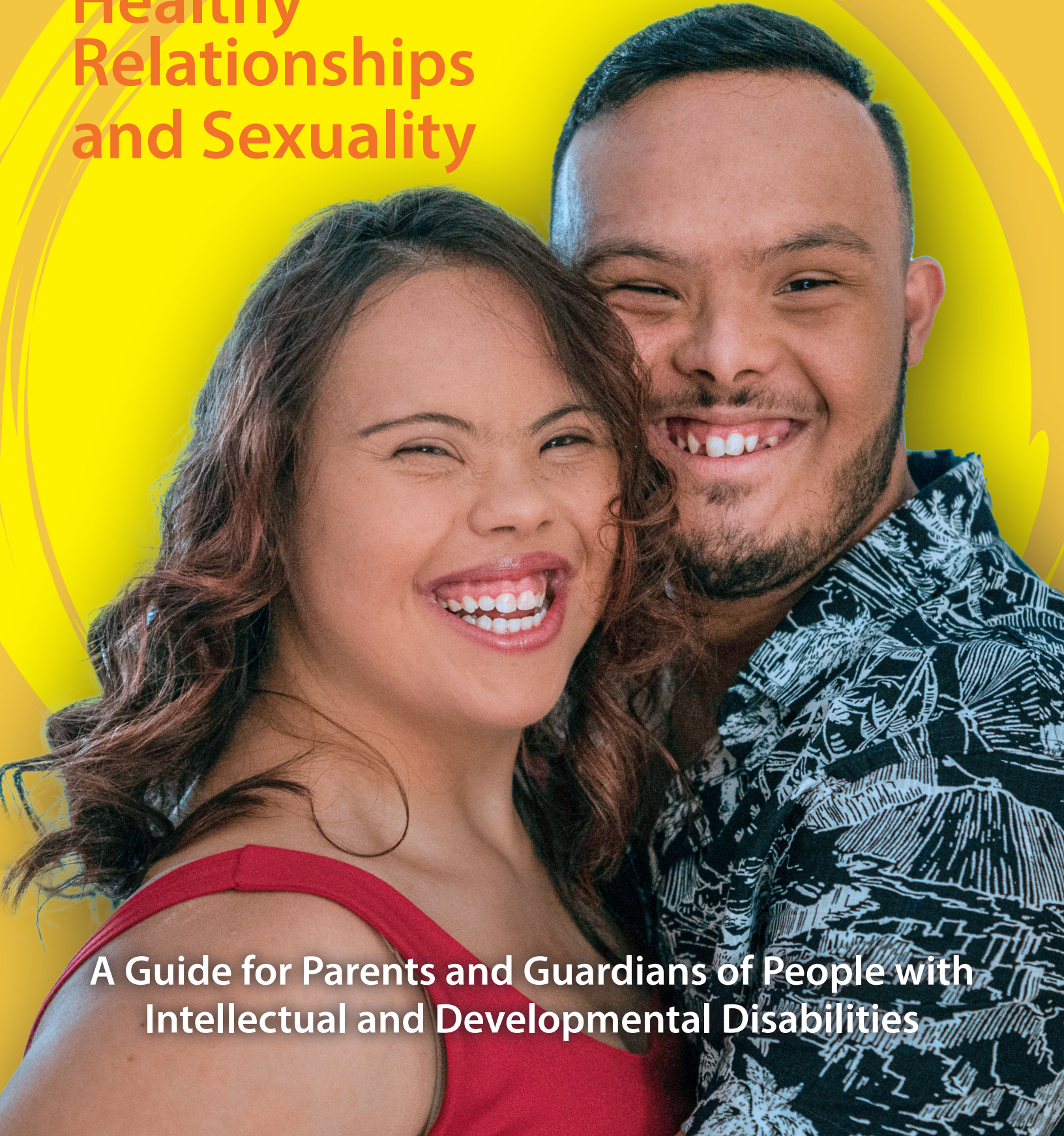


See Us Now Idaho SUN! Idaho

**Healthy
Relationships
and Sexuality**

**A Guide for Parents and Guardians of People with
Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**



People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Relationships, & Sexuality

“Folks don’t naturally realize we have urges and drives too.”

“We are fully human with a full range of emotions and experiences.”

Many of us have received incomplete or inaccurate information on the emotions, sexuality, and relationship experiences of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. A common belief is that adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities are not interested in romantic or dating relationships or that these relationships are not possible. Beliefs like these not only limit the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities but also create potentially unsafe and harmful environments where abuse and violence are more likely to occur.

Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities can, and often do, have romantic relationships. And like all of us, they will be more likely to live full and safe lives with parents, guardians, and community support. Being a part of a secure and present support system for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in your life can make a huge difference in their ability to thrive. Our role as parents and guardians can be complex and challenging, and we may not always know what is best. With practice, compassion, and empathy, we can find many ways to support those we care for and love.

Healthy Relationships: Supporting Healthy and Safe Choices

Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities have a right to make decisions about dating, relationships, and sexuality. They also have a need and a right to information and support in making healthy, safe decisions. It is normal for all of us to begin exploring boundaries, identities, and relationships – and these are BIG changes! Whether the adult with intellectual and developmental disabilities in your life has been exploring or is just starting, we, as parents and guardians, can be crucial supporters of this growth and development.

Many unhealthy and abusive behaviors have been, unfortunately, normalized in our communities. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are often bullied, humiliated, and harmed more frequently than their peers. It is normal to have deep concerns and fears about these realities and still feel the need to conform or fit in with what peers consider acceptable. Peer pressure can often encourage harmful behaviors in relationships as well and lead to many other risky situations, such as sexual activity, alcohol or drug use, and even violence. As our adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities explore identity and relationships, it is important to validate these emotions and experiences while encouraging their own healthy decisions and choices.

Whether romantic or otherwise, healthy relationships can effectively protect against risky behaviors. Healthy relationship skills such as negotiating, decision-making, and problem-solving can help people navigate life when presented with difficult decisions. We are well-positioned to model and guide our adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in developing these skills before and when they feel pressured to engage in unhealthy or risky behaviors.

Ways to Talk with Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities about Relationships

It's never too late to help adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities develop healthy relationship skills and equip them with tools to explore relationships and sexuality. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities, like all people, first learn about relationships from parents or guardians, siblings, friends, and media. This is a fundamental period for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities to learn strategies for maintaining healthy relationships throughout the rest of their lives. It is important to provide reliable and accurate information about what a healthy relationship looks like, feels like, and sounds like during this period.

As parents or guardians, we are role models for healthy relationships. We can encourage and help our family members explore, identify, and navigate their full range of emotions. As parents or guardians, our awareness and understanding of emotions can help to build and maintain healthy relationships. Encourage your loved one to be reflective about their actions and emotions. Our own experiences with unhealthy relationships can impact our relationship with our adult sons and daughters and those we care for — we should be honest when we make mistakes and model being accountable. Normalizing our mistakes and modeling how to repair them will also be helpful to their development. Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities learn from our behavior when we are well and our behaviors when we are in crisis or experiencing difficult decisions.

Reflecting on our own relationship experiences

Before discussing healthy dating relationships, we should examine our values, behaviors, and relationship experiences. Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities will likely have many questions. We do not need to have all the answers, but we should be clear about our values and beliefs first. How have our values and beliefs manifested in our lives? What were our first dating relationships like? How did we resolve conflict in the relationship? Be honest. What did we find challenging? What did we find enjoyable? Our perceptions of intellectual and developmental disability may inaccurately cause us to see our experiences as different than our adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, but reflecting on these will set us up for supportive conversations.

Keep the dialogue going

As with anyone, talking with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities about dating relationships is not a single conversation but an open and ongoing dialogue. These conversations should always be developmentally appropriate and move forward as our adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities face other experiences. To keep the dialogue going, welcome and respect your adult with intellectual and developmental disabilities' opinions, thoughts, and ideas. We should continue to reflect on what made us feel heard and valued in our relationships with trusted people and try to provide that for them.

Vulnerability and authenticity go both ways. Our adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities can tell when we are being authentic—encouraging them to do the same.

Taking experiences seriously

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities experience attraction and love. Knowing how to navigate new feelings may be unfamiliar to adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities who have a romantic relationship. Extend compassion and care.

Supporting the exploration and understanding of their sexuality and gender identity is critical. Understand that discovering one's identity is a normal and natural part of every life and is often a process. People who come out as Queer, Transgender, Gender Non-Conforming, or Non-Binary are often at their most vulnerable. They may endure isolation and abandonment if family or friends react negatively when they share that they are Queer or Trans. Providing support when they tell you who they are is vitally important. Telling them we love and support them reminds them they are not alone. We shouldn't be surprised if they continue to feel distraught if their friends reject them — supportive parents and guardians are important but can never replace peer support and connection. Because Queer and Transgender/Non-Binary people are not fully embraced in all communities, it is vital that we as parents and guardians do what we can to support our loved one's identities. People in Queer and Trans communities experience some of the most significant mental health struggles including suicide. As these identities become increasingly visible and acceptable in mainstream society, especially among younger generations, all of us must provide open-minded support for their health, confidence, and ability to thrive.

