



# Helping Parents Recognize & Respond to Relationship Abuse and Sexual Assault Against Young People with Developmental Disabilities

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<https://www.ncedsv.org/preventing-sexual-abuse-of-people-with-developmental-disabilities/>

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Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Division nor Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

# Our Goals

- Discuss an overview of relationship & sexual violence as it occurs against young people with developmental disabilities:
  - Definition;
  - Scope of the problem;
  - Risk factors; and
  - Warning signs of sexual assault.
- As a parent and a supporter, learn 3 ways to recognize, respond, and provide support to young people with developmental disabilities who may have experienced relationship violence;

# Our Goals

- Identify resources for parents and supporters to have conversations with their children about:
  - Promoting healthy relationships; and
  - Preventing relationship abuse & sexual assault

## Handouts:

- Power & Control Wheel and Respect Wheel
- Resiliency Wheel



# Call to Action



“We have, for too long, been included because it is the legal or feel-good thing to do. We have experienced isolation and abuse. It’s time to do a better job. It’s time to end violence and abuse against people with disabilities, seniors, women and children.”

*Lisa Cooley, Self & Peer Advocate*



# The Scope of the Problem



# Why talk about sexual violence and disability?

- A community problem
- A national health concern
- An impact on all demographics & vulnerable populations
- A workplace issue:  
People with a disability may be a target for sexual harassment & abuse on the job





# Demographics

Anyone can be an offender or a victim of relationship violence. They come from all groups, regardless of:

- Race/Ethnicity
- Class or Social Status
- Education/Occupation
- Age
- Physical or Mental Abilities
- Sexual Orientation (LGBTQ+)
- Gender Identity
- Culture
- Personality Traits

**“If this were any other population, the world would be up in arms.”**

— Nancy Thaler, a Pennsylvania state official, on the high sexual assault rate of people with intellectual disabilities



# Violence Against People with Disabilities

- People with intellectual disabilities experience sexual assault more than 7 times as frequently as people without disabilities. Among women with intellectual disabilities, 12 times the rate.  
(U.S. Dept. of Justice)
- 24% of violent crime victims with disabilities believed they were targeted due to their disability. Increase 13% since 2009.
- Women who are Deaf are 1.5 times more likely to be a victim of sexual harassment, sexual assault, psychological and physical abuse.

# Adolescents with Disabilities Increased Risk of Violence

Data from the U.S. Dept. of Justice suggests even greater risks for young people with disabilities:

- More than one in five young people with disabilities between the ages of 12 and 19 report experiencing violence (including physical abuse, rape or sexual assault from a stranger or partner) – more than twice the rate of young people without a disability.



Reviewing **Risk Factors** that Increase the Likelihood of Becoming a Target for Abuse

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# Risk Factors for Sexual Assault

Usually we hear about risk factors from a health care perspective – smoking & lung cancer; high blood pressure for heart attack or stroke; diet & diabetes, etc.

- People with developmental disabilities may be less likely to defend themselves or to escape violent situations because they rely on others to meet some of their basic needs
- Social isolation puts them at a higher risk for sexual abuse
- May not be aware that this type of violence is a crime

# Risk Factors for Sexual Assault

- Disabilities that impact articulation may result in limited vocabulary or lack communication skills that can pose barriers to disclosing abuse
  - May be perceived as lacking intelligence and may not make credible witnesses
  - May be viewed as intoxicated or making a prank call when trying to reach out for help or file a police report
- May be taught to be obedient, passive, and to control difficult behaviors. These “difficult” behaviors may result from experiencing trauma.



# Risk Factors for Sexual Assault

- May grow up without receiving sexuality education.
- May lack knowledge about their bodies, healthy relationships, and how to protect themselves.
- May not understand sexual & non-sexual touches or the concept of consent
- May be overly trusting of others which makes them easier to coerce or manipulate

# Risk Factors for Sexual Assault



- A person with a mental illness can be at risk for victimization if they:
  - Have difficulty discerning between reality and fantasy;
  - Are dependent on others for their mental and physical care; and
  - May view themselves as unworthy.



