



# Putting it into Practice

*Guidelines for using  
specialist resources with  
women with disabilities who  
have experienced violence  
and abuse*

A resource to support access and  
inclusion

## Summary

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Women with disabilities (WwD) experience violence and abuse at higher rates than other groups of people and other women (Dyson, Frawley & Robinson 2017). Sexual Assault and Domestic Family Violence (SADFV) services in Australia have a key role in supporting these women, however, currently this sector is under pressure to provide services to an ever increasing number of WwD who experience violence and abuse. Previous research has called for the development of approaches, such as the development of accessible specialist resources, to improve access to SADFV services for WwD (Dyson, Frawley & Robinson 2017; Women with Disabilities Australia (WWDA) 2016).

A twelve month Participatory Action Research project was undertaken with 10 sites across Australia to inform the development of these guidelines. The study aimed to engage with sexual assault, domestic family violence, and/or disability advocacy and support services to gain insights from their practice in crisis response and intervention, counselling, and advocacy with WwD who have experienced violence.

This project found that staff and services use written and electronic resources in their practice to provide information to their clients (e.g., handouts), guide counselling (practice guidelines), upskill staff (in training), and for referral from and to other organisations (brochures and fliers).

This project received ethics approval from the Deakin University Ethics Committee.

## General Principles

The following general principles were considered important to underpin all work with WwD including use of specialist and other resources:

**Language** is a key consideration. Service staff felt that using the words and phrases that the person already uses is a good way to build trust and ensure that communication is client led.

**Training** in disability awareness and on how to use resources can improve familiarity with and confidence to use a specialist resource. Training can also assist staff to develop skills to build trust, rapport and suitable communication strategies with women with disabilities. Staff who engage in this type of training feel more comfortable and confident to work with WwD, than staff who have not received training.

**Choosing resources that are available and are 'local'** is important and can be more culturally appropriate and relatable for women using SADFV.

**Specialist resources can also be useful for support staff, other advocates, family and friends** . Sharing resources with people who are supporting the woman and giving them some guidance on how to use the resource can help WwD with retention of information and use of information.

## Types of resources covered in these guidelines

Three types of resources are covered in these guidelines: resources for sector development, Easy English<sup>3</sup> resources, and electronic resources.

**Sector development resources** can be used in cross sector work to build capacity for access and inclusion across services and focus services on strategies they can use to become more accessible.

**Electronic resources**, particularly free and easy to download phone applications and websites can be useful for providing WWD access to information and education about violence and abuse. They can also be used to direct people to other services and supports. Safety is a clear priority, and staff should ensure that the woman is safe and not at greater risk of violence if they use the resource at home. Electronic resources can also be a useful tool to structure a discussion around safety planning. The Sunny app was the key resource used in this research. It is available on the 1800RESPECT website<sup>5</sup> and on the App store.

**Easy English resources** are usually hard copy resources that use words and pictures. 1800RESPECT has developed a set of Easy English books, which are available on the 1800RESPECT website<sup>6</sup>. It is important when using Easy English resources to consider whether the information in them is accessible to the woman being supported; not all people with disabilities relate to or can use Easy English information. It is important to use these resources in a tailored way taking into consideration the individual's experience and familiarity with Easy English and whether it is a suitable approach.

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<sup>3</sup> Easy English is a type of writing style to assist people with low literacy (Scope Australia n.d)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.1800respect.org.au/sunny/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.1800respect.org.au>

## Background

While these guidelines focus on SADFV services, it is important to acknowledge the work of specialist services and service approaches in Australia for WwD, and the work they do to co-develop and disseminate specialist resources for women with disabilities who experience violence and abuse. Central to these guidelines is the comprehensive program of work undertaken by 1800RESPECT focussing on access for women with disabilities to their services, and to SADFV services more broadly – the Disability Pathways project<sup>7</sup>. This project is a response to the needs identified in previous research about building capacity in SADFV services to work with women with disabilities effectively and be accessible to women with disabilities. One part of this project has been the co-development of specialist resources for women with disabilities the Sunny smartphone Application<sup>8</sup> and the booklet series ‘Learn about violence’ (1800RESPECT and Women with Disabilities Australia 2019). These resources, and the ‘One size does not fit all’ sector development resource developed from the ‘Whatever it takes’ report by Dyson, Frawley & Robinson (2017a) are the focus of these guidelines.

