

The background image shows two hands clasped together in a supportive grip. A vibrant rainbow light is projected onto the hands and the white fabric they are resting on, creating a spectrum of colors from red to violet. The overall scene is set against a dark blue gradient background.

NEURODIVERSITY, SEXUALITY & GENDER IDENTITY

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**Supporting autistic, intellectually disabled,
and other neurodiverse populations**

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Forward

For over two decades, I have supported people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and those with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities (IDD) to navigate life challenges. One critical component in life is sexuality.

While it has taken me many years to piece together this information, this serves as a general guide to support those in need of the information who are neurodiverse. While not every area can be covered, it is important to note we should never ignore or dismiss basic human needs. One includes sexuality.

Remember, there are no absolutes when supporting another human being. When addressing gender and sexuality, both spectrums, we must regularly check our morals and values. Not all information contained in this book may be relevant to the person(s) you may love or support. Use what you can and know my goal is to spread the wealth of knowledge so that people can live safe, happy, and fulfilling lives.

Shawn



Sexual Development

When a person is expecting a child, so begins our quest to form the identity of the unborn child. We throw gender reveal parties, baby showers, etc., and fill the child's life with colors, prints, toys, and games we think will link to the biological sex of the child. Boys equal blue, cars and girls equal pink, princesses, etc. If we're not confident or want to be "surprised," we go neutral with greens, yellows, and likely an animal or safari print. However, once we know the biological sex, it is not uncommon to revert to the culture society has engrained in us. The family often does encourage gender identity either in the womb or shortly out of, even if we want to go against the grain.

Even from infancy, a newborn can equate the sense of touch with something new, exciting, or different. For those who have changed diapers, we have been privy to a baby finding its sexual body parts. I discovered how pliable a penis could be after observing a biologically born male stretching it out as if it was an appendage of Stretch Armstrong.

Children ages three to five may begin to touch their genitals for pleasure unless they are told not to do so. This is when a child may also become aware of gender differences and may even begin exploring other children's bodies. Don't hit the panic button just yet.

When a child hits between the ages of five and seven, their gender is typically "fixed." Sometimes, this means matching with their biological sex, but sometimes, it means their hearts and minds match more closely with a sex they were not born with.

Body changes associated with puberty typically begin between the ages of eight and 12. There are usually visible body changes we observe before full-blown puberty hits. We will cover this in a later chapter. At this age, biologically born males typically begin to masturbate and may explore pornographic material online. Biologically born females may also start to masturbate, but we have found they are generally somewhere behind their counterparts. The Internet, social media, and pop culture can be pretty impressionable at this age.

When a child hits 13, their bodies change, and the hormonal surge erupts. Mood swings may start, core clinical issues such as depression and anxiety may surface, and thoughts of sex or the painful awareness of being attracted to or identifying as someone outside the "norm" can become a harrowing and terrifying experience. Most children at this age want to exert more autonomy and control in their lives. This is where they typically do not want to be seen by their parents.

Common Challenges

For those with ASD or IDD, sexual development, sexual identity, and gender identity typically co-occur with their peers. While it is unclear what the root cause is, early puberty among those with ASD or IDD seems to occur more often. However, early puberty among the general population happens earlier and earlier.

Communication for a person who is neurodiverse seems to be the biggest challenge. Communication is broken down into receptive language skills, how a person receives or takes in information, and expressive language skills, or how they communicate their needs, interests, and preferences. No matter the assumption regarding perceived cognitive abilities, two critical things to consider are 1) presume the person's intellect and competence and 2) talk to and with the person based upon who they are.

Being neurodiverse does not equate to having challenges with learning or hearing, for that matter. So, be mindful of what you say because YOU are the role model. In my mind, communication is always an area to be worked on. We must find an avenue for learning and expression. Communication comes in all forms: sounds, body language, augmentative devices, spelling, etc., and we should stop at nothing until a person has found their voice.

Fine and gross motor skills, or body control, may also be challenging. Those who engage in "stim" or repetitive behaviors may find managing this extremely painful. I have heard many express embarrassment and frustration, indicating they wish they could control their bodies because they want to blend in and be seen for the person they are and not the movements, gestures, or sounds their body makes. If the person decides they want to work on this, we must support them with this.

