

Guide for Health Educators:

Teaching Sexual Health Education to Students with Special Needs



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Welcome! Providing comprehensive and medically accurate sexuality education to all students, regardless of ability level, is vital to the health and well-being of all young people. This guide hopes to provide some basic tips and tools to help you better serve youth with special needs. This is not an all-encompassing guide, but instead an overview of some important topics.

As a sexual health educator your goal is to not be an expert in every disability, but instead to utilize resources and support people to best meet the needs of the population you're working with.

Language

Just as language is important in sexuality education, using appropriate and non-offensive language when working with students with special needs is vital. Remember that when speaking about or with a student with special needs to use "person-first language". We are all more than our abilities or disabilities, so speak of the person first, then the ability level. Remember that students with special needs deserve the same choices and independence as their peers. Just as with all students we should emphasize abilities and not limitations. If you're unsure of what language is appropriate or inappropriate be sure to ask the classroom teacher or support person.

Instead of....	Say...
Disabled or handicapped child	Child with a disability
Retarded	Person with cognitive disability
Mute	Non-verbal
Slow	Developmental delay
Crippled	Mobility impaired
Dwarf or midget	Of short stature
Afflicted, suffers from, victim of	Person who has...
Is learning disabled	Has a learning disability
Normal, healthy	Non-disabled
Sickly	Medically fragile or medically involved

*Reference: <http://missallisonclass.blogspot.com/>

Myths & Facts

Unfortunately, there are many myths surrounding sexuality and those living with disabilities. However, the following is true: All people, regardless of ability level, need affection, love and intimacy, acceptance and companionship.¹ Young people with special needs deserve to receive high-quality, medically accurate and factual sexual health education. Children and young adults living with a disability may have special and unique needs related to sexuality education, and should be provided with accommodations to meet their needs. It's the responsibility of sexual health educators to provide education that is free of bias, medically and factually accurate and age and developmentally appropriate. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the following topics be included in effective sexuality education: body parts, personal care and hygiene, pubertal changes, medical exams, social skills, sexual expression, contraception strategies and rights and responsibilities of sexual behavior. Topics should be presented in a way that allows students to be engaged and ask questions.

Tips for Teaching

- 1. Know your audience!** Before providing a program learn as much about your group as possible. Gather information from the classroom teacher, including in which ways the students learn best and what teaching techniques the teacher recommends. Also learn about the setting in which you'll be teaching, how the classroom is set up, what accommodations will need to be made for students and how you can tailor activities to best meet the needs of the students. In addition, find out what subjects the students already have a firm concept of as to determine which lessons are most important. Preplanning with the teacher will be instrumental in the success of your program.
- 2. Power of choice!** Allow the students to assert their independence and power of choice. Let students assist in determining what things they'd like to learn about. Give students the opportunity to decide which warm-up activity you'll do that day. Have students assist in creating group agreements. Help students in creating their own "sexual health bill of rights and responsibilities," to empower them to take responsibility for their sexual health. In addition, teach students that they have the choice and right to say "no" and have the right to refuse things that make them uncomfortable.
- 3. Keep it concrete!** Youth with special needs may have trouble with abstract thoughts, be sure to present material in a way that is concrete. Allow youth to practice new skills and role play situations. Help youth to see how the information you are teaching will be used in real life situations.
- 4. Repeat, repeat, repeat!** Repetition is important when teaching sexuality education. Before beginning new material ensure students have a firm grasp on the material you covered last class. If one concept seems to be challenging, take time to practice and use different teaching methods to present information. Remember to not pack too much information into your lesson plan, keep it simple and provide small amounts of information so students have time to practice and get comfortable with the concept.
- 5. Keep is visual!** Use visual aids to assist you as you teach various topics. Visual aids help students connect an idea with a concrete item. Ensure visuals are simple and easy to understand. Additionally, use multiple teaching techniques. Work with the classroom teacher to determine in which ways students learn best and adapt your material to meet the needs of students.
- 6. Use your resources!** It's very important to connect with teachers, support staff and parents/caregivers before, during and after providing sexual health information. These people know the students the best and can provide additional out of class support and practice opportunities. Provide worksheets or activities that students can take home and share with their parent/caregiver.

