



SEXUAL HEALTH PROMOTION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

People with disability are a diverse group of people with diverse needs and experiences who are too often forgotten in sexual health promotion.

The United Nations (2009) identifies people with disability as *'those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'*

People with disability have the right to have sexual relationships, to access sexual health services and information, and to make decisions about their own bodies.

Yet young people with disability often have numerous barriers to attaining good sexual health and wellbeing. It is commonly assumed that they don't or can't have sex, or that they don't have diverse gender or sexual identities. Where these assumptions are held by support workers or professionals, this may impact a person's ability to access sexual health information and services. Young people with disability, particularly young people with intellectual disability, may receive limited sexual health education at school and may therefore miss out on learning key sexual health messages. Sexual health programs and resources are often inaccessible or not suited to the person's particular needs or circumstances.

Obligations under disability discrimination legislation and international human rights frameworks, and high rates of sexual assault experienced by people with disability indicate the need for health promotion programs that are inclusive, relevant and accessible, and that support people with disability to make their own choices in addressing their sexual health.

The tips below may assist you when working with young people with disability.

Developing inclusive materials and health promotion programs

- **Include the needs of young people with disability in health promotion programs.** This includes the planning and delivery of these programs. Consider how approaches may be adapted to meet the different needs of young people with disability. Focus on making mainstream programs accessible and inclusive and develop disability-specific programs only when required. This should be done proactively as not all disabilities are visible, and not all young people with disability identify as having a disability. Here are some examples for making mainstream programs accessible and inclusive:
 - Use plain English and illustrations/photos for all written resources
 - Include the stories of people with disability whenever you use stories of young people
 - Close caption and audio describe video content
 - Ensure venues used for events meet the Disability (Access to Premises - Buildings) Standards 2010
 - Ensure web based content adheres to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)
- **Choose broad-ranging approaches that respectfully portray disability, as well as diverse cultural backgrounds, genders, sexualities and intersex variations.** Be a visible ally by displaying posters and other items that positively depict people with disability in their diversity.
 - Family Planning NSW has two poster series that tell the stories of people with disability, their sexualities and relationships- Love and Kisses and Outing Disability <https://shop.fpnsw.org.au/> In particular, Outing Disability is an example of a project that uses photo and video to highlight the stories of LGBT people with disability <http://outingdisability.com.au/>

- **Ensure accessibility of all health promotion programs.** Consider systems, facilities and services, including the format of resources and activities, the language and images used, and how resources and venues are accessed. Ask young people with disability you work with to give suggestions and feedback. Provide health education about all sexual behaviours rather than information based on a person's assumed capacity or needs.
- **Create and maintain safe settings.** Raise awareness of the sexual rights of people with disability and actively combat misconceptions, stigma and lack of knowledge amongst colleagues and also within the broader community. Consider the accessibility and inclusivity of the physical and social environment.

Learn how to support people with disability

- **Establish links with organisations of and for people with disability.** There are a variety of national, state and local organisations led by, and working on behalf of, people with disability. Some organisations represent people with all types of disabilities, while others represent groups of people with specific disabilities. They can assist in connecting to local young people with disability, and provide guidance on how to ensure systems, facilities and services are inclusive and accessible.
- **Support people with disability.** Ensure individuals who discuss their sexual health receive positive, non-judgemental and useful responses. Don't patronise or talk down to people with disability. Treat them with respect and dignity. Address the individual directly, not a support person (if present). Information provided should always be inclusive of sexual and gender diversity and intersex status. If unsure of what type of information would be most relevant for the individual, or how to communicate most effectively with that individual, ask them. Each person is an expert in their own needs.

Consider your own approaches

- **Be aware of your assumptions.** Don't assume a person's knowledge, experience or decision making capacity based on their disability. Don't assume a person needs or wants your assistance. Always listen and ask.

- **Use appropriate language.** In Australia, best practice language is to use "person with disability" or "people with disability". Avoid terms that may have negative meanings (e.g. retard, invalid, suffers from..., crippled) or imply that people with disability are courageous, brave, inspirational or pitiable for living with a disability. It is okay to use common expressions like "see you soon" or "I'd better be running along", even if a person is vision impaired or uses a wheelchair.

Useful resources

- Family Planning NSW has an extensive collection of reproductive and sexual health resources available for loan to people with intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorders, and their support people, including parents and carers, disability workers, clinicians and students. Go to www.fpnsw.org.au/disability for more information.
- Promoting Sexual and Reproductive Health for Persons with Disabilities: WHO/UNFPA Guidance Note. See <http://www.unfpa.org/publications/promoting-sexual-and-reproductive-health-persons-disabilities>
- Australian Network on Disability- factsheets on understanding disability. See <https://www.and.org.au/pages/understanding-disability.html>
- People with Disability Australia- Inclusive language guide <http://pwd.org.au/resources/language-guide/>
- Women with Disability Australia Youth Network – multiple articles <http://youth.wwda.org.au/>
- Insight- Sex and Disability episode <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eMAJHmoj9zs>

References

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- World Health Organisation (WHO) 2009, Promoting Sexual and Reproductive Health for Persons with Disabilities: WHO/UNFPA Guidance Note. WHO: Geneva

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