Impulse control, or saying or doing something that could have dire consequences for the person or others, can be pretty challenging. While I appreciate those who cut to the chase and say it like it is, doing so can undoubtedly promote barriers when forming relationships. Feeling the power of hiding behind a screen and posting or chatting about whatever comes to mind on a whim can also be problematic. We've all been there. We get that one email that sets us on fire and becomes reactive. Sometimes we must type a response and delete it or get up and walk away for 20 minutes. The point is to allow time for the feeling to pass before you say or do something that will be far more difficult and painful to repair.

*"The beginning of knowledge is the discovery of
something we do not understand."
-Frank Herbert*

Puberty

Biological Girls

For biologically born girls, puberty generally occurs around the age of 12. However, it is not uncommon for it to appear as early as the age of nine or as late as the age of 17. Body changes are typically seen about one to two years before menstruation. It's crucial to be proactive and prepare for these changes as early as possible, ensuring your child is well-equipped and informed.

Remember, menstruation products come in all shapes, sizes, and varieties. They have plus, light, and even wings! Marketing makes menstruation look like a peaceful walk in a meadow with a spotless, magical stream. You need to know that it is best to explore different products well before the period begins. This way, you are building some tolerance to the product over time, considering any sensory sensitivities, and preparing the child for when and how to use the product.

Some people need help in recognizing how to use products. You may consider taking a permanent marker and marking on the underwear where the pad goes. Remember, you can also practice this with underwear and a pad. If someone has nuanced motor challenges or sensory sensitivities, the practice may work, but you may also need to consider an alternative—an adult brief.

Provide a visual for the child to see and talk about. You may take an old pair of underwear and use red dye or coloring. Say something like, "You may see this in your underwear," but also mention what to do. For example, get help from someone or get a clean pair of underwear with a pad.



Depending on the flow of the period, it may be important to create a visual schedule for when a pad may need to be changed. This does not mean you write the words or put a picture of a maxi pad on the schedule for the world to see. Talk to the person and indicate or agree to a symbol or word that may discretely be used.



Biological Boys

For biologically born boys, puberty typically occurs between 12 and 18. Physical changes generally occur at 13, about two years behind biologically born girls.

Physical changes include growth spurts, a deepened voice, hair growth in many regions, and enlargement of the testicles and penis. At this age, biologically born males may begin to experience wet dreams.

There are YouTube videos on the Internet that help teenagers understand more about puberty. This being said, it is essential to preview these videos and discuss them with the teenager if they choose. It is never recommended to have the teenager explore on their own. Think about it, do you want the Internet to be the primary or only source of information and education for your child?

You can also explore books that explain puberty and changes. With wet dreams, the goal is to not over or underreact. Many children may have experienced difficulties with toilet training if a child experiences a wet dream and wakes up in damp clothing or a bed.

This could be uncomfortable, especially if they have not been prepared to understand what they are experiencing and why.

It is important to consider talking with your child about what they may experience and work with them to devise a plan. For example, if your child wakes up in a wet bed, it may be best for them to clean themselves and their linens if they can. If not, perhaps the best approach would be to ask for "help" and show the parent or caregiver what they are experiencing so partnering to tackle the job can get done. Kindness, patience, and understanding are essential when tackling these issues.



"When our children see us expressing our emotions, they can learn that their own feelings are natural and permissible, can be expressed, and can be talked about. That's an important thing for our children to learn."
~Fred Rogers

Sexual Behaviors

Sexual behaviors can range from those considered "problematic" based upon religious, moral or cultural values to those bordering or even considered illegal. What is most important is to prepare or work through challenges people may experience and again, do not over react or ignore what is happening. A person must feel comfortable enough with you to have everyday "small" conversations if you expect them to feel comfortable with you in order to have more difficult or embarrassing ones.

Challenges I am frequently asked to examine include but are not necessarily limited to the following: increased or frequent sexual comments, touching other people, accessing online pornography, surfing dating sites, and being prone to be exploited. While not every issue can be addressed in this small book, the hope is to provide you with some information and resources to help serve as a guide.

As we discussed earlier, the rate of hormonal surges is not delayed for those who are neurodiverse, so arm yourself with information and be open to and prepared to have discussions. The less taboo you can help the subject become, the better odds of successful outcomes.