## How these guidelines were developed

Ten SADFV service sites across Australia were engaged to work on a research project to consider how specialist resources developed for women with disabilities could be used to support service engagement. SADFV services were introduced to the specialist resources in a survey that asked about their work with women with disabilities and their use of specialist and other resources. Following this, up to two focus groups were held in each site to further engage with the resources and to develop a deeper understanding of what is needed to embed specialist resources in their work with WwD. This was a co-research approach that employed two women with disabilities as part of the Deakin University research team and which perceived the research participants as co-researchers. The project was undertaken in consultation with the 1800RESPECT Disability Pathways project manager and was evaluated as part of the ANROWS action research evaluation of the body of work being undertaken through the Disability Pathways project.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.1800respect.org.au/about-us/disability-pathways-project/>

<sup>8</sup> Refer to <https://www.1800respect.org.au/sunny/>

## General principles for working with Women with Disabilities

SADFV services use resources in their practice to provide information to their clients (e.g., handouts), in counselling, to upskill staff (training), and for referral from and to other organisations (brochures and fliers). This study focussed on specialist resources that have been developed specifically to be accessible for WwD, and that were developed in consultation with or were co-developed by WwD.

Specialist resources can be used as an information empowering tool by enabling access to information that women have not previously had access to. The following section outlines principles for engaging with women with disabilities and considerations for communicating with women with disabilities.

### Engaging with women with disabilities

*“It’s also a trust rapport, as well, that you’re basically handing a person – are they going to get that quality and that service that they’d expect, or are they going to fall down and say, we can’t help you?”*

Engaging with WwD in SADFV services can be challenging for services who are not well equipped, or that have minimal experience working with WwD. In contrast, staff who regularly work with WwD or have engaged in some specialist training are often more confident in their service provision.

*“You know when you get a client that comes back and says, I went to this place but they wouldn’t do this or they didn’t understand this or why couldn’t they, but if they knew the information on this, and it’s available, you know, they could really say, it says here that you’re approachable but you’re not talking to people, or, you know, you’re things up too high, I can’t reach or, you just cut me off five times, and I’ve said this is urgent, or like, you know, it gives women, or people other tools, yeah, to be able to advocate for themselves”*

Some suggestions for engaging with WwD include:

- Enable the woman to tell you about herself in her own words
- Build rapport which might take some time
- Use videos and stories
- Use a ‘teach-back’ approach eg ‘Did I explain that well enough for you?’
- Use case studies, which include a variety of case examples

- Some women may want to invite a support worker to support them in their engagement with the SADFV service –negotiate this, taking into consideration confidentiality and privacy

## Language

Communication modes and approaches with women with disabilities should be tailored to each woman’s experiences, culture, sexuality, and consider any specific language and communication approaches they use including Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC which may include using an iPad or voice generating device). There are many resources you can use to inform how you can communicate effectively and respectfully with women with disabilities<sup>9</sup>.

Principles of good practice drawn from the practice of SADFV services, specialist women with disabilities services and disability advocacy services includes use simple, yet not over-simplified, factual language that is consistent with the language and communication that the woman with a disability uses, can relate to and access. This should include using the words and phrases that the person you are working with already uses and avoiding jargon and abstract concepts.

Communication training can also be beneficial.

## Using specialist violence and abuse resources in different settings

A range of services were represented in the work that informed these guidelines including crisis services (including phone services, crisis response, and crisis interventions, and refuges), counselling (including both sexual and domestic family violence), and disability advocacy. For staff who work in crisis response services, using resources can be more complex, particularly for staff who work in the phone or online environment where there is less time and where working through a resource can be difficult (eg a hard copy resource or giving instructions on downloading a phone application). Some key principles to guide resource use in different settings include:

- Find out what resources including kinds of technology the woman already uses and build on that
- Where possible follow up with hard copy resources eg cards with web addresses or guidelines for downloading phone applications
- Ensure key resources are available in services including refuges where women are referred to for crisis accommodation

## Using resources for Sector Development

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'One size does not fit all'<sup>10</sup> is an interactive poster or static poster that can be used by SADFV services to develop their knowledge and practice for improving access for women with disabilities. The poster was co-developed with women with disabilities to translate findings from the 'Whatever it takes' research undertaken by Dyson, Frawley and Robinson (2017) that looked at how access was understood and responded to in SADFV services in Australia.

The interactive version has links to the 'Whatever it takes' reports, and other resources that services can use to gain a deeper understanding of the concepts and ideas presented in the poster to build capacity in services to improve access. These include:

- 'Measuring capacity to serve domestic violence survivors with disabilities: Non-residential domestic violence programs' (Smith, Harrell, Smith & Demyan, 2015)<sup>11</sup>;
- 'Violence against women: Paper 6 Raising our voices hearing from women with disabilities' (Woodlock, Western, Bailey, 2014)<sup>12</sup>;
- 'Stop the Violence: Addressing violence against women and girls with disabilities in Australia: Background paper' (Dowse, Soldatic, Didi, Frohmader, & Toorn, 2013) and,
- 'Our right to safety and respect: Guidelines for developing resources with women with disabilities about safety from violence and abuse' (WDV, 2017)<sup>13</sup>. A key message of 'One size does not fit all' is that services need to consider how women with disabilities experience the process of getting support from SADFV services and use this to focus their work on improving access.