General Guidelines for Professional Sex Educators

The following guidelines have been created by *Advocates For Youth* (www.AdvocatesForYouth.org)

- Remember that, regardless of the physical, mental or emotional challenges they face, young people have feelings, sexual desire, and need for intimacy and closeness. In order to behave in a sexually responsible manner, each needs skills, knowledge, and support.
- Understand that youth with disabilities are far more vulnerable to sexual abuse than are their peers. Youth who live with developmental disabilities are especially vulnerable. Sex education, must, therefore, encompass skills to prevent sex abuse and encourage to report and seek treatment for unwanted sexual activity.
- Remember that youth who confront disabilities feel the same discomfort and suffer the same lack of information that hampers many of their peers regarding sexuality and sexual health.
- Learn as much as you can about the disabilities of the population with whom you work.
- Be sure that materials address boundaries and limits- both setting boundaries and respecting others' boundaries. Rely on role plays and interactive exercises. Use concrete teaching strategies.
- Be creative. Develop specialized teaching tools and resources for youth with whom you work. For example, in working with youth who have developmental disabilities, you may need to use visuals like models, dolls and pictures. For youth with physical disabilities, it may be useful to use stories and examples of others with similar disabilities who have loving, satisfying intimate relationships.

Resources

Curriculum:

Family Life and Sexual Health- Special Education FLASH- King County Washington

S.T.A.R.S.: a Social Skills Training Guide for Teaching Assertiveness, Relationship Skills and Sexual Awareness- Susan Heighway

Taking Care of Myself: A Hygiene, Puberty and Personal Curriculum for Young People with Autism- Mary Wrobel

Teaching Children with Down Syndrome about Their Bodies, Boundaries, and Sexuality: A Guide for Parents and Professionals- Terri Couwenhoven

Books for Educators and/or Parents:

Doing What Comes Naturally? Dispelling Myths and Fallacies About Sexuality and People with Developmental Disabilities- Orieda Horn Anderson

Sexuality: Your Sons and Daughters with Intellectual Disabilities- Karin Melberg Schwier and David Hingsburger

The Facts of Life...and More: Sexuality and Intimacy for People with Intellectual Disabilities- Leslie Walker

Books for Youth:

Boy's Guide to Becoming a Teen- American Medical Association

Girl's are Girls and Boys are Boys, So What's the Difference?- Sol Gordon

Girl's Guide to Becoming a Teen- American Medical Association

My Body...My Choice- Shirley Pacey

Respect: A Girl's Guide to Getting Respect & Dealing When Your Line is Crossed- Courtney Macavinta and Andrea Vander Pluym

Those are My Private Parts- Diane Hansen

Online Resources:

EyesOpenIowa- online resources including parent's guide- www.EyesOpenIowa.org

Advocates For Youth- www.AdvocatesForYouth.org

American Sexual Health Association- www.ashasexualhealth.org

Center for Disease Control and Prevention- information on STDS, HIV/AIDS- www.CDC.gov

Kids Health- resource for kids, teens, parents & educators- www.KidsHealth.org

Sex Etc. - information on terms, FAQ's, and state laws produced by Rutgers University- www.SexEtc.org

Teaching Sexual Health to Differing Abilities- <http://teachers.teachingsexualhealth.ca/lesson-plans/differing-abilities/>

Teaching Sexual Health to Youth with Physical Disabilities- <http://www.sexualityandu.ca/en/teachers/teaching-sex-ed-for-youth-with-physical-disabilities>

Teaching Sexual Health to Youth with Intellectual Disabilities- <http://www.sexualityandu.ca/en/teachers/teaching-sex-ed-for-youth-with-intellectual-disabilities>

Training Resources:

EyesOpenIowa offers in-person and webinar trainings on all sexual health topics including; Puberty, Reproductive Anatomy, Contraception, HIV/AIDS, STDs, LGBTQ Issues, Becoming an Askable Adult, Answering Sensitive Question, Pregnant and Parenting Teen Support, and more. To request a training please contact Bobbie Jo Sheridan, Training & Education Coordinator at BobbieJo@EyesOpenIowa.org or 515.276.6788.

References:

1. Advocates for Youth. (2006). *Sex education for physically, emotionally, and mentally challenged youth*. Retrieved from www.advocatesforyouth.org.
2. ETR Associates. (n.d.). *Skills for educators: Teaching sexuality to developmentally disabled youth*. Retrieved from <http://recapp.etr.org/Recapp>
3. Miss Allison's Class. (2015). *Working with students with special needs: A guide for paraprofessionals, substitute teachers, and volunteers*. Retrieved from <http://missallisionsclass.blogspot.com/>