect or careless use of the internet and of the situations that can be considered a crime and how to act in these situations.

To prevent communication problems, keep in mind the following instructions when you receive a person with an intellectual disability in the police station:

1. The crime victim is already fragile and needs the highest respect, try to put yourself in the victim's shoes and treat them as you would like to be treated.
2. The victim's problem is unique, at the moment is more important than any other issue, do not allow other matters to disturb your communication.
3. Try to understand the degree of disability and the level of autonomy of the victim (see the first chapter of this guide).
4. Do not ask the same questions repeatedly. Simplify language but don't treat people with intellectual disabilities like children. Be very calm and cooperate if the person can't use the right words, you can use the program created in the Be.Safe project to facilitate communication.
5. Ask if the person with an intellectual disability has someone to talk about the crime, if that person can help them, if they want that person's help, if that person can accompany them when they leave the police station and when they have to go back there.
6. Ask where and how they want to be contacted again, because they may not want people close to them to know what happened.

7. In the days following the incident follow closely the person with an intellectual disability, ask him if he/she is well and if he/she has doubts, take the opportunity to clarify and raise awareness about procedures and behaviours correct and/or risk.

4 - Communication with a person with intellectual disability

Communication issues in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) imposes on States the obligation to fully include people with disabilities in social life, including the life of the local community. Inclusion means that people with disabilities live, learn, work, play, create relationships, do official jobs just like any other person.

Every sphere, every element of social life must be accessible to all people with disabilities, and they have the right to participate in all forms of social activity. Not on "special rules", not in "specially adapted places", but on a par with other people. (M. Zima Parjaszewska, "Scenarios for self-advocates", PSONI, 2017)

These requirements should also be taken into account when an adult with intellectual disability comes to the police station. The initiative to go to the police station indicates her/his independence and self-determination. At the same time, everything must be done so that she/he is to be properly listened to and understood, appropriate steps are taken or an adequate and understandable explanation of not starting any further activity is given. These goals can also be achieved thanks to professional, effective communication.

Savoir-vivre in contacts with persons with intellectual disability

Adults with intellectual disabilities who come to the institution, e.g. to the police station in their own case, are grown-up, fully-fledged citizens.

Do not treat them like children.

In direct conversation, use the form "Ms/Mr" and not "you". If a person with intellectual disability is in the company of a supporting person, you should directly address the person with disability and not the accompanying person. The interlocutor should be focused on the person, that should be indicated not only by the words used, but also through the body language - the direction of the sight and the body towards her/him. If it seems that a person with disability needs help - for example, in completing the form, reading the text, formulating thoughts - you should offer help by asking if such help is needed.

Conversation with a person with intellectual disability

A conversation with someone with an intellectual disability at the time of filing a report or testimony may take longer than talking to people without disabilities. Above all, it should be ensured that you are well understood during such a conversation.

In communicating with people with intellectual disabilities, the so-called easy-to-read text is used. It would be good if the police had materials about their actions, and the rights of the person submitting the report or testimony in easy-to-read. You can use the brochure published in the Be.Safe project (www.besafe-project.eu). The following tips relate to the principles of easy-to-read text and understanding used in speaking:

- **The conversation should be adapted to the interlocutor.**
- **Use short phrases that are individually folded in speech.** You should take care of using simple, common words. If possible, do not use abstract concepts. During a conversation, you can ask if the word is understandable. A report should be written in a similar way, which is then read loud to the interlocutor.
- **At any time, you can explain the words by drawing or using a photo**, if it is possible.
- **During the conversation, the officer should ask open questions.** If the question will only require a yes or no answer, a stressed person with intellectual disability can give the answer that he/she thinks is expected or can agree without going deep into the meaning of the question. Ask, but do not suggest anything.

How to deal with when a person has articulatory problems?

