

TIPS FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS TO SUPPORT THE SEXUAL HEALTH OF LOVED-ONES WITH DISABILITIES

1. **Keep messages about sexuality positive.** So often, the messages we learned about sexuality when we were growing up focused on fear and shame. Focus on how sexual development is normal and healthy when you start conversations about sexuality with children. Sexual development allows our body to turn into an adult, it may lead toward special relationships and be a source of joy and pleasure. Imagine the long-term goals you have for your child when it comes to healthy sexual development. Work toward giving your child the education they need to reach those goals. We are all sexual beings, regardless of ability.
2. **Teach appropriate terminology.** Teach proper terms for body parts from the beginning, using illustrations and other references. 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. Using correct language is important in many situations, such as in the case of reporting assault or giving consent for a type of touch.
3. **Talk about puberty.** Puberty can be a confusing time for children with disabilities. Parents and other adult caretakers need to have several conversations about the physical and emotional changes they are experiencing. Children with disabilities deserve to have support from the adults in their lives during this challenging time.
4. **Rules.** Rules need to be taught. For example, the three rules of a private place are: 1) It is a place that belongs to you, 2) It is a place where you are alone, and 3) It is a place where people can't see you. Privacy rules can help a young person know where it is okay to masturbate. Other rules can be taught for consent, boundaries and other important concepts.
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 that even if they need help with self-care and daily living skills, the caregiver or doctor still has to ask if it's okay to touch them. They have the right to say no. This also goes the other way. If THEY want to touch someone, it is important for them to ask if it's okay, and the other person also has the right to say no.
6. **Repetition.** Practice, practice, practice. Go over scenarios involving 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. For many children with certain disabilities, repetition and keeping things simple are key to learning.
7. **Use teachable moments.** Sexual situations can cause many intense feelings on the part of children and their caregivers. Once the intensity of an event has subsided, it is important to address the situation as soon as possible. For example, after inappropriate touching, 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? What can we do next time?" Teaching the concept of asking for consent ("can I have a hug?") when they are young helps to ingrain the importance of this for life.
8. **Role-play.** Role-playing situations about healthy and appropriate touch is critical. Avoid role-playing unhealthy situations, as children may become confused and may not understand why something is not appropriate. It is important to have ongoing conversations about why some situations are unhealthy. Practice healthy and appropriate alternatives.