Creating Opportunities for Discussion

Create time and space that is comfortable, provides privacy, and allows enough time to discuss whatever issues arise. Watching a TV show together or driving long distances in the car can provide opportunities to connect. Scheduling regular times to be together may be helpful.

Being Present

Being present when an adult with intellectual and developmental disabilities wants to have a conversation will ensure they feel valued. Being present means actively listening, engaging in the conversation, and avoiding multitasking. Repeating what we heard and asking questions may be helpful. Be sure to let them ask us questions and create frequent opportunities for them to start a conversation. If we cannot be fully present, set another time, but first, we should find out if they are in immediate harm. If they are, take appropriate action to plan for and ensure their safety. Once you agree to delay the conversation, schedule a specific time and place when both of you can be present and focused.

Direct and Indirect Communication

Sometimes, adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities may give us signs that they want to talk, such as hanging around but not saying anything or saying that they do not feel well when nothing is physically wrong. We can continue building trust with the understanding that they will have the conversation when they are ready. Connect them with another adult if they feel more comfortable with them or, if possible, a counselor. We shouldn't take it personally if they feel more comfortable talking to someone else about sensitive subjects. It can feel bad in the moment, but it is more important they have someone to support them.

Deep Listening

Wait and listen. Breathe. Let silence fill the space instead of immediately asking questions. They will be more likely to share their thoughts and feelings if they feel safe and valued. Supporting them affirms that we are a good resource and a nonjudgmental listener. We can provide many opportunities for them to give us feedback about our listening. We should do our best to avoid giving critical or judgmental comments, even if we don't fully understand. When we hear something that makes us uncomfortable, it is helpful to ask respectful questions. When we are listening, it can be helpful to repeat what we heard ("I think I heard you say..."). This shows that we do want to understand.

Developmentally Appropriate Conversations

Speaking in abstract ways may create misunderstandings. Direct, concrete language and real-life examples work best. Sharing our own experiences, especially the ones where we made mistakes and learned, can be the best way to go. Describing situations we have experienced and being honest about what we have felt can help support understanding. It can be helpful for us to check in as well, asking, "Do you understand?" or "Does that make sense?"

Answering Questions Honestly

We need to be compassionate, honest, and correct. We don't need to be experts. If we don't know how to answer the question, we can offer to find the answer together, using a credible source so that they can refer to it on their own.

Characteristics of Healthy Relationships

Identifying and talking about the characteristics of healthy relationships can help set their boundaries and understand their rights as human beings. Many factors make up healthy relationships, and no list is complete. The following conversation was developed in partnership with adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and can be a good start to practicing the language of healthy relationships:

“We deserve healthy relationships”

As people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, we can—and do—have real relationships and intimacy. We deserve to be treated with love and respect. Healthy relationships need **trust, honesty, respect, communication,** and **support.** Relationships aren't always easy, but we can be in the right ones if we work together.

No matter what abilities we have, healthy relationships are possible. We don't need to accept anything else. We will do our best in our relationships and ask for help when things don't feel right. Sometimes, we might even need to report abuse or violence.

We deserve real information about relationships and sexuality. To know what is right and what is wrong:

Trust: We do what we say we will do and talk about our mistakes.

We can sometimes hurt each other, and we will always try to be better. We all make mistakes. We do our best to make sure we feel safe together. We work through our problems to strengthen our relationships.

Honesty: We tell each other the truth, even when it's hard.

We know that lies will hurt us and our relationships. We always try to be kind and honest with each other. Sometimes, the truth isn't easy, but our relationship is worth it. We trust each other to be honest and genuine in our relationship.

Respect: We can have different ideas and still be together.

We disagree, and that's okay! We don't need to hide who we are or what we believe. Our relationships are stronger when we can both be ourselves without being afraid. We know our differences will help us grow.

Communication: We share our feelings and talk about the things we want.

We are open with each other. We want to know what each of us feels and what we need in our relationships. We all have a right to talk about what we want and don't want.

Support: We help each other when we can and ask for help when needed.

We all need help sometimes, and no one can do everything. We show up for each other because we care. We do our best to support each other when things are hard. We also have our friends, family, and people we trust to help us. We don't need to be alone in our relationships.

