

# Sexual Education for Adults with Disabilities



Tool 9

## Handbooks

### Talking about Sexuality and Intimacy in your Environment



# Talking about Sexuality and Intimacy in your Environment

This guide offers tips and methods to address sexuality and intimacy in your environment. It also explains the importance of providing sexual education and what advantages this offers.

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## Health Professionals in a Team

When providing information on sexuality and intimacy it is important to talk about it to the people around you. Health professionals should address sexual health issues in their team and with experts within the organisation. In some cases, it can be useful to collaborate with the client's family or friends. Sexual health education can also form a recurring theme in team meetings. This can make talking about sexuality and intimacy easier and lower the threshold for talking about this subject.

## Parents in a Home Situation

In a home situation, it is also important for parents and partners or caregivers to be on the same page when it comes to sexual health issues. Some institutions offer support in this area, for instance as part of the ambulatory care provided. In any case it is important to talk about sexual education with the organisation.



## Before You Start

Bosch' communication triptych (2006) provides a good basis from which to formulate a vision on sexuality and intimacy, define an attitude that reflects this vision and a method for critical self-reflection on this vision.

When you create a vision on sexuality and intimacy and act on this vision, the individual receiving sexual education does not have to share the professional's or parent's personal views or values on this subject. Emancipation is important in this respect. Individuals with disabilities should have the opportunity to develop themselves sexually just like any other person, based on their own values and ideas of 'right and wrong'.

As you attempt to see the world from the individual's point of view, it may prove difficult to put your own norms and values to one side. If, as a result, this undermines the ability of the health professional or parent to talk freely, it may be a good idea for someone else to take over. This way, the individual's personal development is not compromised. In the case of a parent, this can be a care worker or behavioural specialist from the organisation. In the case of a health professional, this can be a parent, behavioural specialist or sexual educator.

By looking critically at your attitude, you are giving others the opportunity to express and develop their own norms, values and opinions. If you have a clear understanding of who you are and are aware of how your attitude and actions influence others, you also know when you should give the other person space to learn. This is the true essence of self acceptance and may help to accept the situation and your perception of it. It is possible to examine your norms and values individually or as a group. In a group setting, you can share experiences and talk about how you feel about certain norms and values. (Bosch, 2006)

## What Topics To Address and How To Address Them

Talking about sexuality and intimacy at home or in a team is important for creating an atmosphere in which potential problems or situations can be discussed openly. The needs and wishes of the educator will become clear during this process. By making sexuality a topic of open discussion, everyone will be more alert and aware of related issues. It is, however, important to make time for these discussions, for example during team meetings or informal moments, and involve others in the process. The ultimate goal is to get all stakeholders on the same page (Hulpverleners, 2014) (Leidinggevendend, 2014).

### **Vision, policy and protocols (of institutions)**

The policies and protocols of healthcare institutions usually offer tools on how to deal with sexuality and intimacy. These tools will help you to move forward and give you insight in how to deal with certain situations. It is important that the institution's policy is at the top of the team's agenda. This means that themes are discussed openly, everyone is aware of the policy and everyone has easy access to policy information. In short, sexual education should be fully integrated into all aspects and at all levels of the programme (Hulpverleners, 2014) (Schaafsma, 2013).

## Successes and difficulties

Making sexual issues a topic of open discussion within your team or environment can make you feel vulnerable. Although not everyone is comfortable with talking about this subject, sharing successes and difficulties with colleagues or significant others is key for improving sexual education. For example, if you are open about what you are comfortable with or capable of, your colleagues can step in and take your place if necessary. An open atmosphere also stimulates knowledge sharing and the exchange of ideas on how to approach subjects or solve problems, ultimately benefiting the quality and effectiveness of the sexual education provided. Discussing successes (and failures) in team meetings also helps to improve sex education and will motivate colleagues or partners to do the same (Hulpverleners, 2014).

