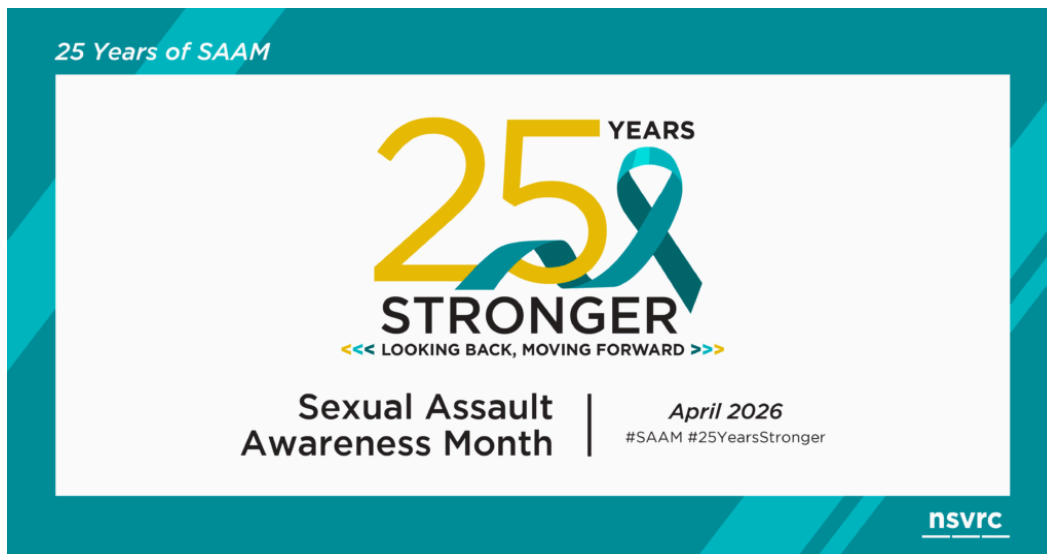


Sexual Rights: Safety

Empowering People With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities to Keep Themselves Safe

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM 2026). The National Sexual Violence Resource Center's theme this year is **"25 Years Stronger: Looking Back, Moving Forward"**, celebrating survivors and the work done to prevent sexual violence while reminding us that there is still work to do. (nsvrc.org)



This graphic was created by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center.

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) are **7 times more likely to experience sexual abuse** than people without disabilities. (acl.gov)

This is often because people think they do not understand relationships or sexuality, so they do not get the education and support they need. Not having this information does not keep anyone safe — it makes it harder to protect themselves.

People with I/DD do not just want to be “protected”. They want the knowledge and skills to keep themselves safe. Everyone has the right to know how to make safe choices about their body.

“I have the right to learn how to keep myself safe from someone hurting me sexually and to use what I learned to help keep me safe.”

This quote from a self-advocate—a person with an intellectual or developmental disability—powerfully highlights why they want and need sexual education.

What You Can Learn:

- **For self-advocates:** How to notice risks and stay safe.
- **For professionals/supporters:** How to help people with I/DD learn the skills they need to stay safe.

Important Things to Know:

1. Know your sexual risks.

Many people think only strangers are a danger, but studies show that

86% of abusers are known to the person—neighbors, family members, sweethearts, doctors, direct support providers, or even people online. Most people will not hurt you, but it is important to understand that abuse can come from people you know.

2. **Remember: your body, your choice.**

Everyone has the right to decide who touches their body. If you need care from another person, it is okay to ask them to get permission first. You can speak up, say no, or leave a situation that makes you uncomfortable.

Example:

Jordan needs help getting dressed in the morning. Jordan asks their caregiver, *“Can you please ask me before you help me put on my clothes?”* The caregiver agrees. Later, the caregiver reaches for Jordan’s arm without asking first, and Jordan says, *“No, I’m not ready yet.”* The caregiver waits until Jordan is ready, respecting Jordan’s choice and body.

3. **Learn skills to protect yourself.**

Knowledge is power. Understanding what abuse is, recognizing unsafe situations, and knowing how to get help are very important. Education about **healthy, unhealthy, and abusive relationships** and **consent** helps people protect themselves and make informed decisions.

Why This Matters:

By learning these skills:

- People with I/DD can be safer from sexual abuse.
- Fewer people carry trauma from abuse.
- Communities can help people with I/DD live happier, healthier, and safer lives.

This is part of SAAM 2026, remembering 25 years of work to prevent sexual violence and supporting survivors while continuing to build safer communities.

Questions to Think About:

For people with I/DD:

- Do I know the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships?
- Do I know how to stay safe in my relationships?

For professionals/supporters:

- Does the person you support know how to protect themselves?
- How can you help them learn these skills?

Turn Knowledge Into Action: Upcoming Workshop:

If you are looking for an opportunity to turn this information into real-world skills, join our upcoming workshop, **‘Supporting Healthy Relationships at Home, Work, and Community.’** This online workshop builds on the ideas of rights, safety, and education for people with I/DD, providing practical training and tools to help both self-advocates and their supporters put these principles into action.



Date and Time: Wednesday, May 6, 2026 | 3:00 – 4:30 PM Eastern Time

Format: Online via Zoom

Register here: [Elevatus Training Online Workshop](https://www.elevatustraining.com/workshop-supporting-healthy-relationships-at-home-work-and-community/)

More Resources to Learn From:

- **Toolkit: Sexual Assault Awareness for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities** | Elevatus Training

<https://www.elevatustraining.com/toolkit-sexual-assault-awareness/>

- **Sex Ed for Self-Advocates: Healthy, Unhealthy, and Abusive Relationships** | Organization for Autism Research
<https://researchautism.org/sex-ed-guide-healthy-relationships/#health-yandunhealthy>
- **Sex Ed for Self-Advocates: Abuse** | Organization for Autism Research
<https://researchautism.org/sex-ed-guide-healthy-relationships/#abuse>
- **What is Consent Handout** | Elevatus Training
<https://www.elevatustraining.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/HO52-What-is-Consent.pdf>
- **Sex Ed for People With I/DD: Consent Video** | National Council for Independent Living
<https://youtu.be/09m9Hv0Ajto?si=agCsQJTItDCGSHD9>

About the Author:

Katherine McLaughlin, M.Ed., AASECT Certified Sexuality Educator, is the Founder and Lead Trainer of Elevatus Training. With over 30 years of experience, she is a national expert in sexuality and intellectual and developmental disabilities, empowering professionals, parents, and individuals as sexual self-advocates and educators. Learn more at www.elevatustraining.com.