

Supporting People with Learning Disabilities in their sexuality

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Sex and Learning Disabilities

In recent years, major changes have taken place in the way we think about people with a learning disability, and in our approaches to their sexual needs.

Ideally, everybody involved with the care of people with learning difficulties is trained in to support them. However, people with learning disabilities are still abused and many left without full access to sexual expression.

Everyone has sexual needs, feelings and drives. The question here is: how can we support people with learning disabilities to channel their needs, feelings and drives to experience pleasure and enjoyment, without exploitation and danger?

Learning about sexuality is a life-long and often haphazard process. Babies learn, from birth onwards, about the bodily pleasure of being warm, being cuddled, being tickled and interacted with. We learn from watching the ways in which our parents show affection to each other; we learn from spoken and unspoken messages about private parts; also from films, advertisements and soap operas on TV.

Children with a learning disability grow up. Although puberty may be slightly delayed for those with profound or multiple disabilities, they go through the same process as any other child: boys' voices start to break, body hair starts to grow, girls begin their periods, boys start to have wet dreams, mood swings become more extreme. All that is the biological process of puberty, which cannot be stopped, even if sometimes parents would want it to!

Sadly, it is often the case that youngsters with learning disabilities only get a very negative form of sex education — "Don't do that, it's not nice!" "Stop touching yourself down there; that's bad!" They need more positive sex education than most young people, in order to protect them from people who seek them out in order to exploit and harm them.

They may need to learn :-

- 1) about bodies and bodily pleasure
- 2) to feel they "own" their own body and can say "no" to touches they do not like
- 3) the difference between public and private
- 4) how to socialise and make friends and how friendship can develop into a sexual relationship

Teaching Public and Private Spaces

Before you start teaching about appropriate behaviour, you may need to start by helping a client to understand the difference between a public and a private spaces and which areas of the body are 'private'.

Public places – where other people are and where other people can see them. It can be helpful to show pictures of familiar public places e.g. the eating room, communal room with others in it, a park, a swimming pool, with a picture of someone naked masturbating with a cross over it.

Private places are where the client is alone. Again, it can help to show pictures of familiar private places e.g. their bedroom and the bathroom, with a tick.. It can also help to have 'private' signs on the doors of private spaces.

Very often, you need to repeat this teaching many times and remind them regularly.

Some learning disabled people need to learn about private parts of the body. A popular way to teach this is to get a roll of lining paper and draw round your client's body, so you have an outline drawing of it. You can then label parts of the body, starting with parts it's OK to show in public – arm, leg etc. Then label the nipples, bottom, [penis/vulva](#) and say that these are private parts of the body and that we don't show them or touch them in public. You could draw underwear on them or use real underwear of your client's to cover up these areas.

The NSPCC have a booklet called the [PANTS rule](#), which you might find helpful.

Teaching People with Learning Disabilities how to Masturbate

Health professionals and parents may observe problems with learning disabled people with their attempts to masturbate, and decide that they need teaching.

We may be talking about a person with with a mental age of 2 but the body of a 20 year old. They may be behaving inappropriately, masturbating in public, and may be approaching others while masturbating. Like other two year olds, males may be touching their genitals because it feels nice and comforting, but then have to deal with arousal – in the case of males, an erection, which they don't understand. They may be playing with themselves out of boredom, anger, hunger, and then not reach orgasm, which may leave them, strung out and bewildered.

Film

There is a short, explicit film of a man masturbating to orgasm. It shows a non-physically-disabled man masturbating to orgasm by stroking his erect penis. The film is very short but some men masturbate for hours of pleasure. Some men also stimulate their nipples and/or other erogenous zones. The man in this film has a larger than normal penis (like most men do in pornography) .Not everyone can get an erect penis, not everyone has an orgasm where they ejaculate (cum). Some people with physical impairments cannot manage this

at all, and need a sex toy. Some people may find the direct stimulation to be a sensory overload and may prefer to rub through cloth or against something. This is all normal and OK, so long as it feels good, happens in private, and isn't causing any physical harm. [Click here to see film](#)

Illustrations

Change have produced a booklet on masturbation :
<http://www.changepeople.info/product/sex-and-masturbation/>

Trainer

If a person is to be brought in to teach the client how to masturbate, there needs to be a background assessment from the parent or one of the members of staff who has voiced the concern, and discussed it with them, in order to understand exactly what they think is going on, and where the difficulties lie. The trainer needs to see the written assessment. In order for clear communication with the client, the trainer must understand, how they generally say yes and no, and learn to communicate before proceeding.

