

For professionals working with disabled young people

This resource is intended to support professionals and carers to have honest and open conversations about relationships and sex with the disabled young person they may be caring for. It has been created by sex-ed social enterprise [Split Banana](#), and disability awareness charity [Enhance the UK](#).

When might this happen?

When considering the professionals that might be asked and expected to discuss sex, relationships and dating with disabled young people, we often think of teachers, medical professionals and carers.

But it's also not unusual for professionals in other fields to be asked difficult - but well-intentioned - questions from those who just want to know the answers, for example football coaches, youth club staff or music teachers. Often, in spaces where extra-curricular activities take place away from home, young people reinvent themselves and feel more comfortable asking uninhibited questions.

Reasons that professionals might feel nervous about these conversations

Relationships and sex, and everything that surrounds them, are sensitive areas for many people.

They can intersect with people's beliefs and values, and are influenced by religion, culture, society and personal experiences.

Often, people avoid talking to young people about relationships and sex, as there is a concern about safeguarding or sexualisation of the young person. But young people have these curiosities, with or without your support. So it's better to provide them with honest guidance and information, than let them seek it somewhere else, potentially more dangerous.

If you feel like you aren't able to support a disabled young person with immediate knowledge or an answer, the situation should not be swept under the rug. A solution should be met by signposting the young person to an official organisation, or getting someone else to support within your own organisation. Often, disabled young peoples' sexuality is silenced, and we must break this cycle, in order to provide them with the guidance needed to keep them safe, healthy and happy.

It's normal to feel nervous, but we're here to help. This guide will set out a 'how to' best have these conversations, and then explore three building blocks that will support you to embed inclusivity when you discuss relationships and sex.

How to have these conversations

Perhaps you've been asked a specific question by a disabled young person, or noticed something in their behaviour that you think needs to be further discussed. Here are some tips that will support you to have healthy conversations.

Sign post

If you know you are unable to answer a specific question, or feel it is inappropriate to do so, do not simply ignore it. Do not shut it down. Be honest with the young person that you do not have the answer, but you will either: go away and find it and/or point them in the direction of a representative or organisation that can answer it.

Choose the right time

You don't want to trap a young person into a conversation they don't want to have, so make sure there's an easy way out, however this may work for them. If you need to explain that their behaviour is becoming inappropriate, do so away from their peer group, to avoid embarrassment.

Ask open questions

Avoid asking closed yes/no questions and instead ask open ones like 'is there anything you'd like to ask me?' and 'are there any specific things you'd like to know more about - I can point you to some resources?'

Offer alternatives

Everyone expresses themselves differently. In school, our anonymous question box always works well. If they'd rather not have these conversations with you, where else would they like to get the knowledge? You could direct them to informational videos, social media accounts, books or drawings., or maybe they'd be happier speaking to someone else in your team.

Safeguarding

Let them know that you're there to offer judgement-free guidance, but that you do have a duty of care to them.

It is crucial to recognise your role to safeguard the young person you work with; from emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect. You cannot promise to keep anything a secret. If they disclose something to you, follow the safeguarding practice within your organisation. This is also important so that you can safeguard yourself.

There are specific issues that some disabled young people may face when it comes to relationships and sex. Devoteeism, for example, is a sexualised interest in disability, that can range from sexual preference to fetishism. It's important to be aware of topics like this, so that you are able to recognise and point young people in the direction of support, if they need it.

Additionally, there is a grey area surrounding the legalities of enabling a young disabled person to masturbate. If you'd like to know more, see Enhance the UK's [Sex and the Law guide](#).

Three building blocks to remember for truly inclusive and relevant sex education

Of course, it is impossible to attain or impart all of the knowledge that someone, or a group of young people will need when it comes to relationships and sex. However, you can still be having conversations with inclusive messaging, approaches and narratives.

Below are our top 3 things to remember when having conversations about relationships and sex.

1. There is no normal

Society tells us that there is a way to look and a way to behave, every single day. Which is why it's important to know and teach that there is no normal.

No normal bodies, relationships, sex, orientations, teenage years and experiences etc. Many insecurities and anxieties are born out of the idea that we, or others, are somehow defaulting from a normal or 'right' way of existing. This can lead us to be disgusted or ashamed at ourselves and our bodies, and to judge others.