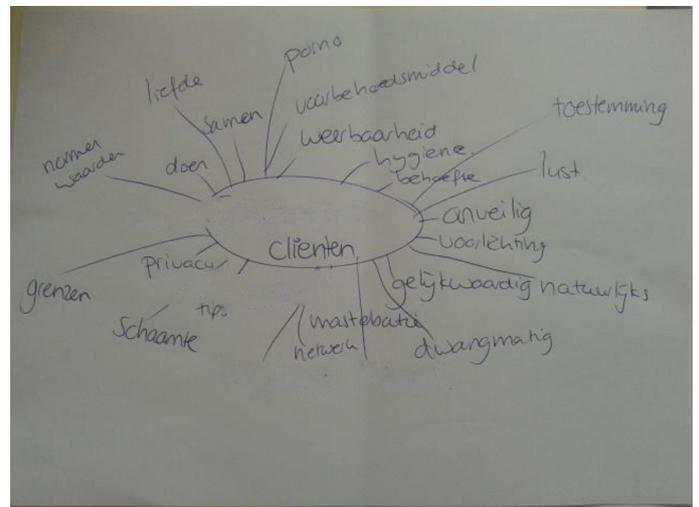
## Boundaries

An important part of teaching sexual education is articulating, setting and maintaining boundaries. Not just for the individual receiving sex education, but also for you, your team or partner. This requires an awareness of your boundaries and being able to maintain them. Role play is one way of exploring personal boundaries and addressing issues. It offers the possibility to act out a role relevant to real-life situations and practise how to respond to them. Your actions can then be discussed as a group (Hulpverleners, 2014) (Leidinggevenden, 2014).

## Definition of sexuality and intimacy

'Sexuality' and 'intimacy' mean different things to different people. Terms like these are open to wide interpretation, but can also be narrowed down to a single aspect. That is why it is important to discuss with your colleagues or partner what you understand by 'sexuality' and 'intimacy' in order to arrive at a clear definition that can be used consistently. A spider diagram can be a useful brainstorming tool in this context. The illustrations below are examples of spider diagrams used by a team of care workers to explore the definition of sexuality. The team made a distinction between sexuality in general and sexuality for clients.

This illustration features words that the team members associated with sexuality for clients.



## Spider diagram (Hulpverlenersteam, 2014)

The second illustration features examples of words that were associated with sexuality in general



Sexual intercourse
- Having sex
- Cohabitation
- Sleeping with
- Fucking
- Making love

Games like these help to get over the awkwardness of using these types of words and allow you to get on the same page in terms of which terminology to use. Talk about if your terminology is correct or may cause confusion.

**Spider diagram (Hulpverlenerssteam, 2014)**

**Vocabulary/language**

Effective sexual education involves communicating in an unambiguous way. Intentional use of words is an important part of this process. One way of finding out which words your colleagues or partner prefer and feel comfortable using to talk about sex is by writing them all down.

Pick a word and write down any synonyms you and your partner or colleagues can think of.

Penis	Vagina
- Private parts	- Private parts
- Phallus	- Vulva
- Cock	- Pussy
- Dick	- Cunt
- Willy	- Beaver

**Matter of fact**

Talking about sexuality and intimacy in a more matter-of-fact way during work handovers or household chores such as doing the dishes and cooking makes it less of a charged subject. In fact, it will become a normal subject of conversation if you talk about it regularly.

How and When To Ask For Assistance

As mentioned earlier, some sex education situations may be difficult for you to deal with. In such a case, it can be useful to ask for help. If your organisation’s policy does not have anything specific on this, then turn to a colleague, partner or expert for help.

**Reasons for requesting assistance from colleagues, partners or experts:**

- If you need information or advice on possible difficulties that may arise when giving sexual education. For example, if you don’t know how to get the conversation started with the individual.



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- If you don't feel skilled or experienced enough in certain areas of sex education (e.g. sexual abuse).
  - If the situation is too complex and you are confused as to what steps to take.
  - If your own norms and values put you in a difficult situation.
  - If you feel that your personal boundaries are being crossed. That is why it is important to know what your boundaries are and how to maintain them.

### Training and Professional Development

Training plays a key role in sexual education and instruction on sexuality and intimacy topics. It should not be assumed that every person has the skills to provide sex education. That is why training and professional development is important. Training will improve the confidence of educators and support them in their role as teachers of sex education.

In addition, training and professional development are also opportunities to review knowledge gained. This way, knowledge and skills remain current and new methods can be learned.

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