# Abusive Tactics Used Against People with Disabilities & People who are Deaf

For more information, refer to the handout developed by  
SAFE Stop Abuse for Everyone [www.safeaustin.org](http://www.safeaustin.org)  
People with Disabilities in Partner Relationships  
“Power & Control Wheel” and “Respect Wheel”

# The Abuser & Their Tactics

- Abuser relationship to survivor - intimate partner, personal care attendant, family member, transportation provider, residential care staff
  - 97-99% are known to the victim
  - People with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be assaulted repeatedly by the same offender
- Abusive Tactics
  - Taking their benefits check; withholding money for needed treatments
  - Ignoring requests for assistance with daily living activities
  - Using medications to sedate the person and/or denying access to medical care or counseling

# More Abusive Tactics

- Destroying assistive devices or removing batteries
  - Hides or disables mobility devices
  - Destroys hearing aids, eye glasses
  - Removes device designed to get help by contacting 9-1-1
  - Moving the ramp to further isolate the person
- Hurts or threatens service animals



**Broaden your definition of a service animal to include cats, goats, pigs, mice, birds, hamsters, guinea pigs, and horses.**



# Signs of Possible Sexual Assault



**IT'S TIME ... TO TALK ABOUT IT!**

Talk early, talk often. Prevent sexual violence.



# Signs of Possible Sexual Assault

- Torn or stained clothing or clothing on backwards
- Difficulty walking or sitting
- Vaginal bleeding or infections; STIs
- Pain going to the bathroom
- Bruising in the genital area or inner thighs
- Sexual talk or behavior
- Urinary track infections or urinary incontinence
- Sleeping disturbances (nightmares, insomnia, excessive sleeping)
- Unexplained abdominal pain

# Signs of Possible Sexual Assault

- Depression, anxiety or extreme changes in behavior
- Physical or sexual aggression
- Physical evidence of pornography or prostitution
- Rectal bleeding
- Pregnancy
- Fear reactions to a person, place, objects, etc.
- Self-destructive behavior
- Extreme reaction to bathing or other physical care giving
- Inserting objects in vagina or rectum

# Adolescents with Disabilities Can Be Victims of Trafficking

- Using force, fraud and/or coercion to hold victims into servitude
- Forced sex & labor trafficking – using disability to force them to beg and sell trinkets to the public
- Added incentive to steal their Social Security and disability benefits

Source: The Human Trafficking Legal Center Fact Sheet & National Human Trafficking & Disabilities Working Group 2019



# Barriers to Leaving an Abusive Relationship & Accessibility Barriers to Receiving Services

# Barriers to Leaving

- Fear of losing health insurance, institutionalization, being physically restrained when denied access to wheelchair, no access to doctor, caregiver, and/or medication.
- If the person has a disability, it may take on average 12 times before they feel safe enough and establish resources



**The most dangerous time for a victim is when they decide to leave the relationship!**

# Accessibility Barriers

- **Minimal training and experience**
- **Lack of understanding** of the implications of mandatory reporting – as a parent ask for the organization's policy & procedure for protecting vulnerable populations prior to the service intake process
- **Lack of physical access** to the office building or shelter
- **Insufficient screening practices & accommodations**
- **Unprepared to provide needed accommodations**
- **Results in negative experiences – no return**





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# What is Trauma & How Does It Affect Young People with Developmental Disabilities

# What is Trauma?

- Extremely upsetting event - temporarily overwhelms the individual.
- Typically overwhelms an individual mentally, emotionally and physically.
- Person's responses:  
**intense fear, helplessness, or horror**  
(children, the response must involve disorganized or agitated behavior.)



(Criterion A2; p.463) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Text Revision (*DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000)

# Using a Trauma-Informed Approach



“Traumatic reactions are ***normal*** responses to ***abnormal*** situations.”

