Sex and Learning Disabilities

In recent years, major changes have taken place in the way we think about people with a learning disability, and in our approaches to their needs and those of their families. We now recognise that adults with a learning disability should be acknowledged as real adults whose individual requirements met without undue segregation.

One aspect of adulthood which most of us take for granted, is the right to be sexually active. There are two contradictory myths which contribute to people with a learning disability not being included in this right:

- People with a learning disability remain forever childlike and "innocent," whatever their actual age. We do not associate sexual expression with childhood, by extension we do not see it as appropriate for people labelled as having a learning disability to express themselves sexually.
- People with a learning disability have very strong sexual drives and appetites, but very poor self control, so that they are a danger both to themselves and to other members of society.

Neither of these ideas are helpful to people with a learning disability or to their parents and care-givers.

All human beings are sexual beings. Sexuality is not an optional extra. Everyone has sexual needs, feelings and drives. The question here is: How can we help people with learning disabilities channel their needs, feelings and drives to get pleasure and enjoyment from their close personal relationships, and provide them with protection from other encounters which are exploitative?

Learning about sexuality is a life long and often haphazard process. Babies learn from birth onwards about the bodily pleasure of being warm, being cuddled, being tickled and interacted with. We learn from watching the ways in which our parents show affection to each other; we learn from spoken and unspoken messages about private parts; also from films, advertisements and soap operas on TV.

Sadly, it is often the case that youngsters with learning disabilities only get a very negative form of sex education - "Don't do that, it's not nice", "Stop touching yourself down there, that's bad!"

Not giving them any positive formal or sensible sex education does not mean that they don't pick up many enticing ideas - but they need more sex education than most young people, in order to protect them from people who seek them out in order to exploit their ingenuity.

Ignorance is definitely not bliss. Not knowing how to behave or the consequences of sexual activity, not knowing the difference between public and private behaviour, not knowing you 'own' your body and can say "no" to touches you do not like, leaves people with a learning disability very vulnerable to getting into trouble, to abuse or exploitation. Proper sex education is therefore a particularly important factor in helping people protect themselves from abuse.

Children with a learning disability grow up. Although puberty may be slightly delayed for those with profound or multiple disabilities, they go through the same process as any other child. Voices start to break, body hair starts to grow, girls begin their periods, boys start to have wet dreams, mood swings become more extreme. All that is the biological process of puberty which cannot be stopped, even if sometimes parents would want it to! However, adolescence is a social process whereby the youngster develops a personal understanding of his or her adult social and sexual identity. Frequently we deny that period of adolescence and then adult status to people with a learning disability. We cannot stop their physical maturity, but often with the best of intentions, we stop or curtail their socio-sexual development. The result is a person who is physically an adult, but who has the social status of a child.

What is the alternative, given that people we are concerned with do have varying degrees of difficulty in learning and in understanding?

- Broadly-based sex education at all levels
- Access to counselling where necessary (for individuals and their families or carers)
- Social skills training about appropriate behaviour
- Consistency of response between home/residential unit and school/college/day centre
- Social opportunities to enable people to make and maintain friendships and relationships
- Education and practical help to protect vulnerable people from sexual exploitation by strangers on public transport and when out
and about

- Environments in which people with a learning disability are treated with dignity and respect.

Sex education, in the context of social education and health education, is increasingly being provided in schools, on special needs courses in FE colleges, and in Day Centres. Youngsters and adults with a learning disability can gain a great deal of individual and social satisfaction from close personal and sexual relationships and in this they are no different from anyone else. They may, however, need specific counselling on issues relating to communication, contraception or parenting.

Care should be taken to ensure that there is liaison between home and educational or work settings. Inconsistent responses only serve to confuse and make learning about appropriate behaviour more difficult. For example, open Masturbation is a frequent source of worry to parents or staff. Masturbation is an extremely common human behaviour and is not harmful - in fact it can help to relieve the tensions which spring from sexual feelings. But persistent Masturbation in public will get the individual into trouble. Careful and consistent teaching and training is needed to make it quite clear that this is an activity which should take place in private.

Surveys have shown that people with a learning disability tend to lead very restricted lives, only going out socially with members of their own family, or attending clubs where they mix only with those from the same Day Centre. Those who venture out into the big wide world face rejection and exploitation. If this is true for the person or people with a learning disability that you know, try to consider how their social and leisure opportunities could be safely extended.

Groups and clubs are at last starting up. People First is a network of groups around the country run by and for people with learning disabilities, providing opportunities to socialise, train and campaign. There is a new craze of nightclubs run by and for people with learning disabilities in London - for more details call 020 7359 7443 (Mondays). SNAC is a network of clubs providing all kinds of activities on 01268 583 181.

To sum up, the vast majority of individuals with a learning disability develop normally as sexual beings. They may need more help to understand the bodily and emotional changes that occur as they grow up, but if we deny them the right to be sexual and to make and break relationships their lives are much poorer. Difficulties can occur when this happens and help should be sought from a qualified source. More expertise and literature aimed at people with learning disabilities is required and we are currently working on gathering this together.

Any questions on personal issues like these can be asked on our Sex and Disability Helpline:

Post: Tuppy Owens, BCM Box Lovely, London WC1N 3XX
Email: Email Helpline
Phone: 0707 499 3527 : The Helpline is open weekdays 11am to 7pm

Terms & Conditions
Accessibility Statement
Privacy
XHTML 1.0
CSS
WAI-AA