

INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is always a difficult topic to think about and discuss, especially for parents. It's hard to see your child as a sexual being. Sometimes people believe that if a person has an autism diagnosis, they won't have sexual feelings or want a relationship. This simply isn't true. Biological urges, body changes, and sexual feelings will happen so it's important to address these in a sensitive and supportive way.

There are the questions of when to start providing information and what do you teach at what age. How do you present the information? Should sex education be solely the job of the parents or should other community members be involved?

As children mature, so will the complexity of their needs. Children need to understand how their body works and why it's changing as they age. Their sexuality is a normal part of development and an aspect of being human. They need accurate, concrete information that is well explained and presented in a variety of formats such as visual supports, videos, print material and possibly through group work.

Dating and relationships are challenging with ups and downs for all young people. We have to explore ways to build solid social skills and boundaries for safety and well-being.

New situations and questions will arise, but if we are prepared we can guide and direct the individuals we support through the maze of information and messages that come to them through many outside sources such as social media, television, print material and movies. Healthy sexuality must be fostered in a supportive, caring environment. Access to resources will demystify sexuality and bring confidence and understanding to our young people, which in turn will give them the ability to make good decisions that are right for them.

Sincerely,



Maureen Bennie

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TEACHING HEALTHY SEXUALITY

WHOSE JOB IS IT?

I attended an interesting poster session at the 2011 Canadian Association for Occupational Therapists conference in Saskatoon, SK. The title of the session was Parental Perspectives in Sexual Health Education of Physically Disabled Children. Although it pertained to physical disabilities, the information was applicable to intellectual disabilities as well.

Here is the abstract.

Introduction: Sexual health education can be confusing. Children with physical disabilities can face even greater uncertainty if their needs and issues are not properly addressed. Although efforts have been made to understand parents' concerns regarding the sexual health education of their physically disabled children, specific emphasis needs to be placed on recognizing parents' important contribution as educators.

Research Question/Objectives: Parental perspectives regarding the provision of school-based sexual health education of children with physical disabilities will be described. This section will outline strategies occupational therapists can use in partnership with parents to deal with the topic of sexuality in school-based programs for children with physical disabilities.

Design/Methods: A participatory needs assessment was completed using qualitative methods with parents who have children with a physical disability. One-to-one interviews and focus groups were used to understand their experiences with sexual health education.

Practice Implications: Understanding parental perspectives will allow occupational therapists to work with parents to support and assist in the sexual health educational needs of children with physical disabilities.

Conclusion: Sexual health education can play a critical role in helping children with physical disabilities transition into adulthood. Parents can play a vital role in meeting the educational needs of children with physical disabilities but often feel ill prepared or question their own skills in facing various issues. Understanding these challenges will allow occupational therapists to better assist and support parents in the provision of sexual health education to their children with physical disabilities.

Parents find it difficult to discuss their worries and concerns around the topic of sexuality. I am not even sure how honest parents would be in a one-on-one interview for research purposes. It's hard for us to see our children as sexual beings. One parent I spoke with thought her son would never become sexually aware of himself because he was very cognitively impaired. This is a misconception because the sexuality component is part of being human. Hormones will contribute to this as well.

One thing to keep in mind is the primary sexual relationship people with disabilities will have is with themselves. So what does that mean from a teaching perspective? It means we have to teach masturbation. Some aspects we have to teach is where this is appropriate (not the bathroom as this can transfer into public washroom behavior), when to do it, and how to satisfy oneself. I have heard of people physically harming themselves because they did not know how to bring themselves to climax. This has to be taught just like any other skill.