# Trauma-Informed Approach

- Basic understanding of trauma and how it impacts survivors
- Understanding trauma **triggers** and unique **vulnerabilities** of survivors with developmental disabilities
- Ask service organizations if their **policies/procedures** acknowledge the impact of violence and trauma on people with disabilities
- Shifts philosophical approach from “What’s wrong with you?” to “*What happened to you?*”

# Responses to Trauma

Experiencing trauma actually changes the **structure and function of the brain**:

- Pathways in the brain can be disrupted
- Some **survivor's brains can be altered forever**
- Chronic trauma causes the brain to continually respond as if under stress, preparing the body for “**flight, fight or freeze**”—even though the actual traumatic event has ended
- Healing can be painful, but strategies can be learned. When empowered to do so, the survivor will get back a sense of control and rebuild self-worth with time and patience.

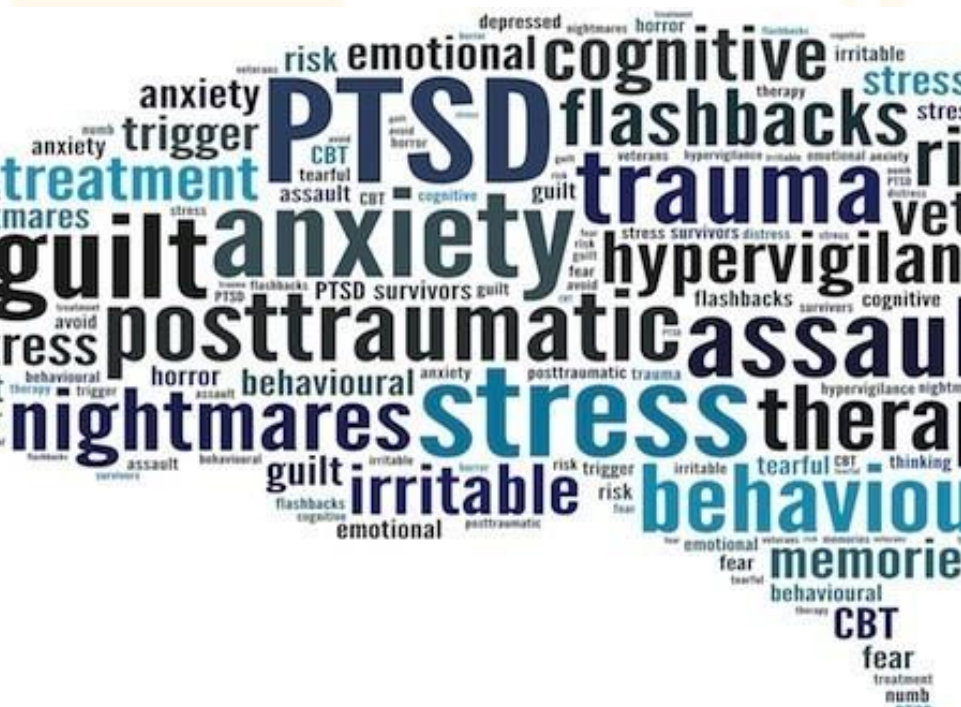


# Is your daughter/son ready to tell you what happened to them?





# Initial Reactions + Intrusive Re-experiencing **Traumatic Stress Disorder**



# Immediate Response to Disclosure

- **Tune in/Listen:**
  - Take a deep breath
  - Be quiet and let them tell you what happened to them
  - Keep breathing
  - Stay as calm as possible
  - Believe what they tell you
  - Do not blame, judge, or punish
- **Say**
  - I believe you. I am sorry this happened to you.
  - This is not your fault.
  - You are not alone.
  - Thank you for trusting me with this.



# Immediate Response to Disclosure

- **ASK:** How can I help you? What do you need right now? Let them make the choice and decisions.
- **TELL:** An advocacy program can help you – on the phone or in person.
- **HELP:** Would you like to call them? I can help you with that if you want. (Do not pressure them to contact. You may wish to call later for your own support.)
- **PROTECT:** What would make you feel safe right now? Let's make a safety plan.

