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Talking to your child/young person about sex and relationships.

Parents play a key role in teaching young people about sex and relationships, preparing them for the physical and emotional changes that they will experience while growing up and helping them develop the skills to understand the responsibilities and potential challenges that sexual maturity can bring.

Talking to your child or young person about sex is a challenge that all parents face. It is important that disabled young people are given the same opportunities and information as their peers wherever possible. This guide is designed to help parents begin having open discussions about sex and relationships with their children and young people. It has been written with children and young people with Special Educational Needs, Disabilities and Complex Needs in mind.

I'm worried about talking to my child/young person about sex.

You're not alone. Research carried out between the Council for Disabled Children, National Children's Bureau and Sex Education Forum explains that parents of Disabled children and young people have concerns about talking about sex with their children for many reasons. These include:

- Worrying that their child may become vulnerable to abuse or exploitation
- Conflict from religious or cultural beliefs
- A fear that knowing about sex may encourage children or young people to become sexually active earlier
- Difficulty in accepting their child/young person has sexual feelings and desires when their developmental age is much lower than their chronological age

These fears are understandable, and every parent wants to do the best for their child. However, children and young people who receive education around sex and relationships tend to become sexually active later than those who don't. Also, going through puberty and developing to sexual maturity without understanding or knowing about the changes taking place can feel confusing.

Discussing relationships with your child or young person will help them to be able to understand the difference between a healthy, loving relationship and abuse. Being open around changes that may happen during puberty and the development of sexual feelings will help young people to feel that they can talk to you about any of these feelings that they experience.

Sex and relationships education happens a number of ways: often through friends, media and even explicit material such as pornography. By beginning frank, open conversations around relationships and sex in the home, you can ensure that your child or young person is able to come to you with questions, rather than looking to other, less reliable sources.

How should I start talking to my child or young person about sex?

It is better to start talking to your child or young person as early as possible. It might be that you are looking for a good time to start talking to your child or young person about sex. If in doubt, start as early as you can and ideally before your child/young person has begun to experience puberty.

If you haven't started to talk about relationships and sex with your child/young person and they have already started to experience puberty, this doesn't mean it is too late to begin. If you are nervous about how to begin talking about this at home, here are some tips that may help:

- Talk to your child/young person during casual moments. While washing up, watching TV as a family or during daily routines such as dressing/getting ready for bed or while driving can be a good opportunity to approach a subject as there is other activity for you both to focus on so you can feel less nervous. It also shows your child/young person that talking about this subject is safe and nothing to worry about.
- Ask your child if they have any questions about what is happening to their body. You could start this by saying, for example, "now you're getting older some things about your body might change. You've grown lately, is there anything else you've noticed?" Make sure your child/young person knows that this process is normal.
- Be open about your beliefs. If you have particular religious or cultural beliefs around sex, be honest about these, but make your child/young person aware that you will try to discuss these openly with them and listen to their different opinion if necessary.
- Assume that your child/young person will go on to have as independent life as possible during these conversations and that sexual relationships will be a part of their future.
- Be realistic about any impact your child/young person's disability may have on their development, and reassure them that if it takes a little longer for them to experience changes or feelings, this is fine.
- Use scientific language. If this isn't the term your child/young person currently uses for body parts, start by using the language they are familiar with. Over time, introduce the anatomical words, especially when talking about genitals (penis, testicle, vagina, vulva.) This will give your child/young person confidence to talk about their body accurately.
- If your child/young person primarily uses symbols to recognise words – e.g if you use boardworks symbols for daily routine reminders – you can use these to help your child understand what you are talking about. Easyonthei have also produced a range of symbols that cover sexual health that are available here: <http://www.easyonthei-leeds.nhs.uk/all/>

What should I make sure they know?

The information that you feel your child or young person needs to know may vary, but at a minimum, all young people should know and understand:

- How their body works and grows – this will include anything that your child needs to know about their medical conditions/disabilities and how they can learn to look after themselves.
- What changes they can expect at puberty – ideally, they should know this before puberty starts. You may use symbols to describe some of these as mentioned above.
- The name and function of the sex organs. It is important that you also remind your child/young person that these are a private area. You may also want to talk to your child/young person about masturbation, and explain that they might enjoy doing this because it feels nice, but that it is a private behaviour and they should only do it when they are alone.
- Relationships and responsibility. This includes being able to talk about their feelings with friends/partners. You may want to explain that they will find other people attractive and want to touch them, but it is important to always have permission to do this, and not to touch someone else without asking.
- How they are expected to behave in public. This includes not touching themselves or other people.
- Keeping themselves safe from exploitation and abuse. By giving your child information about their body and making sure they know that no one should touch it without their permission, you help them to be able to recognise unwanted contact. It may help to discuss how they should handle a situation where they feel uncomfortable, for example, practising shouting 'NO', and rehearsing a list of adults they can tell – teachers, lifeguards, police officers.
- How to prevent unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Brook has clinics for young people up to 19 in Manchester, and other sexual health services can be found on www.nhs.uk You can tell your child/young person that looking after their sexual health is an important part of being an adult – just as they go to the doctor/dentist, they should also protect themselves and be screened for STIs.
- If your child has care workers, make sure that they are also using the correct terminology for body parts and are reinforcing the positive messages around sexual development you are giving your child/young person.

My child/young person has a physical disability. Does this change what I should tell them about relationships and sex?

The short answer is no. All children and young people have the right to accurate information about sex and relationships. However, some young people with disabilities may have experiences that their peers do not, and it's important that we talk about these. For example, intimate personal care can be a necessary part of life for some disabled children and young people. As they grow up, and if they are aware of puberty and their body changing, this might feel more awkward or embarrassing. It is helpful to have some rules around personal care for both family members and care workers, which could include:

- Knocking before entering the bedroom or bathroom.
- Asking permission when performing personal care e.g 'is it OK if I put your clothes on?'

- Involving children/young people in reviews of their personal care plans.
- Assessing whether there may be some aspects of personal care the child or young person could begin to take responsibility for.

My child/young person is developing sexually but still has the developmental age of a younger child. How can I talk to them about sex and relationships?

We understand that it might feel hard to talk to your child/young person about sex when their developmental age is lower than their chronological age. Young people who reach sexual maturity who still need all of their basic needs to be attended to by others and who can communicate very little verbally are still developing sexually, and still need to know what is taking place in their body as much as possible. Talk to your child/young person in the ways you would talk to them about any other subject, and use whichever methods of communication work best for your child.

If your child/young person seems particularly interested in their sexual development – perhaps masturbating frequently because they like the sensation – don't worry. This is a normal part of development. Brook has a traffic light tool describing sexual behaviours that are developmentally appropriate at each age range, and you may want to refer to this, looking at the developmental age bracket of your child/young person rather than the chronological one. If your child continues to show these behaviours, particularly in public, talk to the other professionals in their lives – teachers, doctors, care workers etc can all help to reinforce that this behaviour should be done in private.

A report in 2015 by the BBC's Victoria Derbyshire programme showed that over two years 4,748 reports of sexual abuse against adults with disabilities were reported to 106 of 152 councils in England. The data, secured through a freedom of information request showed that 63% of the 4,748 reported cases were against those with learning disabilities and 37% physical disabilities. It is important, as mentioned above, to practise with your child/young person what they could do if they were being touched without their consent.