

# Notes for

family members, teachers and disability workers



Some people with intellectual disability will be able to read *All About Sex* independently but most will require the support of a family member, teacher, support worker or advocate. The fact sheets in *All About Sex* are intended for all young people and adults with intellectual disability but particularly those who are:

- Approaching puberty
- Asking questions about their bodies and sexuality
- Sexually active or thinking about becoming sexually active

## Why teach people with intellectual disability about sexuality?

People with intellectual disability have limited opportunities to learn about sexuality, relationships, and reproductive and sexual health. Furthermore, many people have had limited opportunities for experiential learning through established relationships. It is often the case that people with intellectual disability have had less education in this area and are less likely to have accurate information than people without intellectual disability.

In recent decades there has been an increased awareness of people with disability as sexual beings. It has also been acknowledged that people with disability have the same rights to sexual and reproductive health, including education, as others in the community. Some of the benefits of sexuality and relationships education include:

### *Improved knowledge and self-esteem*

Education strengthens the resources of the person with intellectual disability.<sup>1</sup> Research suggests that sexuality and relationships education is associated with higher levels of knowledge and lower levels of vulnerability to abuse amongst people with intellectual disability.<sup>2</sup>

Sexuality education has the potential to encourage positive sexuality, promote decision making abilities and empower the person with intellectual disability to act on their decisions.<sup>1</sup> Sexual expression is an important part of being human and positive experiences can build self-esteem and a sense of identity.

### *Increased skills will enhance community participation*

Education provides the tools needed to successfully integrate into the general community.<sup>1</sup> With appropriate support many people with intellectual disability can develop the necessary social skills to make healthy relationship decisions such as starting and stopping relationships, choosing whether or not to have children, and exploring sexual identity. Enhancing relationship skills will lead to more meaningful participation in their communities.

Sexuality education improves a person's understanding of appropriate behaviour and builds one's capacity to participate in the community as a citizen with rights and responsibilities. The development of positive social behaviours for people with intellectual disability is therefore paramount.<sup>1</sup>

### *Improved decision making and self-protection skills*

People with intellectual disability experience much higher rates of sexual abuse than the general population. Education has been widely recognised as a mechanism to reduce vulnerability to sexual abuse.<sup>1</sup>

Research has shown that improvements in knowledge result in improved decision-making ability in people with intellectual disability. Decision-making skills are not static and can be improved through appropriate, individually tailored sexuality and relationships education.<sup>3</sup>

Increased knowledge can lead to prevention, earlier identification and treatment of sexual abuse perpetrated on the person with intellectual disability.<sup>1</sup> Therefore it is important for people to learn that they have the right to be safe, and are given the opportunity to learn and practise protective behaviours.

1. Swango-Wilson A. Meaningful Sex Education Programs for Individuals with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities. *Sexuality and Disability* 2011; 29: 113-118.
2. Murphy G, O'Callaghan A. Capacity of adults with intellectual disabilities to consent to sexual relationships. *Psychological Medicine* 2004; 34: 1347-1357.
3. Dukes E, McGuire BE. Enhancing capacity to make sexuality-related decisions in people with an intellectual disability. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 2009; 53(8):727-734.

## How to use *All About Sex*

Many people find it difficult to discuss sexuality. Family members often find themselves in the role of educator without any formal training and with very little support. *All About Sex* has been designed to make it easier for people to begin having discussions about sexuality and relationships.

*All About Sex* is designed to help educators find appropriate language and information that is accurate and easy to use. Useful suggestions for educators about how to approach the learning experience with a person or group of people with intellectual disability include:

### *How people learn best*

In general, people with intellectual disability will learn best when they have established rapport and trust with the educator. Use of simple language with illustrations has been demonstrated to improve comprehension. Furthermore, carefully paced information with repetition of key messages will assist a person with intellectual disability to learn over a period of time.

The illustrations in *All About Sex* are designed to improve understanding by providing context and can be useful points for further discussion. While some people with intellectual disability will have difficulty reading these fact sheets independently, it is likely that their comprehension will be greatly improved with the support of a reader.

### *Determine level of understanding*

Each person will vary in how much or how little they understand about each topic. It is important to find out what the learner already knows about the topics before proceeding. The fact sheets are ordered to provide a suggested sequence for learning starting with basic concepts about bodies, and public and private. Topics then progress to more complex reproductive and sexual health issues. However, they can be used in any order to suit the learning needs of the person.

### *Some language and illustrations are explicit*

Some of the language and illustrations in *All About Sex* are very explicit. This is necessary to maximise the learning potential for people with intellectual disability. The language chosen is simple and clear and the concepts have been used successfully in teaching situations. The language and images are also intended to reflect the diversity that exists in society around types of relationships, cultural background, age and gender.

### *Remember that people will have had a range of experiences*

It is important to remember that, like all of us, people with intellectual disability have a range of experiences which will have shaped their knowledge about sexuality, reproductive health and relationships. Some people with intellectual disability will have experienced sexual assault. Others will have been involved in rewarding

interpersonal relationships and/or have experienced a close and supportive family life. Every learner has a wealth of life experiences which they can draw upon to support their learning.

A learner's previous experience may also shape how they react to the material in these fact sheets. Some learners may have experienced negative reactions from others when they have indicated that they have sexual feelings or that they may have been sexually assaulted at some time in their lives. When working with a person with intellectual disability in the area of sexuality, educators will need to be sensitive to the consequences of some of these past experiences.

### *Check it is OK with people before showing them explicit images*

When using explicit language and images, it is important to gain the consent of the learner before showing them. This also enables the learner to pace their own learning. It is respectful to the learner and allows them to have a degree of control over their own learning.

This practice also builds in opportunities to teach learners to be active decision-makers in their own learning and counteracts the passive behaviour that people with intellectual disability often learn from being service users and care recipients. This is also a good way to build the learning of protective behaviours into everyday living.

### *Always use correct anatomical language*

Educators are strongly encouraged to use the correct anatomical language provided in these fact sheets when working with people with intellectual disability. Research shows that people learn best when correct anatomical language is consistently used. Although slang terms are often used to talk about different body parts, not everybody uses the same slang terms and this practice varies between different cultural groups. Therefore very few slang terms are used in *All About Sex*.

### *Use everyday situations as examples*

Learning can also be enhanced by using everyday situations to reinforce what has already been learned formally. An example of this may be discussing the different types of relationships seen on a television show that the learner likes to watch at home.

### *Use the 'What you need to know' section to reinforce the key messages*

Some of the fact sheets may seem repetitive but best practice indicates that people with intellectual disability learn best when messages are repeated. The 'What you need to know' section at the end of each fact sheet can be used to identify and reinforce the key messages. These sections are written in second person where possible to help the educator address the learner directly.

### *Supplement the information in All About Sex with other resources*

*All About Sex* can be supplemented with other teaching resources listed in the fact sheet called 'Resources'. We recommend that educators look at these resources first to check their suitability before using them with the learner. Further information may be accessed through services listed in the fact sheet called 'Where to go for help or advice'.

### *Learning environment*

People learn best when they are engaged in the topics, when they are relaxed in the learning environment and are enjoying the learning material. *All About Sex* is intended to be easy and enjoyable to use for educators as well as learners.

We wish you all the best in using *All About Sex*.

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Family Planning NSW is a not-for-profit organisation funded by the NSW Ministry of Health

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Reviewed Oct 2013/FPNSW 10/13