# Supporting Victims of Sexual Violence

As a parent, what else should be on your mind?

- If they were physically injured from the assault, seek medical assistance. Sometimes injuries are not visible, so it is best to seek treatment if you are unsure.
- **Only about 15% of victims with a disability are receiving these services.**
- While the risk of pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDs from a sexual assault is low, these are major concerns that a health care professional can help them address.

# Supporting Victims of Sexual Violence



- Victims may be eligible for compensation for medical expenses incurred.
- Contact a sexual assault advocate for information on the **Victims of Crime Compensation Fund** or visit the VOC website to check on eligibility, applications, & types of assistance <http://voc.nv.gov>

# On-going Support for Survivors

- **Prepare for flashbacks & upsetting memories** by reminding them the flashbacks are not reality – it happened, they survived, and they are not actually in danger right now
- Help them **learn strategies for immediate self-soothing**, calming anxiety, and slowing down breathing when thoughts race
- **Seek professional help to begin reconnecting** with their body and feelings – this can be scary - using drugs & alcohol to avoid this detaches them from the people and activities they enjoy



# On-going Support for Survivors

- Common to feel isolated and disconnected from others after abuse or sexual assault
  - **Support from others is vital to recovery** – let them know you love them & encourage them to seek help, but don't pressure them
  - Reconnect with friends or make new friends
- Encourage them to take time to rest & restore the body's balance – helps to reduce anxiety & fear
- As a parent & supporter, take care of yourself!

# Parent or Supporter Self-Care

- Sexual assault & abuse affects all family members & friends
- Important to pay attention to how this is affecting you
- Remember sexual violence or abuse is never the victim's fault and likewise, it is not your fault.
- It is ok to feel angry, hurt, fearful, guilty or numb. These are natural responses. May help to keep a journal to get these feelings out on paper
- Speak to a trusted friend, counselor or spiritual leader about your feelings – not to the victim

# Parent or Supporter Self-Care

- It is natural to want to seek revenge against the abuser. This will cause problems and divert you away from the **main goal** – helping in recovery
- Take care of yourself and remember they need you more than ever – you may feel angry or upset that they did not share sooner or embarrassed this happened to a family member. These are normal and share with an advocate or counselor
- Be patient with yourself. You will experience loss or grief. Healing takes time. Recovery is a process for you as well.



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# How much will others share about the abuse or sexual assault?



# Building Trust & Confidentiality

- **Maintaining confidentiality is key** to developing trust.
- Victims are **reluctant to report** to law enforcement due to victim-blaming responses & self-blame, fear of reprisals, shame (personal and/or cultural, disability stereotypes, prejudice & discrimination).
- If you are reaching out for advocacy services, advocates working under VAWA guidelines dictate information should not be released without a survivor's informed, written consent.

# Building Trust

- Special conditions regarding release of information & informed consent exist for minors & some vulnerable adults with cognitive disabilities. **Ask the advocacy organization: What alternatives exist for people with developmental disabilities who may NOT be able to give informed/written consent?**
- As you will see, funding received by VAWA can dictate DV/SV advocacy programs policies. **Know the advocacy program's and collaborating organization's policies ahead of time.**



# Confidentiality Policy Differences

## Community-based Domestic & Sexual Violence Advocacy Programs

- Survivor has control over information
- Survivor decides what information to reveal and how it supports decision making and safety
- Advocates will not share without written permission from survivor

## Disability Social Services

- Consumers control over information may be limited by a family member, social worker intervention, guardianship/payeeship, or mandatory reporting
- Agencies typically share information with guardians, families, and other agencies

# Reporting Abuse Against People with Disabilities

- People with a disability reported victimization to the police 48% of the time.
- Reasons for NOT reporting the crime:
  - Victim dealt with the crime a different way;
  - Believing insurance wouldn't cover the costs related to the crime;
  - Thinking the police wouldn't be able to help;
  - Not wanting the offender to get into trouble; and
  - Fear of reprisal.