In some cases, the problem may be not so much the issue of understanding the meaning of speech but participating in dialogue as the articulatory problem. Many people with intellectual disabilities, apart from intellectual dysfunctions, also have a paralysed or defective speech engine, which can sometimes make conversation impossible. When such a person contacts the police on their own, it must first and foremost be respected their will and made every effort to talk without the participation of third parties.

It happens that such a person can write what can be found at the beginning of the conversation. In any case, you can use the alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) tools.

Alternative and augmentative communication is a group of methods that allow people who do not speak or speak to a limited extent to communicate with their surroundings. It consists of using signs based on gestures, pictures, symbols and objects in communication. AAC helps people with speech disorders express their thoughts, feelings and make independent decisions.

It covers all communication methods in which non-verbal signs are used: gestures (e.g. sign language), graphic signs (e.g. pictures, pictograms, symbols), objects (e.g. word pads), internet or mobile applications.

At present, AAC applications are the most available tool, in particular the TIM Be.Safe application - the AAC communicator. It works in the form of a mobile application that can be run on a tablet or smartphone. A person who has problems with communication selects the appropriate pictures, and the application reads them in the form of a grammatically correct sentence. The application's extension is a camera with the appropriate software that allows users to control application elements with their eyes.



The TIM Be.Safe application has been equipped with pictograms depicting dangerous events that may be experienced by Internet users (e.g. hate speech, identity theft on Facebook, etc.), which may be useful when submitting a notification or testimony.

More information on access to the application can be found on the Be.Safe project website at www.besafe-project.eu.

Of course, there may be occasions when, despite all the means available, mutual understanding is not possible. Then you should use the help of third parties. In the guide, we omit methods available to the police, focusing on the possibilities of supporting people with intellectual disabilities by those around them.

Supporting a person with intellectual disability by third parties

If you are unable to communicate with a person with intellectual disability, ask her/him to invite who can help them to communicate. People struggling with communication problems for many years most often use the support of people known to them - family, friends, and volunteers. It is possible,

however, that in some situations they would like to maintain discretion. Then it is possible to contact a nearby institution dealing with people with intellectual disabilities and ask for a specialist-translator.

When conducting a conversation with the participation of a supportive person, one should remember **to address the person with intellectual disability directly.**

Please keep in mind that the existing legal mechanism - supported decision-making - also mentioned in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities - allows for making decisions and other legal activities in the company of a supporting person.

5 - How to support people with intellectual disabilities

People with intellectual disabilities need to get sufficient support. Before meeting a person with an intellectual disability, you should take care of the following aspects:

- **Location of the meeting**

Every person feels better in a place that he/she knows. It is therefore better to visit a person with intellectual disability in a place that they know, when this is possible. Of course, there might be a situation where this is impossible. In this case, you can think how to adapt your place for a person with intellectual disability. Ask them or their supporter what they need in order to feel comfortable. Sometimes their preferences can seem non-standard, but it is important to create a safe and comfortable space. For example, some people might feel uncomfortable because your chair is red, or something similar. If you are uncertain on how you can help and the person with intellectual disability is unable to say it, just open a window for fresh air, offer coffee or tea and be pleasant.

- **Time for meeting**

The level of concentration of people with intellectual disabilities can vary throughout the day. You can find out which part of the day is the best for them or their supporters.

- **Communication**

You can read more about what questions to ask and how to effectively communicate with a person with intellectual disabilities in the [previous chapter](#). As already mentioned, some basic principles to use when communicating with a person with intellectual disability include:

- **Being concrete.**
It is difficult for people with intellectual disabilities to understand abstract concepts.
- **Using short sentences.**
Sometimes we want to be correct and we use many words to get to the point.
- **Speaking directly with the person who has an intellectual disability.**
It is good when the respective person has their supporter next to him/her. The supporter can be a parent, friend, social worker or assistant, who knows a person with an intellectual disability. It is necessary to speak directly with the person who has an intellectual disability and not the supporter.
- **Using communication aids when needed.**
The respective person can use their own communication books, or you can use the set of symbols from the BeSafe project.