Be prepared to discuss masturbation. Two key elements to consider are: 1) how to successfully release sexual tension and energy through masturbation and 2) the time, place, and setting for which this can occur. I encourage people to know their bedroom is the only place in which masturbation can take place. All other locations are public and teaching masturbation in a bathroom can run somewhat of a risk because not everyone is able to successfully generalize a public bathroom is well, public.

While the videos are somewhat outdated, David Hingsburger has created wonderful and useful videos and books on not just masturbation but also on the ethics of touch. Resources for both males and females can be found at diverse-city.com.

In addition to teaching about time, place and location for masturbation it is important to talk about privacy and cleanliness. Information should not be shared with other people because it is private. Making sure a person knows how to clean themselves up is also important so make sure a person has access to tissues or wipes, a cloth, a garbage can, etc. so they can maintain as much privacy and independence as possible.

"All young people, regardless of sexual orientation or identity, deserve a safe and supportive environment in which to achieve their full potential."
-Harvey Milk

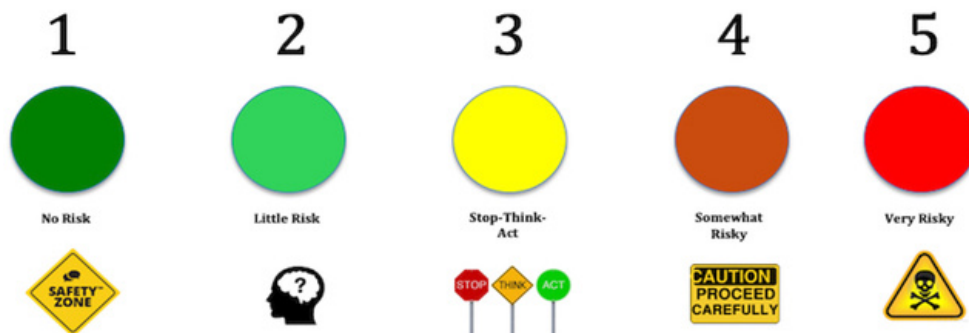
Challenges in using the Internet can be far more difficult to approach, and people these days are keen to use the Internet as a source of information and a way for social connection. Much like the **CIRCLES** curriculum teaches to make sure people are knowledgeable in terms of understanding degrees of social relationships and corresponding forms of touch (or lack thereof) and communication exchanges that may take place based on the degree of the relationship. Categories include a romantic interest, a family member, a close friend, an acquaintance, a paid supporter or community helper, and a stranger. It may be beneficial to use pictures from a person's life to review these categories and have open discussions on what a person may say and do based on the relationship they have with each person.

Another important aspect is to teach as much Internet safety as possible. Suppose a person struggles with excessive use of online pornography or sharing private information. In that case, it may be necessary to consider possible restrictions to using the Internet and any Internet-capable device. Some apps and programs can allow freedom and independence without opening Pandora's box regarding Internet exploitation. Programs such as **Qustodio** can be used on computers, laptops, tablets, and cell phones. We will visit this a little later.



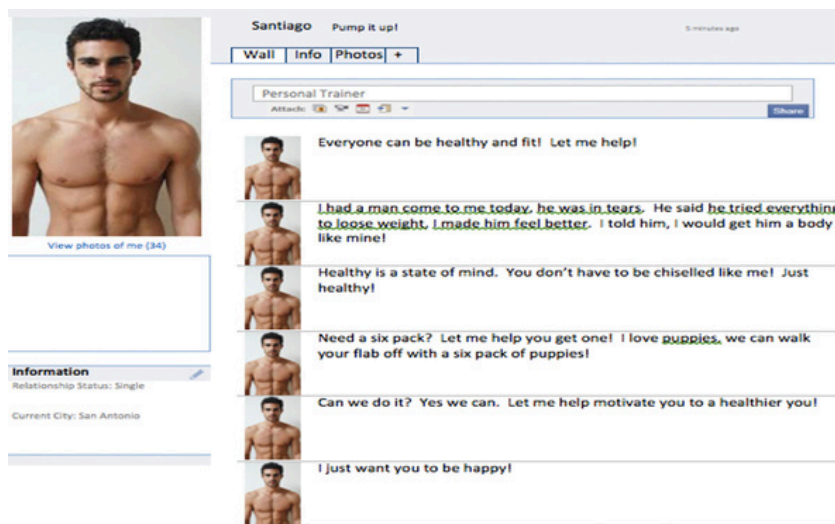
Work with the person to reinforce what to share and what not to share. Posting or sending photos or videos of their sexual body parts should be avoided. Aside from sexual exploitation, there is also the risk of blackmail. Ensure they are also supported for privacy settings on apps like Facebook and Instagram. A good reminder before posting is "unless it's something you would want your mother, grandmother, or teacher to read, then think twice about posting it.