National Crime Victim's Rights Week Resource Guide:  
Crime and Victimization Fact Sheets, 2017

# Reporting Abuse Against People with Disabilities

- People who are deaf may not be able to report due to barriers with communication, e.g., no interpreter or assistive device is offered or available
  - **CAUTION:** Confidentiality is a major concern in the Deaf culture. Abusers may also be part of the same Deaf community.
- Before reporting, always consider the safety of any victim. There may be a threat of imminent harm to them or a friend/family member and/or a service animal when an investigation begins & continues.

# Self-reporting Considerations

- Support self-reporting if this is what the survivor wants to do.
- **Self-reporting may begin the process to help the survivor regain control over their life and increase the likelihood of holding an offender accountable for their behavior.**





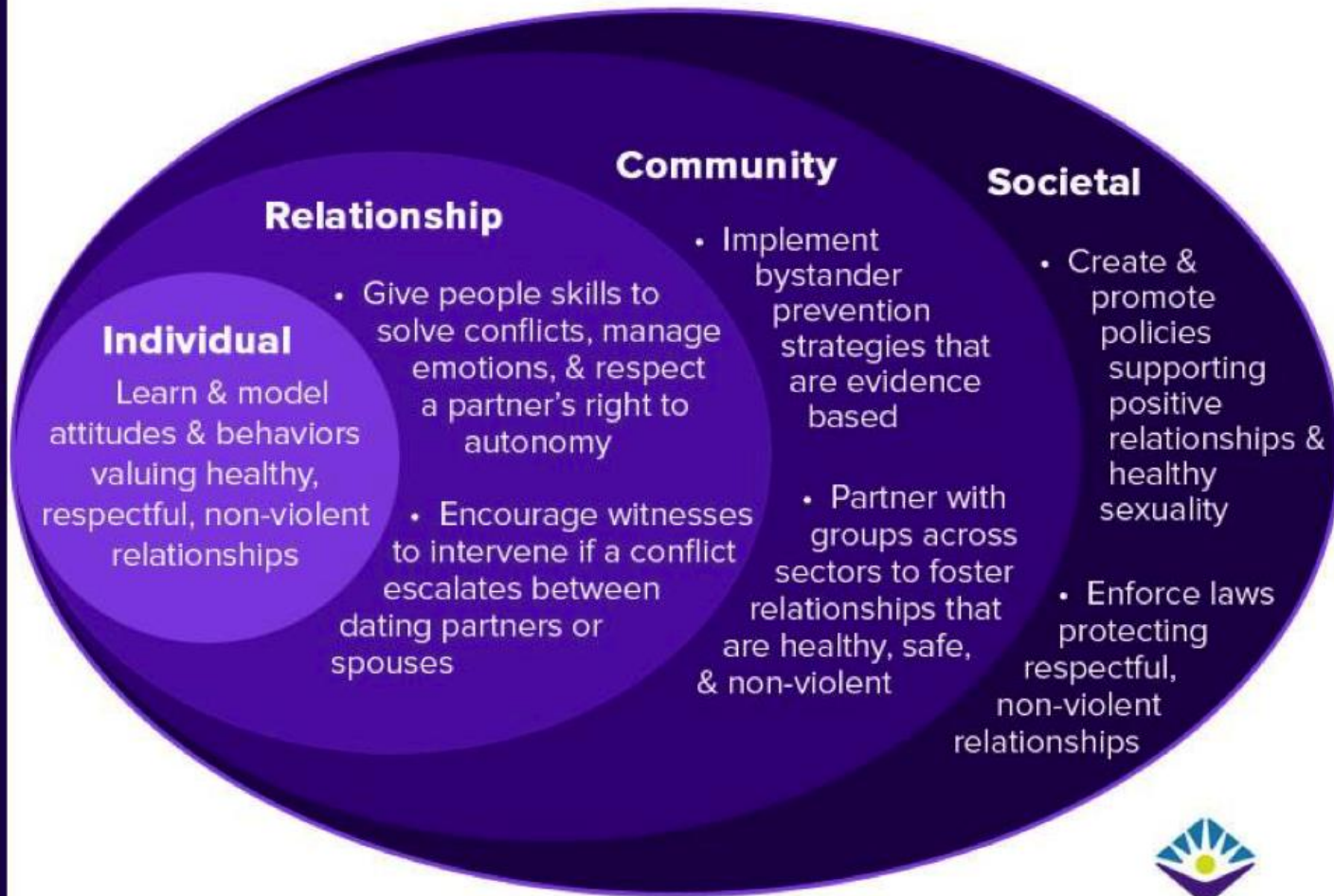
# Setting the Stage for Prevention

Understanding the  
Protective Factors that  
Promote Resiliency



# Preventing Intimate Partner Violence Requires Change at All Levels

Strategies may include:



VetoViolence

Learn more about intimate partner violence prevention from CDC:  
<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/prevention.html>





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# Protective Factors Supporting Healthy Relationships & Preventing Relationship Abuse

# Protective Factors

“**Protective factors** are conditions or attributes (skills, strengths, resources, supports or coping strategies) in individuals, families, communities or the larger society that help people deal more effectively with stressful events and **mitigate or eliminate risk factors** in families and communities that decrease the health and well-being of children and families.”

*“Your words, attitudes, and actions impact my life more than my disability.”*

# Five Domains of Wellbeing

1. **Social connectedness** to people in their peer group, school & communities, in ways that allow us to give as well as receive; diversity of relationships; emotional support; fostering growth
2. **Stability** – having things we can count on; sameness from day to day; adequate predictability; resiliency
3. **Safety** – ability to be ourselves without significant harm, risk or danger