When the trainer then sees the client, they must make it clear that even though others may have asked them to come to see them, they are there for the client, and ensure the client understands this. Understanding must be expressed by "yes" and "no" with words or signs that are known to mean yes and no. The trainer must also say that everything that is said or that happens is in strict confidence, perhaps with the one member of staff who did the assessment and is acting as their legal representative, and obtain confirmation that this is understood.

The next step for the trainer is to discuss the situation with the client to find out what their behaviour is like, what is going on in their world, what is causing the worry which the professionals have, and what the origins of this behaviour is. This will be written up in the trainer's confidential assessment.

It may be that when the learning disabled person is angry they comfort themselves by playing with their genitals, and, if this is a male, the trainer can explain that this might make the penis big and throbbing. Arousal can make the individual feel worse, so perhaps they could learn to comfort themselves another way.

If necessary, discussions on the guiding of their hand or demonstrations using a life-like sex toy may need to follow those discussions, or they may be the way which is selected by the trainer to proceed. In the UK, usually the trainer will only be brought in when all discussions have failed on their own. For example, if the client is being caused distress because they cannot make masturbation work for them and they cannot achieve orgasm, then the best course of action will be the guidance of their hands so that they learn how to

reach orgasm, which parents and health professionals may not be allowed/choose not to do. The trainer must agree not to include their own sexuality nor have sex with the client, and not abuse the client nor support them to abuse someone else.

The trainer needs to write out their planned activity, and then get the client to agree to it, writing down the agreement and signing it and the client signing or, if required, having the legal representative sign, having witnessed the client saying or showing agreement.

The trainer guides the client's hand, in order to reach the desired goal of being able to masturbate to orgasm by themselves.

If the client is physically unable to masturbate, then the trainer can show them how a sex toy can be fixed on their genitals and vibrate them to orgasm. Another session may be required to ensure that the client does it alone (or with the vibrator put in place), so the trainer can finish their consignment knowing he has taught the client effectively.

At the end, another final assessment must be completed to show how successfully the trainer has done the job of enabling the client to live happily. This statement can express uncertainties and suggestions for future actions.

Body Positive Training

It's important for all disabled people to feel good about their bodies so that they can enjoy them to the full. The use of mirrors, photographs and films of them looking good will boost their self esteem, cheer them up and provide them with sexual confidence.

This can be done with even the most severely learning impaired people. At the Chailey Heritage Foundation, as part of a PSHÉ Positive Body Awareness Programme which they were piloting, they allowed teenage girls (over 16) with profound and multiple learning difficulties and perhaps the mental age of as little as 6 months, to choose a bikini top and matching shorts. They dressed them in these matching outfits and showed them a reflection of themselves in the mirror. Most gave enchanting smiles of pleasure at themselves in the looking glass.

Dating

People First provides opportunities to socialise, train and campaign.
<http://peoplefirstltd.com/>

Essex Stars in the Sky a dating and friendship service for adults with learning difficulties in Essex and Suffolk. Members are paired up and have their first date with a member of staff sitting nearby. 01206 615 165
<http://www.brightlives.org.uk/essexstarsinthesky/About%20us/>

Stars in the Sky Worcestershire arrange members only social events in Worcestershire, giving people opportunities to meet new friends and form relationships. 01562 820262
http://www.kidderminstershuttle.co.uk/news/8337743.Dating_agency_for_people_with_learning_disabilities/

Love4Life Hampshire friendship and dating club, with people being matched up. 0808 168 4662 <http://www.fitzroy.org/love4life-about/>

Luv2meetU aims to provide support to people with learning disabilities to widen their circle of friends and develop friendships and relationships – helping to combat isolation and loneliness and improve overall health and well-being.
<http://www.luv2meetu.com/>

They have branches in:

- Bradford 07747 461225
- Calderdale 07825 781695
- Cheshire 07909 008257
- Kirklees 07747 461225
- Leeds 01924 229120
- North East Derbyshire 01274 655956
- Sheffield 01274 655956
- Wakefield 01274 655956

Mates 'n' Dates is a dating and friendship agency for adults with learning disabilities in Oxfordshire. They support adults with a learning disability to make new friends, to date and to develop relationships. Mates 'n' Dates has been open for 5 years and has over 260 members who live in Oxfordshire.
www.matesndates.org.uk

Mingle is a group for adults with learning disabilities who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or cross dress. The mingle group is also run by Mates 'n' Dates.