Having a risk scale created and made available can sometimes benefit a person. They can visually see and weigh the odds of how risky behavior or interaction may be based on components of the scale.



Work with the person to reinforce what to share and what not to share. Posting or sending any photos or videos of their sexual body parts should be avoided. Aside from sexual exploitation, there is also the risk of blackmail. Make sure they are also supported for things such as privacy settings on apps like Facebook and Instagram. A good reminder before posting is "unless it's something you would want your mother, grandmother or teacher to read then think twice about posting it.

None of us know who is sitting behind the other computer screen. So, reinforcing people on the other end of a computer or tablet are not necessarily who they present to be. Creating a mock profile and discussing what is "fake" vs. "real" can be beneficial, and point out so possible traits or characteristics that may clue you in. The following is an example of a fake profile.



Sex & The Law

Sexuality is only beginning to find its way into the curriculum of special education students. Many parents are also challenged with the thought of whether or not their son or daughter can learn and navigate aspects of sexuality. We know parents and educators must be on board with teaching students about sexuality. Otherwise, a person is left to their own devices to either figure it out on their own or turn to places like the internet to find sources of information.

For those who are neurodiverse, they are not exempt from the law. While mitigating circumstances can lend lighter sentences or a track through mental health court, the burden and experience can often be avoided. Sexual "offenses", or those that may be deemed illegal, range from indecent exposure, to sexual assault, to luring through the Internet, and anything in between. Risk for being exposed to the criminal justice system only increases if a person has been limited in their opportunities for sexual education and/or sexual expression, being told their legal sexual behavior is "inappropriate", or being placed in a position where they explore the challenges of sexuality on their own.

Despite laws being different in jurisdictions across the United States, what can be done is teaching the difference between what is "legal" vs. "illegal" in terms of sexual behavior. Replacing the terms "appropriate" vs. "inappropriate" when discussing sexual behaviors should be divorced because these terms are rooted in our own morals, values and beliefs and are really tainted based upon our own perception.

Pictures and/or cards representing different forms of both legal and illegal sexual behaviors or interactions can be used to teach a person more about this. Having a person choose a picture or a card, or have them sort between those considered illegal vs. illegal can be a way to begin understand more about this.



While this is not a comprehensive list, some examples of illegal sexual behaviors include but are not limited to the following:

- Incest or sex with a family member/relative;
- Prostitution, or exchange of money for sex acts (although legal in specific jurisdictions);
- Sex with a minor (adult having sex with anyone under the age of 18);
- Sexual touch of a person without consent or those who cannot give consent, such as minors (includes sexual harassment);
- Exhibitionism, or showing your sexual body parts in a public place;
- Stalking



Some examples of legal sexual behaviors include but are not limited to the following:

- Homosexuality, sexual attraction to the same sex;
- Bisexuality, sexual attraction to both males and females;
- Pansexual attraction despite gender;
- Many fetishes or being sexually inspired by certain things (i.e., role play);
- Viewing adult-themed pornography;
- Phone sex (with a willing participant);
- Consenting to sexual touch/interactions



Online pornography use is on the rise. An estimated 93% of boys are exposed to online pornography during their teen years. For people who are neurodiverse, the Internet may be their sole source of information related to sexuality (1). Imagine your child learning about intimacy and sexual interactions by watching only pornography scripts without understanding relationships, intimacy, and consent. The Internet can also be tricky to navigate. Pornography sites have all times of pop-ups and ads that can encourage entering other areas, such as child pornography. People who are neurodiverse and have been involved with child pornography possession cases report being fixated on the images without completely understanding why (2).

In addition to teaching online safety, the first line of defense is to ensure that age discrimination is understood. A person must have some semblance of knowledge about whether or not a person may be a child, a teenager, or a young adult. Can they extract clues from the environment? Can they look at physical traits and characteristics to determine a person's age category? We want to encourage and teach that media containing minors (children and adults) should be avoided at all costs regarding sexual viewing. This will also expand knowledge when interacting with people, whether online or in person. A rule of thumb is this, "when in doubt, avoid" because we don't want interactions with anyone who could be a potential "danger zone" or even "jail bait"!