Some practical steps you can take:

Representation

Follow social media accounts (on your phone and the young person you're working with) which make visible as many different bodies, relationships and experiences as possible (we've included some at the end of this).

Share diverse experiences

Highlight a variety of different voices, stories and first-hand experiences when you're speaking to your young person to share the lives of other people living with physical disabilities.

It's okay (and really important) to also be honest here, and share the tough stuff as well as the joy.

It may well, for example, take a disabled young person longer to find a partner, or to feel comfortable and confident in navigating certain sexual positions in relation to their non-disabled peers.

This is, sadly, usual in the society we live in, and it's more than okay to feel frustrated by this; whilst encouraging hope is great and much needed, disabled young people need to know that they are not always expected to feel totally positive about the way disability is currently perceived, especially in the world of sex and relationships.

Be subjective

Use subjective language, e.g. "for some people puberty means that your breasts will grow bigger", "for some other people it's different to this", "some people may not grow breasts at all". There is no 'right' and 'wrong' way of growing and being when it comes to bodies, and continually embedding this through your language is powerful.

Show an awareness of overarching narratives

Be conscious of the wider 'defaults' that society gives us - such as heteronormativity and whiteness, and how you can name, avoid or challenge them.

It is important to be aware that although there is no normal behaviour there is still harmful behaviour. If a young person expresses that they are doing something which is worrying them or others, it is important to listen and help them to find guidance and support.

Case study:

Enhance the UK have previously been contacted by sporting coaches who have explained that participants in their class have developed crushes on them. This might include asking inappropriate questions about their personal and sex lives, which they do not feel equipped to answer.

Whilst answering these questions certainly isn't part of their job description, it's important to realise that these participants may feel that their coach is the only person in their lives that they can turn to and ask. In this situation, it's beneficial to both parties if the coach is able to confidently use the correct terminology around the issue and signpost their participant to sites, centres and resources that are better placed to support them.

This is much more useful than ignoring or shying away from the subject altogether, and keeps the participant safer and healthier.

2. Penis-in-vagina sex is one kind of sex

From a very young age, we are told that sex is when a penis enters a vagina. And whilst it is true that this is one example of sex, it is not solely what sex is.

What about sex when there's no penis involved? Or vagina? Or when penetration isn't an option?

Instead, it's helpful to think of sex as both outercourse and intercourse. Outercourse is any sexual activity which is non-penetrative, such as kissing, touching, oral sex and solo or shared external masturbation. Intercourse is penetrative sexual activity, such as vaginal or anal, or solo or shared internal masturbation.

It's important that young people know that:

All sex requires consent

By showing that outercourse also counts as sex, we are expanding what it means to have an intimate experience - and that every intimate experience requires communication and consent.

Consensual sex and sexual pleasure, are a healthy part of our lives

It is important that pleasure is not shamed or stigmatised. Whether with yourself, or with others, pleasure comes in all shapes and sizes, and is an important part of mental wellbeing.

People's consensual sexual choices are equally valid, even if they are different from our own

Some people will have sex with genders different from their own. Some people won't. Some people will have sex with multiple partners. Some will only ever have outercourse sex. Some will choose not to have sex at all. As long as it's consensual for all involved, people's sexual practises are equally valid, and should be respected.

Whilst penetration and intercourse aren't possible for everyone, the ability to be sensual and sexual is.

And this sexual expression should be celebrated in equal measure to penis-in-vagina sex.

Case study:

'I lost my virginity when I was 19. Before this, I'd been terrified of sex - not necessarily the act, but how I would get into certain positions, and whether my muscles would relax enough for me to enjoy the experience. I'm a wheelchair user with cerebral palsy, and at that time, ten years ago, was unable to find any resources or pieces of advice to educate me around sex and disability. I come from a family where open, frank and honest discussions are the norm, but no amount of talking around the subject was calming my fears.

One Sunday afternoon, my auntie, sister and I just tried out some possible positions, so I could figure out for myself what was possible and what wasn't. There were plenty of giggles and some tears too, but it was the best bit of sex education I ever had.'

Emily, 28.

3. Brush up, but take it easy

The majority of adults we talk to lament their lack of RSE. Few people had the conversations they were yearning to have, or received the information they needed to build healthy relationships with themselves and others.

