

Sex education for children with intellectual disabilities - tips for parents

All people, including those with disabilities, have the right to explore and express their sexuality in appropriate ways. Everyone needs ongoing and age appropriate sexuality education to develop positive attitudes about their sexuality.

Comprehensive sexuality education can help people with intellectual disabilities stay safe and reduce the risk of sexually transmissible infections (STIs) and unplanned pregnancy. Many parents don't provide sexuality education because they mistakenly think their child 'won't need it'. Other parents have tried, but struggle to present the information in a way their child can understand.

Aspects of sex education

Sexuality education should include information about:

- Developing social skills, including concepts such as 'public' and 'private'
- How to develop and maintain different types of relationships
- Coping with relationship issues or rejection
- Sex and relationships, including marriage and parenting
- Protective behaviours
- The physical and emotional changes of puberty
- The biology of sex, including reproduction
- Appropriate and inappropriate expressions of sexuality
- STIs
- Safer sex
- Contraception
- Masturbation
- Same-sex attraction.

Tailoring information to your child

There isn't a 'standard' model of sexuality education that suits all children with an intellectual disability. Information needs to be tailored to your child's level of understanding. For example, children with a moderate or profound intellectual disability might need more basic information. This could include information about differences between males and females, what kind of touch is appropriate or inappropriate and how to behave in different social situations.

Preparing yourself

Suggestions for parents include the following:

- Make sure you have all the information you need. If you're unclear about any details, check first.
- Source a range of books, DVDs and other resources on sexuality and disability. Check online or visit Family Planning Victoria's Resource Centre.
- Ask your child's teachers or carers about the sexuality education their school is providing. They might be able to give you advice or suggest useful resources.
- Talk to your disability association, Family Planning Victoria and other parents in relevant support groups for suggestions and tips on how to best deliver the information to your child.
- Work through any feelings of unease and embarrassment you might have, possibly with the help of a counsellor. It's important to keep messages positive and non-judgemental.

- Decide beforehand which words you're going to use. This can be difficult, since names for body parts (such as vagina and penis) tend to be either medical or slang. Avoid vague euphemisms such as 'front bottom', as this can confuse your child or give them the impression that talking about genitals is shameful or embarrassing.

Talking about sex in different ways

You should look out for times when your child shows interest or curiosity in sex. For example, they might see actors kissing in a movie on television and start asking questions. Suggestions on ways to talk about sex include the following:

- As with any child, sexuality education should be delivered over time. Give the simpler facts first and then continue to add to your child's knowledge as they grow older.
- Try to deliver information as simply as you can.
- Try to keep discussions light and fun.
- Anatomically correct dolls can help teach your child about differences between the genders.
- Children with intellectual disabilities often have trouble thinking in abstract ways. It might be helpful to source a range of resources, such as books with clear and simple pictures, DVDs, dolls and three-dimensional models of body parts.
- Read age and developmentally appropriate stories about sex and sexual issues together. Contact your local disability association or Family Planning Victoria for resources.
- Role play might be useful when discussing relationship skills or assertiveness. For example, help your child to practise saying 'no' to unwanted advances in different settings.
- Role play might also help your child to understand the difference between private and public settings if they're having trouble.
- Use demonstrations whenever possible. For example, you could use dolls to show where babies come from or take your daughter with you to the toilet to demonstrate pad changing and disposal.
- Masturbation should be discussed as a healthy and natural way to explore and express sexuality on your own and in a private place.

Negotiating stumbling blocks

Some aspects of your child's sexuality education may be more difficult than others. Suggestions for dealing with stumbling blocks include the following:

- Use praise and positive reinforcement when your child shows understanding of a particular topic or displays the desired behaviour.
- If you don't know the answer to your child's question, say so. Suggest that you find out the information together, possibly online.
- It's okay to be uncomfortable or embarrassed, but be honest about it with your child.
- There is no single 'right' way to talk to your child about sex. It will be a process that includes ups and downs. Don't be discouraged or upset if one particular method doesn't work. Put it behind you and try something else.
- Remember that what works for other parents might not work for you and vice versa. Keep experimenting.
- If your child is having trouble grasping a concept, try breaking it down into smaller steps.
- Seek advice from your local disability association, Family Planning Victoria or relevant support groups.
- Try to use simple, concrete words and concepts.
- Use a range of methods for each topic to increase the likelihood of retention.

Following up

Suggestions include the following:

- Realise that your child needs constant reminding and reinforcement. You might need to cover the same topic several times before they fully understand.
- Ask your child questions to make sure they have understood the information.
- Using dolls or puppets in the teaching process might help your child to show their understanding of sexuality without feeling pressured.
- Keep your child's carers informed and make sure that sexuality education provided by other sources is presented along similar lines to yours.

Where to get help

- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100 or 1800 013 952 www.fpv.org.au – FPV's Resource Centre has a wide range of useful books and educational resources for parents and carers of people with disabilities
- Yooralla Community Learning and Living Centre Tel. (03) 9916 5800
- Scope Tel. (03) 9843 3000
- Disability Intake and Response Service Tel. 1800 783 783 or TTY 1800 008 149

Things to remember

- Sexuality education needs to be tailored to your child's level of understanding.
- Resources such as books, stories, DVDs, anatomically correct dolls and three-dimensional models can help your child grasp abstract ideas.

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