Abusive Relationships

Abusive relationships can include verbal, emotional, sexual, and/or physical abuse. These can occur in any relationship regardless of ability, sexuality, or gender identity. Abusive experiences in relationships may disrupt normal development, including the development of a stable self-concept, self-esteem, and body image. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities who are in abusive relationships, like anyone, often carry unhealthy patterns of abuse into future relationships. This does not mean that they are incapable of reaching wholeness — do not underestimate adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, resilience, and ability to heal. However, it can be important to seek counseling and/or other culturally relevant modes of healing if they have experienced an abusive relationship.

Signs of Abusive Relationships

It can be difficult for anyone to talk about experiences with abusive relationships, and many who do have these experiences never tell anyone. It is important for parents and guardians to be a trusted adult and care provider that the adult with intellectual and developmental disabilities will reach out to if experiencing abuse.

The following was developed with adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities as a model in maintaining good conversations about relationships and what all of us deserve:

“I have a right to report abuse and violence.”

“I have a right to ask for help when I am being hurt.”

None of us deserves to be hurt or abused in our relationships—or by anyone. We have a right to be in relationships and have the support we need to live our full lives. We also have the right to ask for help when we feel unsafe. Sometimes, we may even want to report what is happening to the police or someone we trust.

We deserve to set **boundaries** on what we want and don't want. We have the right to our own **choices** without anyone controlling us. We have **value** and should not be afraid to disagree. Our **humanity** matters, and no one should take advantage of our disability. We have the right to the **care** we need and deserve to feel safe.

If we ever feel unsafe, we can ask for help. These rights always need to be respected:

Boundaries: When I want anyone to stop, they need to stop.

We can tell someone to stop anytime and in any way we can. This is important for things like touching, kissing, or sex. It also means how people care for us and what they say. Boundaries always need to be respected.

Choices: I get to be myself without anyone trying to control me.

All of us get to be who we are. No one has the right to control what we do or say. We get to make our own choices unless we are hurting someone else - or ourselves. Even if someone is helping us, we get to decide how that happens.

Value: I get to disagree and still be respected.

It is okay for us to have different ideas or beliefs. Even when we disagree with someone, we still deserve to be treated with respect. All of us have value. Our ideas and beliefs can be different without being treated as less important.

Humanity: "I want to be seen as a person, not as a disability."

No one has the right to take advantage of me.

Our disability is just one part of us. It is not all of who we are. No one has the right to use our disability to control us. We deserve to be treated and understood as complex human beings.

Care: I deserve the services I need without feeling hurt or afraid.

None of us should have to choose between being safe and having what we need. We still have rights even if we have a caregiver or receive services. Our care needs to happen how we want it to happen.

Why Do People Experience Abusive Relationships?

Many people may not recognize abusive behavior. Status and self-esteem are often intricately linked to our relationships and identities. Many of us may feel that it is better to be in an abusive relationship than in no relationship at all.

The person who is experiencing harm may be in love and want the violence to end, but not the relationship altogether. Reasoning and logic can become extremely difficult when someone is experiencing abuse or trauma. Our patience and kindness with them are critical despite the possible emotions that may arise. A person experiencing harm is likely already feeling shame and guilt.

A person in an unhealthy relationship may also believe that they can change the person causing them harm or believe the person causing the harm when they promise to stop. It is also common that the person who is causing harm in a relationship threatens to hurt themselves if the relationship ends. In supporting our adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, it may be helpful to offer to contact a mental health professional or even report the behavior.

People experiencing abuse may feel deep shame and isolation. They might be afraid to tell us about the relationship for these reasons. They may fear the relationship will end once you know of the harm. They may also be afraid to leave the relationship due to threats or other forms of abuse from the person causing the harm. People who choose to abuse will use many tactics to keep their partner in the relationship. Remind them they are not in trouble, and it is not their fault. Our priority is that they are safe and well.

What if the Adult with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities is Being Abused?

Create an open environment in which to start the conversation. We should always begin by meeting people where they are and being willing to listen to their thoughts and feelings.

It is important to trust our instincts. We can start by telling them we are worried about them and give specific examples of the abusive behavior(s) we have witnessed. Let them know that the abuse is not their fault and that all people are deserving of love and care. When intervening, seeking support from a social worker, mental health professional, or counselor is okay. We should not feel embarrassment or shame in asking for help.

People need to know that they do not have to accept or engage in any form of violence in relationships. Here are some suggestions.

