



Healthy Relationships

Middle School Years

by Theresa Fears, MSW

The middle school years are a time of profound changes in emotional and physical development.

Relationships with friends become more important, and children (now youth) begin to exercise more independence from their families.

This time is even more challenging for parents of children and youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) because of fears about physical development, specifically puberty.

Despite the need for children to understand what is happening to them both physically and emotionally—to help them move successfully through puberty—parents may resist providing them with information during this sensitive time.



There are many reasons parents are reluctant to talk to their children, including:

- ⚙ feeling that the child is too young or not ready;
- ⚙ uncertainty about how to discuss the subject;
- ⚙ fearing that the child will take information as permission and become sexually adventurous or inappropriate;
- ⚙ discomfort with the topic; and,
- ⚙ feeling uneducated on the subject and afraid that they will “do it wrong.”

If children and youth with I/DD are to have full lives that include positive relationships, then they must be educated.

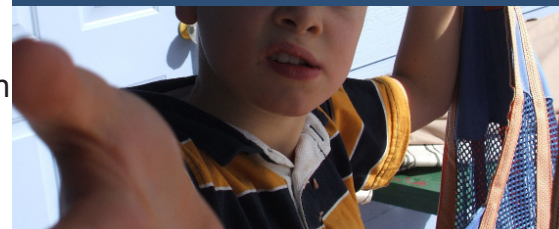
The good news for parents is that there are excellent resources available to help. Here are a few to get you started:

The Arc of King County Healthy Relationships Program: arcofkingcounty.org/services/healthy-relationships.html

The Arc of Spokane Sexual Abuse Prevention: arc-spokane.org/sexual-abuse-prevention

Respectability: respectability.org

Healthy Relationship Tips



- ⦿ Emphasize personal boundaries and space.
- ⦿ Teach your child that she/he gets to choose whether or not to hug.
- ⦿ Use correct anatomical terms.
- ⦿ Recognize behavioral changes that indicate possible sexual assault.



For Additional Reading...

Healthy Bodies Toolkit Parent guides for talking to children with disabilities about the changes of puberty (comes in a boys and girls version).

What Parents Need to Know Information emphasizing how parents are an important part of a child’s sexual development.