# Five Domains of Wellbeing

4. **Mastery** – feeling in control of one's fate and decisions we make; we can influence what happens to us, having skills to navigate & negotiate life; choice; empowerment to become active bystanders helping others; self-confidence; conflict resolution skills; and
5. **Meaningful access to relevant resources** to meet our basic needs without shame, danger or great difficulty; cultural competency; reduced barriers, information & referral

Source: *The Full Frame Initiative*

# Discussion Question

Knowing these risk factors, how can you as a parent or supporter, prepare yourself to have a conversation about relationship abuse, sexual assault and healthy relationships?



For ideas, review the  
handout  
**“The Resiliency Wheel”**

# Preparing for a Conversation

- Reflect on your own comfort level about language related to sexuality, body parts, and relationship violence
- Make sure you know and understand the material by gathering resources on this topic for you & them
- Educate yourself and practice discussing with another person
- Most people with developmental disabilities do not talk openly about these topics so make sure there is a safe, private, and comfortable environment for discussing these sensitive topics



# Preparing for a Conversation

- Look for natural opportunities to talk about relationships, sexuality, and sexual violence – wedding, birth of a baby, new puppy, interested in dating, boyfriend or girlfriend questions
- What do they already know about relationships?
- Start at their level of understanding & avoid vague terms that can be confusing – use correct terms
- Know the **signs of sexual assault** and relationship violence

# Preparing for a Conversation

- Discuss the following concepts as part of sexuality education:
  - Privacy;
  - Consent;
  - Safe vs. unsafe touch = setting boundaries;
  - Communicating needs;
  - Understanding personal rights and choices;
  - Making decisions; and
  - Safety planning.
- Answer questions honestly at their ability level.

# Peer Advocates Speak Up

## *Talk About Sexual Violence: Peer Advocates Talk*

- Two survivors of sexual violence share their experiences to encourage others to speak up and get support
- Kecia's #MeToo Story posted October 18, 2019
- <https://thearc.org/resource/talk-about-sexual-violence-peer-advocates-talk/> OR [https://youtu.be/OttP0\\_klwKg](https://youtu.be/OttP0_klwKg)

“I have the right to information, community participation, private sexual expression, boundaries in personal care and relationships, and a full life.”

