

Sex education for children with intellectual disabilities - tips for parents

All people, with or without a disability, need ongoing and age appropriate sexuality education to develop positive attitudes to their sexuality. All humans, regardless of abilities or disabilities, are sexual beings and have the right to explore and express their sexuality in appropriate ways.

Without adequate sex education, people with intellectual disabilities may be at increased risk of experiencing sexual abuse, sexually transmissible infections (STIs) or unplanned pregnancy. Many parents don't provide sex education because they mistakenly believe their child 'won't need it'. Other parents have tried, but struggle to present the information in a way that their child can understand.

Aspects of sex education

Ideally, sex 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 difficulties or rejection
- Sex and relationships, including marriage
- Protective behaviours
- The changes of puberty
- The physical mechanics of sex, including reproduction
- Appropriate and inappropriate expressions of sexuality
- Sexually transmissible infections
- Safer sex
- Contraception
- Masturbation
- Same sex attraction.

Information needs to be tailored to the child

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

Prepare yourself first

Suggestions for parents include:

- Make sure you know what you're talking about. If you are unclear about any details, check first.
- Have a look at a variety of books and materials on sexuality and disability. You can browse on the Internet or visit the library and bookstore at Family Planning Victoria.
- Ask your child's teachers or carers about what sort of sex education their school is providing. They may be able to give you advice or show you resources.
- Talk to your disability association, Family Planning Victoria and other parents in relevant support groups for suggestions and tips on how to best express the information to your child.
- Work through your own feelings of unease and embarrassment, perhaps with the help of a counsellor. It is important to keep messages positive and non-judgemental.
- Decide beforehand which words you're going to use. This can be tricky, 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 you may cause confusion or give your child the impression that talking about genitals is shameful or embarrassing.

Different ways to talk about sex

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

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

Negotiating stumbling blocks

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

- 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, admit it. Suggest that you find out the information together, perhaps using the Internet as a resource.
- There is no single 'right' way to talk to your child about sex. It will be a process that includes success and failure. 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 may 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 disability association, Family Planning Victoria or relevant support groups if you are stuck for ideas.
- Try to use simple, concrete words and concepts.

Following up

Suggestions include:

- Realise that your child needs constant reminding and reinforcement. You may have to cover the same topic many 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 may allow your child to express their understanding about sexuality without feeling pressured.
- Keep your child's carers informed and make sure that sex education provided by other sources is presented along similar lines to yours.

Where to get help

- Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100 – the FPV library has a range of useful books and educational resources for parents and carers
- Yooralla Community Learning and Living Centre Tel. (03) 9916 5800
- Scope Victoria Tel. (03) 9843 3000
- Disability Intake and Response Service Tel. 1800 783 783

Things to remember

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

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Family Planning Victoria

This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. The information provided was accurate at the time of publication and is not intended to take the place of medical advice. Please seek advice from a qualified health care professional.

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