As a result, many of us don't have a template for how to have these conversations. Instead, the very idea can bring up feelings of dread, embarrassment and shame. And that's fine.

Often these feelings can come from a lack of knowledge or our own confusion around a specific topic. In which case, using the topic guide above and the resources below, consider what you feel uncomfortable in talking about, why this might be and what resources you could look to for further information and support.

This can especially be the case when you're trying to have conversations about something you don't have lived experience of, like being physically disabled. Again, looking to stories and good resources, as well as contacting user-led charities for advice, can help you to fill in these gaps.

Sometimes, due to personal experience, trauma or for no clear reason at all, some things might be just too painful or embarrassing to talk about. In this case, it's good if you can find other resources or services that you can signpost young people to. We've included some good ones below.

Some brilliant resources to get you started

Made for you as a professional:

[Sexual Citizenship and Disability: Understanding Sexual Support in Policy, Practice and Theory](#) by Julia Bahner. Based on case studies from 4 countries, this book develops the concept of 'sexual citizenship' to make it relevant in practice to disabled people, professionals working with them, and policy-makers.

More specifically about sex and disability

['This is How We Do It'](#) by VICE: interviews of people with a wide range of impairments, medical conditions and trauma about their romantic and sex lives.

Spencer Williams is a journalist with Cerebral Palsy and writes a [very candid column](#) (also for VICE) on navigating sex.

[Disability After Dark](#) covers everything you can think of when it comes to sex and disabilities. It's also very queer-friendly.

[URevolution](#) is a content platform that describes itself as body positivity without the ableism. Also has a great sex and dating section.

[Disability Visibility](#) is a platform created by disability activist Alice Wong. Alice also hosts an amazing [podcast](#) and has just released a [book](#),

To share with your 11+ year old:

[Fumble UK](#). A digital media platform for young people to learn about relationships and sex.

Fumble article: [Yes, People With Disabilities Are Having Sex \(And Loving It\)](#).

Fumble article: [Disability Visibility](#).

[Sexwise](#) for all of their sexual health and contraception information. Engaging little video snippets.

To share with your 18+ year old:

[Salty](#). An unapologetic newsletter and website filled with brilliant articles by and for women, trans and non-binary people.

Salty article: [‘Eight Tips For Meeting New Partners When You’re Living With A Disability’](#)

Salty article: [How to Find Sex-Positive, Queer-Friendly Disability Aides](#)

Inspiring pages and people to follow on social media:

[Hannah Witton](#). Talks frankly about sex and relationships with a stoma, and is a podcaster and author.

[Aaron Phillip](#) is the first black, transgender and physically disabled model to be signed to a major agency, and is an advocate for disability and queer rights.

[Chellaman](#) is a deaf, trans, genderqueer artist and model. He’s also a major advocate disability and queer rights.

[Lucy Edwards](#). The first blind Cover Girl partner. Lucy is also a BBC reporter, YouTuber and author.

[Voices4Ldn](#) are a direct action group for the LGBTIQ+ community. They make excellent content including a lot of disability advocacy.

[Lauren ‘Lolo’ Spencer](#) is a model, actress and disability influencer.

[SimplyEmma](#). The UK’s leading disability and travel blogger, Emma writes about moving around the world in a wheelchair.

[Dis-sexuality](#). A Mumbai-based platform for women with disabilities to share their experiences of sexuality and connect with others.

[Gynaegeek](#) (Dr Anita Mitra). An NHS doctor committed to spreading the word about sexual health.

[Crippling Up Sex With Eva](#). Sex educator Eva delivers sex education for disabled young people. Although US-based, there are also online classes and events.

[Andrew Gurza](#). A queer activist, disability awareness consultant and [Disability after Dark](#) podcaster.

Have a look at our resources for young people to see more people and platforms we recommend.

And if you still want more:

[Sex, Power, Money](#) by Sara Pascoe. Sara explores the sex industry, objectification and the allure of wealth in relation to them.

[The Curious History of Sex](#) by Kate Lister. A fun, informative read that uncovers the root of some of the language and practices used today.

[Queer Sex: A Trans and Non-Binary Guide to Intimacy, Pleasure and Relationships.](#)

[Sex Ed in Color](#) is a candid podcast about being a person of colour working as a sexuality professional.

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