- Self advocate



The single most important issue for  
traumatized people is to find a  
sense of safety in their own bodies,

— Bessel van der Kolk —



# National Resources for Survivors with Developmental Disabilities



# National Abuse & Violence Helplines



## **National Domestic Violence Hotline**

- 800.799.SAFE (7233) Voice
- 800.787.3224 (TTY)
- <http://thehotline.org>

## **GLBT National Help Center**

- 800.246.7743
- [www.glnh.org](http://www.glnh.org)

## **National Sexual Assault Hotline**

- 800.656.HOPE (4673)
- 800.810.7440 (TTY)
- <http://www.rainn.org>

## **National Human Trafficking Hotline**

- 888.373.7888; 7-1-1 (TTY)
- <http://polarisproject.org>



## **National Dating Abuse Helpline**

- 866.331.9474
- Text “loveis” to 22522; Chat
- <http://www.loveisrespect.org>

## **Young Adult Survivor Resources**

## **Trevor Project – LGBTQ Youth**

- 866-4.U.TREVOR
- <https://www.thetrevorproject.org>

## **Youth Talkline – GLBT Youth**

- 800.246.PRIDE
- Chat & support services

## **Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

- 800.273.8255
- <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

## **National Suicide Hotline Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Line**

- 800.799.4889



# Resources

- End Abuse of People with Disabilities  
[www.endabusepwd.org](http://www.endabusepwd.org)
- Tool Kit : Sexual Assault Awareness for People with Developmental Disabilities  
<https://www.elevatustraining.com/toolkit-sexual-assault-awareness/>
- National Center for College Students with Disabilities  
[www.nccsdonline.org](http://www.nccsdonline.org)
- National Disability Rights Network 202.408.9514 TTY: 202.408.9521; [www.ndrn.org](http://www.ndrn.org)
- Responding to Survivors with Autism Spectrum Disorders: An Overview for Sexual Assault Advocates 2018  
[www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)
- Youth in Action! Becoming a Stronger Self Advocate  
[www.ncwd-youth](http://www.ncwd-youth) Check their Publication Tip Sheets



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## Healthy Relationships, Sexuality and Disability

Resource Guide 2014 Edition



<https://www.mass.gov/files/documents/2016/07/x/hrhs-sexuality-and-disability-resource-guide.pdf>



# Break the Silence: Stop the Violence



**Tips by Parents for Parents (4:27 min.)**  
Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2008

# Looking for materials to start the conversation about sexual assault prevention?

Check out Illinois **IMAGINES** [www.icasa.org](http://www.icasa.org)

- Prevention Education Program Materials translated into Spanish
- **Instructional Guide for Parents & Guardians**

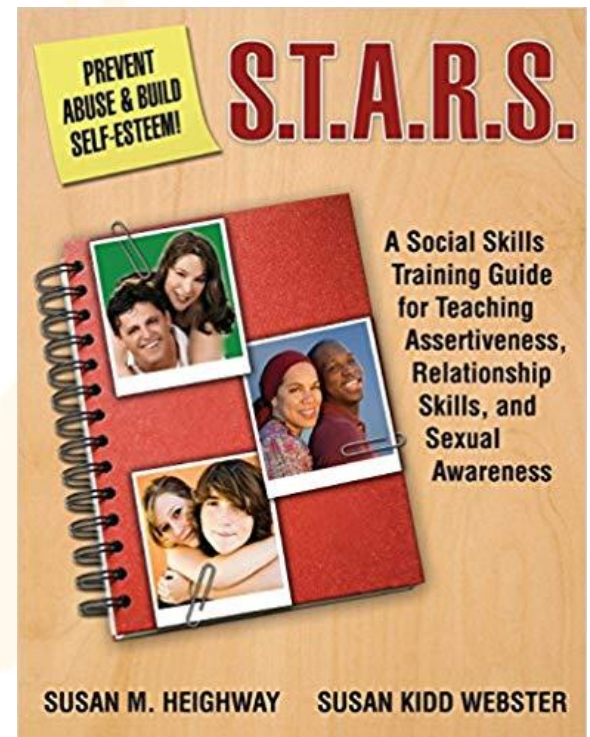
Smart Healthy Appropriate Relationship Education  
(SHARE © NOVA 2019) <https://www.novabucks.org/education-training/children-with-developmental-disabilities/>

