

Supporting Healthy Sexuality

Support Person Fact Sheet

Key Facts

The subject of sexuality includes: a person's sexual orientation, sexual feelings and sexual activity. It also includes sexual and reproductive health and healthy relationships. Many people with I/DD have boyfriends, girlfriends, partners, or spouses. They have the same rights and choices about relationships and their sexuality as their peers without I/DD, and often need information and support to help them make healthy decisions about these issues.



Education about Healthy Relationships and Healthy Sexual Behaviors

Formal education is particularly important for people with I/DD. Without this education, vital information about these topics could be misunderstood and leave the person vulnerable when it comes to relationships and sexual experiences. They also may be less likely to informally learn about sexuality from movies, the internet, magazines, and talking to friends. A teacher should be a person who has been trained to run sexuality programs for people with I/DD. However, family members and support staff can help by being willing to talk about relationships and sexuality, answering questions, and reinforcing education.

Education should start when one is young, with topics like friendships, feelings, “public” and “private,” OK and not OK behaviors, parts of the body and the law. As people go through their teenage years, education moves on to subjects like menstruation, masturbation, consent, intercourse, safe sex, and heterosexual and same-sex relationships.

Education also needs to cover the risks of sexually transmissible infections (STIs). People need to learn about their own bodies including the importance of seeing a doctor if they see changes in their breasts or testes. Women should also have regular Pap tests, especially if they are sexually active.

The Role of Support Workers and Families

Parents and support providers often play an important role in educating those they are supporting about healthy relationships and healthy sexual behaviors. According to the Oregon Healthy Teens Survey, youth with disabilities are:

- Sexually active at an earlier age
- At higher risk for pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections
- Less likely to practice safe sexual behaviors
- More than twice as likely to experience sexual coercion, assault and abuse when compared to their peers without disabilities.

Therefore it is extremely important for those in a supportive role to educate the person about healthy relationships and healthy sexual behaviors as early as possible.

Privacy

All people need privacy and to respect other people's privacy. One important role of privacy is that it gives a person the opportunity to be sexual. This can mean masturbation, or it can mean developing a relationship — kissing and cuddling and moving to a sexual relationship if the two people want that.

Consent

People with I/DD have the right to decide if they want to be sexual, but they can be vulnerable to exploitation. For a person to consent to sexual touching, they need to understand that the other person is going to touch them in a “sexual” way. They have to be happy about what is happening and know they can say yes or no. It can be difficult to know whether a person is able to give consent. Consult a professional if unsure

Mandatory Reporting

People have the responsibility to protect those that cannot protect themselves. In the US, most states have laws to protect people with I/DD from abuse. Oregon state law mandates that certain professionals must make a report if they have reasonable cause to suspect abuse. These people include mental health providers, social service agencies, law enforcement personnel, clergy, emergency response workers, and healthcare providers. These people are called “mandatory reporters”. You can report abuse in Oregon by calling 855-503-SAFE (855-503-7233).



For more information:

[Click here for information about your sexual rights: \(URL: https://thearc.org/position-statements/sexuality/\)](https://thearc.org/position-statements/sexuality/)

[Click here for information on reporting abuse: \(URL: https://www.oregon.gov/odhs/report-abuse/pages/default.aspx?utm_source=ODHS&utm_medium=egov_redirect&utm_campaign=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.oregon.gov%2Fdhs%2Fabuse%2Fpages%2Findex.aspx\)](https://www.oregon.gov/odhs/report-abuse/pages/default.aspx?utm_source=ODHS&utm_medium=egov_redirect&utm_campaign=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.oregon.gov%2Fdhs%2Fabuse%2Fpages%2Findex.aspx)

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The fact sheet contains general information only and does not take into account individual circumstances. It should not be relied on for medical advice. We encourage you to review the information in this fact sheet within the context of educational purposes and when appropriate, share it with your health professional to decide whether the information is right for you.

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