Like 2 Meet is a dating and friendship agency for adults with learning disabilities in South Wales. To join, people will need to be a member of either Vale People First, Bridgend People First, Cardiff or Newport People First and be over 18. 07866 564741
<http://www.valepeoplefirst.org.uk/>

If there's no club in your area then type the words "disco or club, learning disabilities" and your local town into your search engine to find out what's available locally. Examples of the type of club you might find are called **Beautiful Octopus**, **Squidz Club**, **Funky Flamingo** and **Bubble Club**.

Resources

Resources are also on www.SexualRespect.com/wordpress/resources/#lear

Change a provider of excellent visual resources that could be used to make social stories and sequential materials <http://www.changepeople.org>

fpa provide resources and training <http://www.fpa.org.uk/specialist-sexual->

[health-services-people-learning-disabilities/sexual-health-and-relationships-training](#)

SENSRE online support network for people who are providing or hoping to provide sex and relationships education for people with learning disabilities, autism and complex needs. They send out regular emails with information, ideas and issues. People can either follow the Twitter account - @sen_sre - or email or call Gillian Leno, Sex and Relationships Specialist, Queen Alexandra College, Harborne B17 9TG. It's [0121 428 5053](tel:01214285053) direct or email at gleno@qac.ac.uk

Queen Alexandra College Birmingham QAC working with professionals, educators and caregivers directly to develop and deliver appropriate support for pleasure-focused, rights-based sex education. This includes training specifically to support all the things that are discussed in their policy.
<http://www.qac.ac.uk/>

Living you Life— sex education and personal development resource for special educational needs now up dated and revised by **Brook**

Talking together...about sex and relationships by Lesley Kerr-Edwards and Lorna Scott 2003 fpa

Sex Education Forum leaflets

Respond London-based organisation working around abuse and learning difficulties
<http://www.respond.org.uk/what-we-do/training/>

YOI a social skills programme for people with developmental disabilities National Institute for People with Learning Disabilities, New York www.yai.org/services

Holding on Letting Go by John Drury, Lynn Hutchinson and Jon Wright 2000 Souvenir Press

Books Beyond Words a series of picture books produced by the Royal College of Psychiatrists and St Georges Hospital Medical School for adults and adolescents who cannot read or who have difficulty reading. Titles cover a wide range of subjects, including falling in love, personal hygiene and health, and sexual abuse. Suitable for 7 year olds and above <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/publications/booksbeyondwords.aspx>

Downs Syndrome Scotland <http://www.dsscotland.org.uk>

The Council for Disabled Children

<http://www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/resources/cdcs-resources/sex-and-relationships-education-for-children-and-young-people-with-learning-difficulties>

Elfrida Society <http://www.elfrida.com/publications.html>

Secret loves, hidden lives? — exploring issues for people with learning difficulties who are gay, lesbian or bisexual by David Abbott and Joyce Howarth. Policy Press 2005

Speaking Up published a booklet Sex and Sexuality in 2006 by people with learning difficulties. speakingup.org

The Sexuality & Sexual Rights of People with Learning Disabilities by Paul Cambridge 1996 BILD www.bild.org.uk

Sexual Health and Relationships —a review of resources for people with learning disabilities 2005 Health Scotland

http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/resources/s/genericresource_tcm4222735.asp

DVD called **You, your Body and Sex** deals with masturbation and privacy, is animated and usefully explicit.

Sex 1998 BILD

Love Is... Highland Learning Disabilities and Relationships Group

Let's Talk About Sex — Growing Up, Changing Bodies, Sex and Sexual Health 2001
Walker Books

Cloth Sex Education Models Jane Fraser has updated her cloth models which she sells for sex education for young people with learning disabilities. <http://www.bodysense.org.uk>

Teach-a-bodies anatomically correct dolls used in teaching

<https://www.teach-a-bodies.com>