- Mid to high functioning teens & young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Parents are integral partners & includes a **corresponding parent program**
- Very interactive with guided group discussion, activities, & videos
- Includes sexual harassment in the workplace



# More conversation starters...

- S.T.A.R.S. A Social Skills Training Guide for Teaching Assertiveness, Relationship Skills, and Sexual Awareness
- [Susan Heighway](#) and [Susan Webster](#) (Authors)
- Available on Amazon





# Beyond the Birds and the Bees

## Beyond the Birds and the Bees

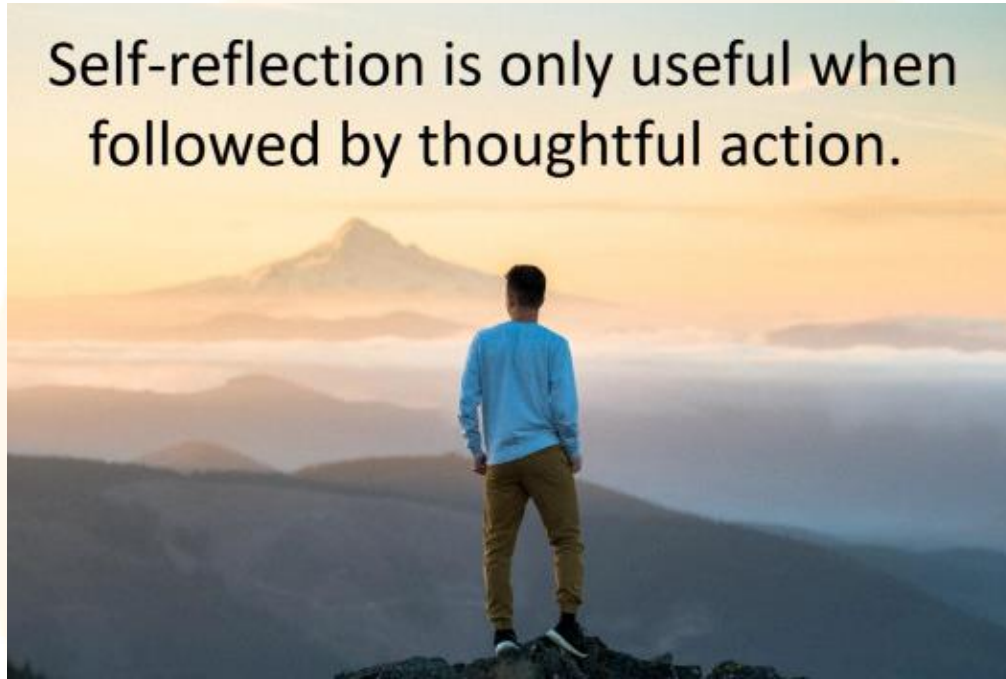
Adolescent Sexual Consent and Disabilities:  
A Technical Assistance Guide



- Adolescent Sexual Consent and Disabilities 14 pgs.  
[https://pcar.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdfs/beyond the birds and bees.pdf](https://pcar.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdfs/beyond%20the%20birds%20and%20bees.pdf)
- Prepared by Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape
- <https://www.safesecurekids.org/parent-teacher-resources>

# Self-Reflection

Self-reflection is only useful when followed by thoughtful action.



What is one thing you can do tomorrow to make a difference in the life your daughter/son or the young adults you are working with to help them heal from relationship violence and/or sexual assault?



# Questions?

**Please complete evaluation form.**

Need more resources...

<https://www.ncedsv.org/preventing-sexual-abuse-of-people-with-developmental-disabilities/>

