



Talking about relationships

The SL&RR program respects the right for people with disabilities to have meaningful connections. This includes an understanding that relationships are a fundamental part of life and people with disabilities have the right to respect in their relationships. For people with an intellectual disability relationships are not always acknowledged by others as being such an important part of their lives. This ableism and oppression restricts many people with disabilities to have fulfilling relationships.

“Sometimes people with disabilities don’t have the chance to be in a relationship, or they might not understand relationships because they haven’t had the right information before, like when they were at school. This is not good. You can’t not tell someone something because you think they don’t understand. They might actually want to have a relationship and a family.” Linda Stokoe, SL&RR Peer Educator



Some theories suggest that people with disability do not have capacity to intellectually comprehend intimate relationships, let alone consent to sexual experiences. Research that has been informed by the lived experiences of people with an intellectual disability has found that people with an intellectual disability aspire to, have and enjoy sexual experiences 'like anyone else.'ⁱ

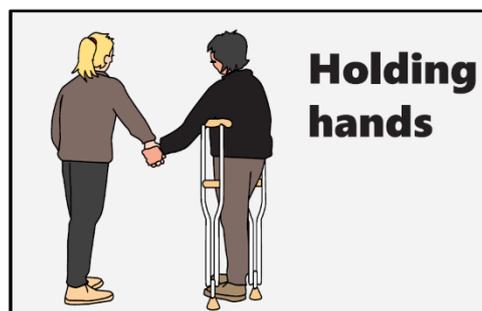
Despite this, sexuality education for people with an intellectual disability, when it does occur is oversimplified, biologically focused and rules based.ⁱⁱ

Although not solely a program designed for sexual education, SL&RR understands that relationships are important, and bridges this gap to include people with disability in the development of a sexuality and relationships program which meets their needs.

This information is linked to a resource called The Relationship Cards, downloadable on the SL&RR website

It is common for people with disability to speak about a lack of privacy, respect, access to information and services, and protectionist views from the supporters in their lives. SL&RR acknowledges that disability does not limit relationships. SL&RR acknowledges that people with an intellectual disability should be able to express their sexuality their way, as straight or LGBTIQ and should be supported in their choices.

“Having a relationship means that you have another person to talk to, you can go and do things together, or play games, or cuddle, or make love, or help out around the house together. It’s hard being on your own, so it is nice to have someone to spend time with.” Linda Stokoe, SL&RR Peer Educator



Key messages:

- Relationships are a fundamental part of life.
- People with disabilities have the right to respect in their relationships and for their relationships to be respected.
- Much against protectionist views, people with intellectual disability are sexually active and desire meaningful connections.
- It is common for people with intellectual disability to be segregated from sexual education in schooling.
- Information about relationships needs to be useful and meaningful. This extends to sex education and accessing services for information about relationships.
- As needed, this information should be presented in Easy English.

It is common for conversations about relationships with people with intellectual disability to intertwine with conversations about violence and abuse. To know more about violence and abuse, please refer to the violence and abuse topic of the ‘Talking about’ series.

ⁱ Johnson, K., Hillier, L., Harrison, L., & Frawley, P. (2001). Living safer sexual lives: Final report. Melbourne, Australian research Centre in Sex, health & Society, La Trobe University.

ⁱⁱ Frawley, P., and N. J. Wilson. 2016. “Young People with Intellectual Disability Talking about Sexuality Education and Information.” *Sexuality and Disability* 34 (4): 469–484.

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