- Tell them they are worthy of healthy relationships and remind them to be clear about their boundaries. Remind them to listen to their limits and respect them.
- Encourage people to trust their instincts. If they feel fearful, validate their concern and ask what would make them safer. This is an ongoing conversation; recognize that their needs may change.
- Be attentive to the person's safety. Ask, "Is there anything I can do to make you feel safer now?"
- Let them know that help may be available from a community or tribal domestic or sexual violence organization, counseling, and other mental health resources. It can be helpful for them to process the relationship with outside sources.
- After experiencing trauma, they may require assistance doing everyday tasks and may ask you to accompany them in public.
- Encourage them to keep a journal or help them keep a journal describing the abuse (dates, times, places, specific injuries, threats, etc.). These journal entries could be helpful if an investigation or legal action occurs. However, do not include anything you wouldn't want disclosed during a criminal trial

People are likely to be conflicted about ending a relationship. Ending any relationship is messy, sad, and takes time, and it can be even harder when abuse is involved. Unless someone's life is at immediate risk, forbidding them from seeing their romantic partner may not be a good idea. The person experiencing harm is the one who is going to have to separate from the relationship — not us.

"What can I do to help you?" or "What are your immediate needs?" They might not have the answer right away; it might take some time, or the answer may never come. It is critical that they feel supported and can seek help when the time is right.

What If an Adult with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities is Engaging in Abusive Behaviors?

Most people who are abusive don't consider themselves abusers. Many are in denial about the severity of their actions. As a parent or guardian, it may also be hard for us to believe, but reaching out and talking to them about engaging in abusive behaviors in their relationship is critical.

People choosing abusive behavior need help and can change with support. We can still love and care about them and let them know that we don't think they are a terrible person. It's never too late to change their behaviors or relationships. It's important to ensure that the person who has caused harm doesn't feel isolated. Isolation does not encourage people to change. Model and encourage responsible accountability for their actions that have harmed others. An apology is a great start, followed by tangible actions showing they recognize the harm and want to change their behaviors.

We can offer to help them by locating community resources that can provide counseling. We should explain that there are consequences to actions that may result in the criminal legal system getting involved. An additional consequence may be that the person who experienced harm does not want contact with the person who caused harm. This can be a temporary or a permanent separation. It's sometimes helpful to remind the person who caused harm that the healing of the person who experienced harm takes priority. This healing may include separation from the relationship, and those wishes and separation must be respected.

Ask questions and listen to the person who has caused harm about how they think they got to this point in the relationship. Prepare to look at actions and the behaviors you have modeled in your home and family. Trauma that is passed down from generation to generation can appear in many ways (called generational trauma).

Moving and struggling alongside our loved one who has caused harm is one of the most important things we, as parents or guardians, will ever do

.

Conversations about Sexuality

Talking about sexuality may be deeply uncomfortable for us as parents and guardians. Our experiences, views, and opinions will influence our ability to engage with adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities in ways we may not even understand.

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities deserve accurate information and trusted conversations about sexuality. Due to stereotypes, misinformation, and ableism, adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities are often viewed as incapable of romantic or sexual feelings and are left out of these vital dialogues. As parents and guardians, we can be a powerful bridge of support in fostering healthy, thriving lives.

Tips and Reminders for Parents and Guardians of Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

- Seek help and support: None of us have all the answers, especially regarding complex issues such as sexuality and relationships. For more information and resources, visit www.idahocoalition.org. We can also connect with other parents and guardians for support. We are all likely to experience similar tensions, struggles, and successes!
- Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities have romantic and sexual desires, which is often denied by society. While we may struggle to fully embrace our loved one's feelings and desires, we can do our best to meet them at their level of understanding without denying their authentic experiences.
- Sexuality is about more than sex. Our conversations should be open to a broad range, including gender identity, feelings of attraction, changes in our bodies and emotions, choices about relationships, and parenting.
- It is so important that we break our habits of being vague or avoiding important issues. Using accurate names for body parts and direct conversations about emotions and attraction will help our adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities explore their sexualities safely and openly.
- Sharing our values, concerns, and beliefs will help open the conversation. They do not need to agree with everything we have to say, but knowing where we are with these issues will help to build trust.
- Our conversations should be consistent and regular. It is okay for us to repeat ourselves and make sure our loved one understands what we are saying.

