

## Sexuality and Developmental Disabilities Workshops with Katherine McLaughlin

### Why Focus on Developmental Disability and Sexuality?

Many caretakers of people with developmental disabilities often wonder whether they really need to talk about sexuality. They may not think a person with developmental disabilities as a sexual person because of their disability, or they may feel afraid that talking about the topic will spark the person's interest in sex and cause them to start having sex.



We believe that it is vital to talk about this topic. Why? Because we are all sexual beings! Even though the media in our culture present a narrow view of who is considered sexual, we really are all sexual beings. The media's view would have us believe that only thin, blonde, strong, physically fit, tall, young, able bodied people are sexual. We need to remember that all people--including people with developmental disabilities--are sexual! People with developmental disabilities are often left out of the conversation about sexuality, but in reality, they, too, have thoughts, feelings and concerns about sexuality, just like everyone else.

While it is important to acknowledge that people with developmental disabilities are sexual and have thoughts, feelings and concerns about sexuality, it is also true that much of the information they receive is inaccurate. Because many adults are not willing to discuss these issues with them, many people with developmental disabilities get information about sexuality from television, which may be inaccurate or misleading.

This is another reason why it's vital to talk about sexuality--to explain information they're getting using language that they can understand, and to be sure that the information that they are getting is accurate. In addition, sometimes messages about sexuality on television can be negative, and it's important for people to be able to give positive messages about sexuality, and understand their own values about sexuality.

Another issue for people with developmental disabilities is that they may be very isolated or not have many friends. When they are isolated, they often miss out on the informal learning that happens while hanging out with friends. This is a way that many people have learned about sexuality. Friends often talk with each other about who they have a crush on, or how their bodies are changing as they're going through puberty. Sometimes these conversations happen at school, and sometimes they happen when they are with their friends outside of school. For people with developmental disabilities, they may not be in a school setting where informal learning takes place, and don't have opportunities to hang out with friends to talk about these kinds of concerns.

Finally, an extremely important issue in sexuality education is prevention of sexual abuse. People with developmental disabilities are at risk of being sexually abused because they are frequently taught to comply with what others are asking them to do, and they often want to please others. By understanding various aspects of sexuality and relationships, it makes it easier to understand what is healthy and what is not healthy, and that it's okay to say "no" to unwanted touch.

Even if you think that sexuality education is important, there are lots of reasons that you don't talk about it. You may not know how to begin or what to cover. You may know what to cover, but don't know how old a child should be before you start talking, or you may fear that talking about it will encourage sexual activity. Or, you may not even know what you believe regarding sexuality.

Our offerings are designed to help staff; direct support workers and parents become aware of and overcome their own barriers to talking about sexuality with people with developmental disabilities. Our programs cover many topics including:

- Looking at your own values and attitudes and how they may help or hinder healthy sexual development,
- Helping you figure out what topics to cover when,
- Tips for talking about sexuality and how to make conversation more comfortable

Hopefully, our products will also help you clarify your own values around sexuality, and feel less fearful and more prepared in talking about sexuality with the people in your care. It may not give you all the answers, but it should help you get started.

Ignorance may be bliss, but knowledge is power. People with disabilities deserve and need knowledge just like anyone else.