

Tips for Parents: Talking to Your Child with a Disability About Sexuality

Disability Services ASAP (A Safety Awareness Program)

This fact sheet provides pointers on talking with your child with a disability about sexuality. Children with disabilities often do not get the basic information they need about sexuality and their bodies. In the past, family members and teachers avoided these topics out of a desire to keep children safe and because it was feared that teaching about sexuality would lead to sexual behaviors.

All people are sexual from birth to death, including children with disabilities. All children benefit from knowing what is okay to do in public and what is not, and understanding enough about their own bodies and sexuality to know if they are being sexually abused and how to get help.

This fact sheet provides tips on ways to approach this topic, but not specifics about what information to share. Share what is appropriate for your child's age and ability to understand, and is in keeping with your own family values.

If you need assistance with more specific information and resources, contact your local Planned Parenthood, a family therapist, a school counselor or a local library or bookstore for a basic book on about teaching children about sexuality. Tips for beginning this discussion include:

- Keep in mind that both you and your child may feel uncomfortable talking about this subject. That's okay. You will most likely feel more comfortable once you get started and with practice.
- If you feel embarrassed, you can tell your son or daughter that you are a bit embarrassed but that this is important enough you want to talk about it anyway.
- Don't assume that your child does not need to know about sexuality just because of her or his disability. We all need accurate information about our bodies to feel good about ourselves and to be able to protect ourselves. If your child does not know that it is not okay for someone to touch the private parts of another person's body without permission (aside from providing assistance in using the toilet or bathing or for medical purposes), then he or she will not know to tell you if this happens.
- It is okay to set boundaries for your child's sexual behavior, as long as you do so in a way that is clear, open and does not make her or him feel guilty for being sexual.
- Be very clear about what can be done in private (such as masturbation) and what can be done in public (such as hugging). Knowing these boundaries can help adults and children with disabilities avoid getting into legal trouble for public sexual behaviors.
- Reinforce what sexual behaviors toward other people are not okay. A child with or without a disability should not grab another person on the rear end, breasts or genitals. This kind of behavior won't be tolerated as they grow up, and it is much easier to teach it while your child is young. The same rules should apply to your child with a disability as to other children.
- Remember, what you are teaching will be helpful to your child throughout her or his life. She or he will naturally learn about sexuality through peers, siblings, television and other sources. You have the opportunity to make sure that you are balancing these messages with factual information taught with your family values.

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