Options and Resources

It is necessary for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities experiencing trauma to have autonomy regarding any decisions in response to abuse or sexual assault — being able to make their own choices is crucial to their healing. We must be aware of mandatory reporting laws that may require anyone, including doctors, teachers, and counselors, to report certain crimes against our adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Understanding this going forward is necessary because a person may feel forced to report or be required by law to report what our loved one tells them to a policing agency or another agency. This may impact our relationship with our adult with intellectual and developmental disabilities or those from whom we seek support. As parents and guardians, we should be clear with our loved ones about mandatory reporting and clearly communicate with our support systems to make sure we are all aware of our obligations.

Community or Tribal Domestic & Sexual Violence Organizations

Our local community or tribal domestic and sexual violence advocacy organizations can provide resources to people experiencing abuse or sexual assault, such as safety planning, counseling, support groups, or assessing criminal or civil legal options.

Reporting to the Criminal Legal System

Adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities must weigh their options and make the best choice for them. For some people, reporting to the school or a policing agency is a very empowering experience, but for others, it is not. It might be helpful to seek a counselor or an advocate with a community or tribal domestic and sexual violence organization before reporting to the criminal legal system. If adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities choose to report to the criminal legal system, they will have to share what happened, and it is important to understand this before going in. Sharing their experience of the abuse or sexual assault is a very personal thing. If they choose to report the abuse or sexual assault, they will be asked to talk about it in detail and possibly requested to reshare the details many times to many different people. This process can be retraumatizing. Not everyone may believe what happened to them. People will question their experience or may try to blame them. Be mindful that the criminal legal system cannot guarantee that someone who has harmed another will be found guilty or convicted. It's important to consider that what our loved one needs may not be something that the criminal legal system can provide.

Anyone who is abused might feel a loss of control, and this can be retraumatizing. Not everyone finds reporting empowering; some feel a loss of control because decisions about what happens with their information are made for them. Having advocate support throughout the process may help your loved one regain a sense of control. Advocates will better understand the criminal legal system and be able to explain it to them. The criminal legal process can be long and drawn out. Unfortunately, adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities will not have much control over the events or the outcome. This does not necessarily mean it will be a negative experience, but it can be.

Civil & Criminal Orders of Protection

The civil and criminal legal systems have two types of orders. Civil laws are applied when an individual has had their rights violated or when individuals have disputes with other individuals or organizations. Criminal law cases are only conducted through the criminal court system. A community or tribal domestic violence program advocate may be able to help our adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities decide if they want to access a civil protection order.

Civil Protection Orders (CPO) – A civil protection order is a document from a judge that tells one person to stay away from another person’s home, school, or workplace. The order may also ban calling or texting. Most states have options for minors in an abusive relationship to file a petition for a civil protection order. Filing the petition is free, and you do not need an attorney. The paperwork for a civil protection order is available at your local court clerk’s office in the courthouse. A person violating a civil protection order may be arrested and criminally charged.

Criminal No Contact Orders (NCO) – If there is an ongoing criminal case regarding abuse in a relationship, the judge will usually issue a no contact order requiring that the person causing harm (the defendant in a case) stay away from and not harass the person experiencing the violence. You can ask the court to change or terminate an order, but a judge may or may not agree to that change. Generally, NCOs are only in effect if a case is ongoing (so if the charges are dropped, the order ends). You can have both a civil and criminal order (either at the same time) or one after the other.

National Helplines

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or 1-800-787- 3224 (TTY line for Deaf/hearing impaired). Free, confidential assistance 24/7 to victims of domestic violence. Multilingual and may connect you with a local program that can provide assistance.

National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline: 1-866-331-9474 – Speak with peer advocates or text LOVEIS to 22522. The crisis text line provides round-the-clock support for anyone in crisis, which can be reached by texting HOME to 741741

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673 – Get help and referrals from advocates.

Trevor Lifeline (for LGBTQ youth): 1-866-488-7386 – Crisis intervention and suicide prevention for LGBTQ youth.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255 – Free, confidential support for people in crisis.

National Runaway Safeline: 1-800-786-2929 – Share your story and build a plan.

National Street Harassment Hotline: 1-855-897-5910 – Support, advice, and information.

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- A Guide for Parents and Guardians: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://icasa.org/uploads/documents/illinois-imagines/Soft-cover-Guide-for-Parents-and-Guardians-Module-4.2.pdf>
- Tips for Talking to Your Youth with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities About Sexual Health and Relationships: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://teenpregnancy.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/resource-files/IDD_Sexual_Health_Com_Snapshot.pdf
- Healthy Relationships, Sexuality and Disability: <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.mass.gov/doc/healthy-relationships-sexuality-and-disability-resource-guide-0/download>



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