



Sexuality

Key facts

All people have the right to make choices about relationships. Many people with intellectual disability have boyfriends, girlfriends, partners or spouses. People with intellectual disability have sexual feelings just like other people and have the same choices to make about their sexuality.

People with intellectual disability often need information and support to help them make decisions about these issues.

Education about relationships and sexuality

Without education about relationships, a person is more likely to make unwise choices and to be vulnerable to sexual abuse. Education helps each person to think about and feel comfortable with their sexuality.

Education for a young person should start with topics like friendships, feelings, “public” and “private”, ok and not ok behaviours, 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.

Formal education is particularly important for people with intellectual disability. They are less likely to informally learn about sexuality from movies, the internet, magazines and talking to friends. They also find it harder to learn what is ok and not ok sexual behaviour.

The teacher should be a person who has been trained to run sexuality programs for people with intellectual disability. However support staff and family can help by being willing to talk, answering questions and reinforcing education.

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.

The role of support workers and families

Workers and families have an important role in supporting a person with their sexuality. They can also be role models by doing things like:

- Using daily opportunities to talk about what is ok and not ok.
- Using a person’s favourite TV show to talk about things like relationships.
- Knocking on a person’s door and waiting for a response before entering.

Sometimes, support workers and families don’t feel comfortable talking about sexuality. Then, it is important to help the person find someone else to talk to.

Consent

People with intellectual disability 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. You can consult a professional like a psychologist if you are unsure.

NSW also has laws to protect people with intellectual disability from sexual exploitation. It is a crime for a disability worker to have sex with a person with intellectual disability. And it is a crime for anyone to take advantage of a person’s intellectual disability to get them to have sex. Consent is no excuse for these crimes.

Sexual health

Education 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 and testes. Also, women should have regular Pap tests if they are sexually active.

Some people with intellectual disability have very delayed puberty. A doctor can investigate the cause of this.

For more information

Family Planning NSW has:

- Education resources for people with intellectual disability and education programs for disability workers.
- Clinics where people can see a doctor or nurse for advice.
- A telephone advice line staffed by nurses. Phone 1300 658 886. www.fpnsw.org.au

There is information on Family Planning Associations in other parts of Australia at www.shfpa.org.au

The Intellectual Disability Rights Service provides legal advice and information.
Phone (02) 9318 0144 or freecall 1800 666 611
www.idrs.org.au

Being a healthy woman, a book for women with intellectual disability, their families and disability workers.

www.health.nsw.gov.au/pubs/2010/being_healthy_woman.html

You might be interested in these fact sheets

- **Contraception**
- **Managing menstruation**
- **Preventive health**

*This fact sheet was updated in **May 2011**.*

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 look at the information in this fact sheet carefully with your health professional to decide whether the information is right for you.