

GUIDE FOR FAMILY MEMBERS OR CARERS

Talking about sex, relationships and sexual health with any young person can be daunting. When the person you are talking to has a learning disability, it can be even more complex, but remains just as important to ensure their understanding of their bodies, health and relationships.

This advice is to support family members and carers to prepare for, and have these important conversations.

1. Understand that ALL young people have the right to explore their sexuality.

There is no 'normal' when it comes to sexuality. Every young person will become sexually aware at different ages, and that is fine.

It's important to talk about things positively so the child or young person can build a positive self-identity and experience fulfilling relationships. Everyone deserves to understand and express their sexuality and their identity, this is no different for young people with a learning disability.

Remember, sexuality and relationships aren't all about the act of sex, it is about the variety of relationships a person will hold over their lifetime. Don't assume that something doesn't apply to the child or young person you are talking to because you think their capacity will limit their experiences. You can find out more about capacity, and the Mental Capacity Act [here](#).

2. Keep calm

- It can be nerve wracking for anyone to talk about sex and/or relationships with a child or young person with a learning disability, especially if it's the first time.
- You don't have to (and can't!) know everything. But you can do your research. Make sure what you're saying is factually accurate, and if you don't know the answer to a question then just be honest.

Here are some things you should remember:

- You will probably know the child or young person you are talking to well, and be aware of how their learning disability affects their understanding. Try to be flexible in your communication, using the communication method that works best for them. It might be helpful, for example, to use pictures or videos to describe things effectively.
- It's important that the child or young person is aware you are not judging them (even if you are nervous or embarrassed). Try to ensure that you are speaking to them in a calm, quiet and safe environment in which they can freely ask questions.

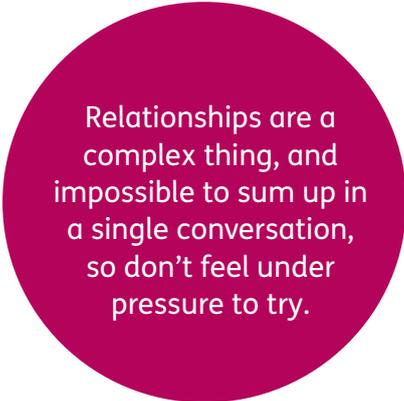
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- Stop if you think they are not processing the information as they can easily feel overwhelmed. It is better to do this over a few discussions to give them time to think and come back with more questions.
- When conversations about sex or bodies are shut down it reinforces the idea that it is something to be ashamed of, or not to be discussed. Try to remain open and honest. If it is an inappropriate time or place to be talking about things, you thank them for the question and plan to talk with them about it later on, or move to somewhere more appropriate to have the discussion.
- If a question takes you by surprise, you can thank them for asking you and tell them you are going to find out more information and arrange to have a chat with them later on.

3. There is no such thing as ‘the’ talk

Relationships are a complex thing, and impossible to sum up in a single conversation, so don't feel under pressure to try. 'The talk' shouldn't be a one-time only event, it should be a continuous discussion over time. Lots of small conversations will make more of an impact than one big one, and will provide greater opportunity to discuss things in a way that is most responsive to the needs of the person you are talking to.

Many young people will be curious about things, like where they came from, or why their body is changing. These are natural opportunities to open up conversations and discuss things honestly. Another good way of starting a conversation is to use [storylines from TV such as reality TV](#) or soaps, as this can make it relevant to them without being too personal.



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4. Respect children and young people's right to privacy

Helping children and young people understand the difference between public and private spaces is an important part of discussing sex and relationships. Being clear about where it is appropriate or inappropriate to have particular conversations or do particular things can help reinforce this concept. To do this you could:

- Try to have conversations in calm, quiet and safe environments in which the child or young person is comfortable and able to ask questions.

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- Discuss what privacy means, and why it is important.
- Lead by example, having conversations and undertaking intimate tasks in private locations.
- Ensure that the child and young person has their own space and that this is respected, for example, by knocking on their bedroom door before entering.
- If the person needs support with personal care, you can ask them whether they are happy for you to help them with individual tasks.
- Stay calm if things happen in the 'wrong' location and be clear about why it is not appropriate. Remember not to shut conversations down without arranging a more appropriate time or place to talk (see point 2.)

5. Emphasise consent

Consent can be taught early on. For example, by respecting the rights of children and young people to say no to any physical touch (such as not forcing them to sit on the knee/ kiss/ hug friends or relations if they don't want to). It's important from an early age to model and teach respecting other people's boundaries and also be clear that the child or young person is allowed to say what their boundaries are, and know that they'll be listened to.

When it comes to sex itself, it's important to emphasise that sexual activity should only take place when everyone has actively given enthusiastic permission, and that everyone has the right to say 'no'.

6. Use the correct words for body parts!

It's important for children and young people to know the correct names for body parts. This helps them to understand their own anatomy and that of others, but it can also keep them safe. Knowing the correct word for 'penis' or 'vagina' can sometimes help them to speak up if there is a problem.

7. Be LGBT+ inclusive

You can explain that all families are different, and not everyone has a mum and a dad – some have two mums or two dads. It's best not to assume the gender of the person the child or young person has a crush on, and you should acknowledge that asexuality may also be a possibility for some.

If the child or young person is LGBT+, or thinks they might be, it is important to speak openly with them about their feelings, without judgement. Be supportive - remember that being LGBT+ is not a choice and how people respond to it will be an important part of how happy and comfortable the child or young person will feel with themselves.

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8. Talk about healthy relationships

Everyone deserves to be treated with respect by their friends and partners and shouldn't feel scared, controlled or pressured by people. Talk with the child or young person about what the qualities of healthy friendships and relationships are, and what they can do if they are not being treated with respect. All relationships and sexual experiences should make us feel positive.

9. When do I start the conversations?

For children or young people with a learning disability, it can be hard to know when to start the conversation about sex. If they are asking questions about it, e.g. where do babies come from, then they are interested and ready to know the answer.

Be sure to use accessible language at the level that the child or young person understands, but make sure you're not shying away from the facts. Calling it a 'special dance', for example, is probably just going to confuse young people.

10. Am I doing it right?

There is no one right way to talk to a child or young person about sex and relationships. Some things will work and some things won't. It's important to remember that what works for others might not work for you. Don't be discouraged or upset if a particular method doesn't work, have a break and try again.

Ask others for help. Do you have a family member, teacher, or supporter who would be happy to help you have conversations or be a person you can share ideas with?

You can find lots of useful information and advice on all things sex and relationships on [Brook's website](#) or [Mencap's website](#).

If you would like further information to help have these conversations Mencap have a list of FAQs, and a list of helpful resources and organisations [here](#).