### Guidelines for using 'One size does not fit all'

- Ensure every staff member has the interactive PDF on their computers so they can easily access and/or have the poster in 'high traffic areas' so staff can become familiar with it
- Use the poster in professional development training, in training with service boards and committees on access, and if training other services. Co-facilitate with women with disabilities
- Give a copy of the poster to women with disabilities so they can use it in advocacy work
- Hang in 'high-traffic' areas (tea rooms/waiting rooms) for a wide spread audience
- Ensure staff has interactive PDF on their computers so they can easily access when needed
- Use in multidisciplinary team meetings, when referring women to other services, in workshops and training with other services

## Guidelines and principles for using the Sunny app



The Sunny App was developed by 1800RESPECT in collaboration with Women with Disability Australia in 2017. Sunny is a phone application that features information and support for victims of violence and abuse. It was design and developed in consultation with WwD to maximise accessibility and usability. Sunny's features assist WwD to report their experience, learn about violence and rights, and know where to go for further support. Sunny also shares stories about other people's experience, which can assist someone to identify their experience.

Sunny is screen-reader accessible, compliant to level AAA of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 and free to download from any smart phone's application store. A key safety feature is the two factor opening for discretion, in which the application firstly shows a generic weather application, then opens into the recognisable application after clicking the indiscrete 'show sunny' button.

### Quick reference guidelines for using Sunny

- Be familiar with the features of the App so that you can guide clients through its use
- Talk through the App in detail using each feature, step by step.
- Download on crisis response phones alongside other useful information and phone numbers
- The information on the Sunny App is consistent with the 1800RESPECT Easy English books to enable them to be used together to reinforce safety messages.
- Use in conversations about safety planning
- Make sure that a woman is safe to use the App if she is taking it home
- Although it uses Easy Language principles, the App can be useful for women who do not identify with having a disability, but may be experiencing memory/cognitive issues.
- The language used in the Sunny App can be useful for women who have not yet found words to describe their experience
- Introduce and promote Sunny to other services that you refer women with disabilities to, or those you are working in collaboration with WWD.
- Can be used in one on one first response situations, eg. when someone is presenting in hospital
- When working with the App one on one with a client, make a proactive plan for the next step if someone discloses their experience

### Considerations for using Sunny

- Sunny is most accessible for women who are technologically savvy and own a smartphone or table
- Care should be taken using Sunny on a phone if women's phone are monitored or controlled by another person
- The Sunny App is designed for women with disabilities. It is important that it is used by women who do identify with the format and can relate to app and it's features

## Other considerations for using electronic resources.

Free and easy to download phone applications and websites, are a useful format for delivering information and education about violence and abuse. A client centred approach to inform use of electronic resources will consider:

- Phone/computer/internet access
- Digital literacy
- Resource download ability, storage, usability and suitability to the user and their supports, to best access and maximise the use of the features of the electronic resource
- Tailoring the training approach to the user's needs

When working one-on-one with clients, following the natural progression of the resource in a stepwise way can maximise the potential 'teachings' of the resource. In some instances it is impractical to use electronic resources with clients, this can be impacted by what is perceived as 'common practices', organisational policy for using electronic media, or in instances where the workplace is outside of mobile or internet coverage. Some services are in transition to an electronic platform and staff preference remains with printed and handout material, rather than electronic resources.

## Using electronic resources safely

Electronic resources require a level of technology literacy and awareness to use the resource safely and meaningfully. Factors that a user should be aware of include onlookers, data sharing, phone sharing, control of phone use, issues of confidentiality with iCloud platforms, and volume/audio features. It is important to combine broader training about how to use electronic resources safely with the targeted information about safety on the Sunny App - 'using Sunny safely'. This information can also be useful in setting a safety plan with a WwD. Furthermore, phone applications and websites can be useful to talk about 'what not to do' or to talk through scenarios about 'using technology differently' and focus on safety on media/electronic usage. It is also important to consider the way some perpetrators of violence hold and control information from women with disabilities as a form of, or connected to violence and abuse. Also electronic media that has storage features may be used as evidence in legal cases which needs to be considered when thinking about use of these resources.

