

## Talking to children and youth about healthy relationships and sexuality

# “More than just the birds and the bees ...”

Information for parents of children with disabilities from the  
Children's Developmental Rehabilitation Programme (CDRP)

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**Parents can help children with disabilities learn about their bodies and feel good about themselves.**

**They can teach their children how to make good choices and develop healthy relationships.**

All children and youth benefit from learning how to feel positive about themselves, and how to develop positive relationships. This booklet gives you suggestions for having these conversations. Please use any ideas that suit your family's values and needs.

### **What is sexuality?**

Sexuality is a natural and healthy part of living. It can involve:

- Learning about male and female bodies, and your own body
  - Feelings about yourself
  - Developing relationships
  - Understanding private parts
  - Being physically affectionate
  - Learning about reproduction and safe sex
  - Being involved in a sexual relationship
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## **Why is it important for a child with a disability to learn about sexuality?**

Children with disabilities often receive less sex education than their peers. They seldom get specific education about their disability. They also have less general knowledge about sexuality and reproduction. You can talk with your child about sexuality in a way that makes sense to them.

Many children with disabilities do not feel good about themselves or their bodies. Because they are frequently assessed and treated, they might feel like they are ‘broken’ or ‘need to be fixed’. These feelings can affect how they make friendships and interact with others.

You can help emphasize the positive qualities about your child, rather than focusing on what they can’t do. Your child can learn a lot by watching how you interact with others. You can encourage them and show them how to develop good relationships with others.

Unfortunately, people with disabilities have a higher risk of being sexually abused. You can help reduce this risk by teaching your child about their body and personal boundaries.

### **Helping your child learn about personal boundaries**

Talk with your child about:

- Their private parts and who can touch them.
- The reasons why certain people may touch their private parts.

Tell your child to talk to you or an adult they trust if someone:

- Touches their private parts.
  - Asks them to keep a secret or play a game that involves touching private parts.
  - Forces them to do something that they don’t want to do.
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## **How do I start talking to my child about sexuality?**

Start talking to your child about their body at a young age. Show them books and videos that they can understand. When talking about private parts, use proper terms for male and female body parts and functions.

Use “teachable moments” to have discussions. These can be moments in your everyday life that can give you a chance to talk about relationships and sexuality in private. For example, when you are helping your child with bathing or dressing, let them know about their private parts and who can touch them.

## **I know I need to talk to my children about sex. How and when do I start?**

Start talking about relationships and sexuality with your child before they reach puberty. It is important to talk about puberty before these changes happen.

Some parents believe that if they talk to their child about sex, their child will start having sex sooner. This is not true. Children who discuss sex with their parents make better choices about relationships and safer decisions about sex.

Plan ahead. Talk to your partner about the key messages you want to give your child. You may want to “practice” how to start the conversation.

Let your child know that it is natural for them to have sexual feelings and feel attracted to others. Talk to them about values, peer pressure, self esteem and dating.

Ask your child what they already know about sex and personal safety. Clarify the things they do not understand. Build on what they already know.

When your child is ready, encourage them to talk to their doctor or health care provider privately. Let them know that they can talk with health care providers on their own, and that these conversations will be kept private. Encourage them to ask any questions they have.

## **I'm concerned that my child will talk online with strangers about sex and see inappropriate pictures and videos. What should I do?**

Although the internet can be a valuable source of information, it also contains sexually explicit material that is not appropriate for children to view.

When interacting online, your child might be asked questions about sex or asked to do things of a sexual nature.

Talk to your child about how to use the internet safely and responsibly. Keep the computer in a central area of your home. Monitor what your child is doing while they are online. Set specific times when they can go online when you are at home. Decide what websites your child can visit and what websites are off limits. Tell your child that they should only interact online with their friends and family.

Let your child know that they should never share personal details online, such as their address, phone number or the name of their school. Tell them that information and photos that are put on the internet remain there forever.

Youth often use the internet to answer questions related to sexuality. Let your child know about websites that offer accurate information. Some examples are provided below.

**Children need their parents to talk with them about sexuality and relationships.**

If you have questions, talk with any member of your family's health care team or your therapist at **905-521-2100** ext **77031**.

### **For more information**

- K. Schwier and D. Hingsburger. (2000). *Sexuality: Your Sons and Daughters with Intellectual Disabilities*. This book is available through the Hamilton Public Library.
- [www.nichy.org](http://www.nichy.org) The National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities offers practical information for parents and children.
- [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org) provides general health information for children and parents.