

TIPS TO SUPPORT CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS ON SEXUAL HEALTH

1. **Teach appropriate terminology.** Often, people with disabilities have a difficult time with change, and that can be true with vocabulary. For example, if you teach a child with a disability that a penis is called a "pee pee", they may continue to use that word well into adulthood. If a person is assaulted and needs to explain where they were touched to a doctor or police officer, or if that person is in a romantic relationship and giving consent for a type of touch, it is important to use appropriate terminology.
2. **Rules.** Many people with disabilities can follow rules, but those rules need to be taught. For example, the three rules of a private place are: a place that belongs to you, when you are alone, and when people can't see you. Once a person with a disability has learned those 3 rules, they will most likely be able to follow those rules. These are particularly helpful rules when learning about masturbation.
3. **Repetition.** This is key when teaching about sexuality. Practice, practice, practice. Go over scenarios around healthy and unhealthy behaviors. Whatever topics you would teach to other children in the home should also be taught to the child with a disability. The way things are taught might be a bit different and may have to be repeated over and over.
4. **Use teachable moments.** Teaching children with disabilities in the moment of intensity is not ideal, but soon after the situation occurs is the best time. For example, after inappropriate touching, when everyone is calm, say to the child, "Remember earlier today, when your brother asked you to stop hugging him and you didn't stop? How do you think he was feeling? How were you feeling in that moment? What can we do next time so that both people are satisfied?"
5. **Talk about body rights – "my body belongs to me".** Teach the child that "no one has the right to touch you unless they ask and you say it's okay." Teach them that even if they need help with self-care and daily living skills, a caregiver, doctor or teacher still has to ask if it's okay to touch them - and they have the right to say no. This also goes the other way as well. If THEY want to touch someone, it's important for them to ask if it's okay, and the other person also has the right to say no.
6. **Talk about puberty.** When a child goes through puberty, hormones begin to race all over – whether a person has a disability or not. We are all sexual beings, regardless of ability. We all experience feelings of wants and needs. Children with disabilities also go through puberty and have these intense feelings. This can be a very scary and unknown time for children with disabilities, and it's important that parents and other adult caretakers have several conversations about the changes in their bodies, as well as feelings in their brains.
7. **Role-play.** This can be a fun activity for everyone, and extremely important for children with disabilities. Role-playing situations around healthy and appropriate touch are the most important. Sometimes, when role-playing unhealthy and inappropriate touch, children with disabilities become confused and may not understand that it is not appropriate. It is important to have many conversations about the inappropriate or unhealthy situations. Then practice what could be done instead that is appropriate or healthy as a role-play.