## Using electronic resources in crisis intervention

For crisis intervention services that provide emergency smartphones, phone applications like Sunny can be pre-downloaded for clients. It can be a useful additional resource to use alongside other useful applications, phone numbers, and resources. Resources like Sunny are more likely to be used if they are pre-downloaded or downloaded for the woman with disabilities.

## 1800RESPECT Easy English books

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In 2019, 1800RESPECT co-developed with WwD, a set of three Easy English books about violence and abuse for people with disability. Book one is titled 'Learn about violence and abuse', book two 'Learn about rights' and book three 'Where violence happens, who can do violence'.

At the time of publication, they were available through 1800RESPECT only. Together they provide the reader with a comprehensive overview of different types of violence and abuse, scenarios about rights in relation to relationships, and rights to safety and respect. They also provide examples of places and types of relationships where violence and abuse can occur. Presented in an Easy English format with pictures and words, these resources are designed to be accessible for a broad range of people who may find complex language harder to read, comprehend and use.

Up to 44% of Australian adults find it difficult to read and write. Easy English is used in the disability field as best practice delivery of information (Scope Australia n.d). An important consideration when using Easy English resources is to consider whether your client has used these in the past and whether she considers she needs information provided in this format. Some WwD can feel affronted by these resources as they do not identify as a person who needs to use Easy English. This can be due to feelings of incapacity or being judged as incapable of understanding generalist information, they may see some resources as not 'applying or relating' to them.

## Quick reference guidelines for using 1800RESPECT Easy English books

*One research participant noted that when using these booklets it was important to "...pick and choose bits and pieces and use it, in conjunction with a conversation."*

*The following can be used to guide your use of the 1800RESPECT Easy English books*

- Use the booklets in early conversations with women to understand their experiences of violence and abuse
- Choose these resources if the woman is already familiar with and indicates she has used these kinds of resources successfully before
- Be very familiar with the content of the booklets so that you can judge their suitability and choose the most relevant parts for your client
- The information in the books is consistent with the Sunny App. This application can be downloaded on the woman's phone and can be used as a take home resource after a counselling session using the 1800RESPECT Easy English books
- After working with the resource one on one, make sure that a woman is safe to use this resource if she is taking it home as they are large and very identifiable as resources that are about violence and abuse
- Use the books at a pace that works for the woman. This might mean going through the whole resource in one go, or come back to it at another stage
- Share the resource with other services you refer women to or that refer women with disabilities to your service. This will ensure consistency for clients.
- The booklets can be used by staff to upskill in how to communicate in Easy English to prepare for conversations with clients, particularly staff with limited experience having these conversations or working with women with disabilities.
- Using the books can help to focus a conversation if the person is finding it difficult to communicate their experience
- Can be useful for supporters and carers to gain a clear understanding of experiences and responses to violence and abuse

## Consideration for using 1800RESPECT Easy English books

- Do not allow the woman to take this resource home if it is not safe for her; ie if staff supporting her do not know about her experiences, if the perpetrator is at her home. The Sunny app may be a more discrete option for information at home
- Make sure that the books can be used with the client in a culturally appropriate way
- It is best when the woman relates to the content and pictures in the resource: gender, culture, hair, body shape, sexuality, etc

## Using the Easy English resources in 'one-on-one' work

These resources are particularly accessible in one-on-one conversations with clients because they can be read by the counsellor to explain information, or as a way of focussing discussions on key messages. They can supplement other information and can be useful for reinforcing concepts and ideas that have been covered in counselling or other support services. It is important to ensure that by taking a resource home there is a plan to use it safely and privately if the woman does not want others to know about the supports and services she is receiving, in particular if there is concern about perpetrator access to the resources.

These resources can also be useful for developing a 'language' for the woman to use when talking about her experiences of violence and abuse. Understanding the woman and her needs, experiences and reading skills is important for using Easy English resources. Another consideration is to pace reading of these resources and not overload the woman with information. Some of these resources are long.

Using resources which come in sets, such as the 1800RESPECT books, may be confronting or overwhelming if used as a whole. From a trauma perspective, this could be triggering, so tailoring and focussing on the section/s of the books that the client needs at the time is recommended. In addition, having a PDF or online version of the booklets enables specific and shorter sections to be used to avoid unnecessary overexposure. These formats also allow quick access and an ability to search for words and terms, which is favourable in crisis settings where time is limited. Physical ability to hold and use a hard copy book also needs to be considered when using this type of resource.

## Accessibility of Specialist Easy English resources

Generally, Easy English combines images alongside pieces of text. Typically these images are directional and correspond to the wording. Images need to be diverse and portray characteristics which are relatable for the women using these resources.

Resources which are slim, light and easy to use and transport, the 1800RESPECT Easy English books are a good supplement to these books for people who cannot handle the size and weight of the Easy English books.