

The Need for Relationship and Sexuality Education

One way to improve the quality of life of all youth is to prepare them to develop and maintain a variety of life-enriching relationships. The range of potential relationships includes family, acquaintances, school/work friends, platonic friendships and intimacy with loving partners.

Healthy friendships can prolong and enrich life and depend on many factors, including social skills, self esteem, personal grooming, and body image. The needs of the young person will vary according to their individual strengths and challenges. Some youth with disabilities have a narrow experience with relationships beyond family. In the work place, attempts by these individuals to make friends or to ask for a date have been misunderstood causing unhappiness, job loss and, in rare cases, restraining orders or arrests. It is important for youth to learn about the range of relationships and what types of behaviors are appropriate in a given relationship.

Sexuality blossoms in adolescence with the onset of physical puberty. Though youth with disabilities and/or chronic illness may have other health issues taking priority, it is important not to miss out on addressing emerging sexuality. Knowing how a chronic illness might affect puberty, learning to communicate to make friends and to date, and differentiating friendships from intimate relationships are all very important issues for adolescents and young adults and their families. In addition, youth need to know which sexual behaviors are private and which are appropriate in public. They also need to understand issues of abstinence, contraception, sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy in relation to their disability or health condition.

Over their lifetime, individuals with physical, developmental and intellectual disabilities are at higher risk for sexual exploitation and abuse than the general population. Education on how to distinguish between beneficial, healthy relationships and exploitative or abusive relationships and how to find help if there is any concern about abuse is very important. Sex education should include assertiveness skills and emphasize the ability to say "no."

Public schools in Washington require "human growth and development" classes for students with intellectual disabilities. If a youth receives special education services, parents may also request that elements of relationship and sexuality education be incorporated into their child's IEP. Health care providers can also support healthy development of sexuality through interventions such as educating the youth on the impact of a chronic illness on puberty and sexual function. However, the most important education takes place by parents in the family home in the context of the family's values, culture and spiritual or religious beliefs.