



the incubator hub by Healthy Teen Network

# Young People with Disabilities Tip Sheet

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## What are disabilities?

Disabilities are human conditions where a **person's brain or body functions differently than most other people's brains or bodies**, and where that person faces mistreatment, unequal treatment, or exclusion based on their brain or body.

In other words, disability happens when people's atypical bodies and brains exist in a society that treats only some kinds of bodies and brains as valuable.

*From the World Health Organization*

*Disability results from the interaction of the individual with a health condition with personal and environmental factors, including negative attitudes, inaccessible transportation and public buildings, and limited social support.*

*16% of the world has a disability. 1.3 billion, or 1 in 6 people, have a disability.*

Some disabilities are mostly physical and affect how a person's body moves, what their body looks like, or what senses they use.

Among others, this includes:

- people who use wheelchairs, scooters, walkers, or canes.
- people with disfigurements and people with partial or absent limbs.
- people who are blind, low-vision, deaf, or hard-of-hearing.

Other disabilities are mostly mental and affect how a person learns, thinks, feels emotions, and communicates. This includes people with learning disabilities, altered mental states, and intellectual disabilities—among others.

Some disabilities are lifelong and start at birth. Other disabilities can be acquired late—like if someone became paralyzed after a car accident or developed post-traumatic stress effects after surviving a violent attack.

People can have more than one type of disability, including disabilities they were born with and disabilities they acquired later.

# Cultural Impact: Negative & Positive Messages & Outcomes

The disability and self-advocacy movements give positive messages and impact.

## Negative Cultural Messages

- **Negative messages:** not sexual, hypersexual, childlike
- **Stereotypes:** dependent, cannot make good decisions
- **Ableism:** are less than people without disabilities

*Leads to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to have*



## Negative Outcomes

- Lacking sexuality education
- Complying vs. consenting
- Feeling disempowered
- Lacking body autonomy
- Lacking control
- Having higher rates of sexual violence, unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and loneliness and isolation

## Positive Cultural Messages: “Nothing About Us Without Us”

- Empowers self-advocates
- Person-centered
- Supportive decision-making
- Dignity of risk
- Sexuality and relationships are human rights
- Everyone deserves sexuality education

*Leads to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to have*



## Positive Outcomes

- Owning their bodies
- Controlling their lives
- Making their own decisions
- Being proud of who they are
- Having dignity
- Forming positive, healthy relationships
- Decreasing abuse











# Sexuality and Relationships Education for People with Disabilities

Use the following three steps to effectively support end users with disabilities.

## Step 1: Self-Reflection

- Do I have negative or positive values, attitudes, and beliefs regarding sexuality and disability?
- Am I comfortable or uncomfortable with people with disabilities? Why or why not?
- Am I nervous about doing something wrong, or do I see them as fragile?
- What model of disability do I use? Why?
- What kind of experience do I have working with this population?
- Since there is a higher rate of abuse, have I done the work of my own trauma history?

## Step 2: The Needs of the End Users

-  What sexuality education have they received?
-  Non-speaking
-  Non-reading
-  Deaf
-  Sensory issues
-  Need more time to process
-  Need movement
-  Physical disabilities

### Step 3: Considerations, Messages, and Techniques

#### Considerations:

- Variety of disabilities, provide adaptations, communication supports, interpreters, technology, role-play, and hands-on visuals.
- Taught to comply: Rather than "Does not make sense," say, "Can you repeat what we just talked about?"
- Non-compliance skills, saying no and yes.
- Be prepared for disclosure. Reinforce the message, "it's not your fault," and provide trauma-informed sexuality education.
- Need consistent messages.
- Teach to the biological age, not "cognitive" age.

#### Messages This Population Needs to Hear:

- Messages from the self-advocacy and other disability movements.
- Positive messages about sexuality, not just abuse prevention.
- Disability language.
- To be treated just like anyone else.
- Know that you believe they are competent. Assume competence.

#### Techniques:

- Slow down, silence is okay.
- Take breaks, short chunks of content, and avoid ambiguity.
- Repetition.
- Simplified responses.
- Practice, practice, practice speaking up.
- Task analysis, chaining.
- Use lots of visuals, communication boards, and cards.
- Use plain language and be concrete.



## Additional Resources

### To read:

- Organization for Autism Research, Sex Ed. Guide for Self-Advocates  
Search “sex ed” at <https://researchautism.org/sex-ed-guide/>

### To listen/watch:

- “Sexuality and People with Developmental Disabilities” series of videos. You will hear directly from people with developmental disabilities about the importance of open dialogue, access to information and resources, and connecting people to the community as the foundation to developing more intimate and meaningful relationships and supporting them in their sexual self-advocacy.  
<https://opwdd.ny.gov/access-supports/empowerment#sexuality-and-people-with-developmental-disabilities>
- Sex Talk for Self-Advocates Webinar Series  
<https://www.elevatustraining.com/resources-2/sex-talk-for-self-advocates-series/>
- Organization for Autism Research, Sex Ed for Self-Advocates Podcast  
<https://researchautism.org/sex-ed-for-self-advocates-podcast/>
- Sex Ed for People with IDD: videos by NCIL and Rooted in Rights  
<https://ncil.org/sex-ed-for-individuals-with-i-dd/>
- *Crip Camp* on Netflix <https://www.netflix.com/title/81001496>
- Comprehensive Sex Education for Youth with Disabilities: A Call to Action by SIECUS  
<https://siecus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/SIECUS-2021-Youth-with-Disabilities-CTA-1.pdf>

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