Internet

If there is concern regarding the use of the Internet and content that could be deemed illegal, promote sexual deviance (sexual interest in children, rape, etc.) OR lead to other problems or concerns (like getting in the way of doing other things or spending large amounts of money on content); other avenues need to be explored. It is not out of the norm to consider parameters on electronic devices, and resources are available.

Apple users with iPhones, iPads, etc., can enlist the help of a family plan. This allows the account holder to set limits and exclude certain available content. It can also limit the use of technology with different settings. A Google search can walk you through this process.

Also available are several applications that can be added to an array of electronic devices to accomplish the same outcomes. Of those I have explored and used, I have found **Qustodio** to be the most economical and user-friendly. Use on five electronic devices costs around \$55 per year. The account holder is also alerted if the user attempts to move the monitoring app. More information can be found by going to www.qustodio.com. Many monitoring apps are available, and you need to research the best option to meet your needs.

Another realm to explore and consider is the old-school use of pornographic DVDs and printed pictures. Unfortunately, Playboy and similar magazines are hard to come by in print these days, and if you can find them, they can come at quite a premium. With the world at our fingertips via the Internet, we can search and create our own "books" of pictures based upon the person's sexual interests and be sure to avoid any content that could be teaching or impressing upon the wrong idea or image as it relates to what sexual relationships generally consist of. This holds with pictures and videos. Some tips for what to consider avoiding include but are not limited to: the term "teens," the term "school," bondage, rape, anything including sexual involvement of an animal, or violence within the sexual interaction.



Private vs. Public

Contrary to some popular belief, people who are neurodiverse are among those of us who have sexual thoughts and behaviors. Maslow taught us sexuality is among the most basic human needs, so talking about sexuality is paramount.

In discussing sexuality, teaching and reinforcing what is considered private vs. public is essential. This is not only specific to sexual behaviors but other actions we engage in.

In addition to masturbation and having sex, we generally do other things in private. These include but are not limited to getting dressed, going to the bathroom, and having conversations that contain confidential information. Nothing is worse than hearing a person on their speakerphone, in public, having a personal conversation.



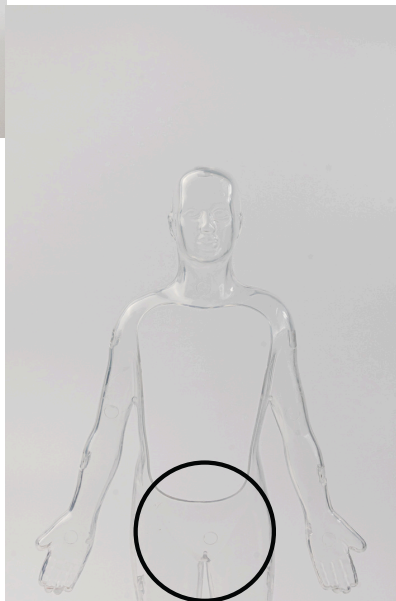
Labeling rooms in the home with color codes, signs or words may also be beneficial. Anywhere in the home where there is risk or opportunity for more than one person should be labeled as "public". This may include places like the living room, where private actions should not take place. Areas, such as the bedroom or bathroom, may be labeled to represent private spaces, or those where ordinarily only one person (or one person and a designated partner or helper) may be present.



All people should also be taught and aware of what constitutes their private body parts, as well as the private body parts of other people. This includes genders different from their own.

One way to teach about what constitutes areas of privacy on the body is to use a swimsuit, precisely one that would be deemed acceptable at the YMCA and not a nudist beach, which should cover a person's sexual body parts.

Another essential skill is to see that a person can identify where the private body parts are on a person. They should be able to point to where they are, circle them on a body chart, and label them using correct terminology. This is where you want to avoid the use of slang. For example, it is a penis and not a "wee-wee." This event is more critical when considering aspects of abuse prevention and safety.



Critical Skills

Sadly, it is not uncommon for neurodiverse people to be considered or remembered for some challenging behaviors/strategies they have used in the past. These labels can carry on for many years and not only haunt but damage a person. Supporters getting rooted in fear can also create a sense of hyper-vigilance and little opportunity.

As we support people, we want to ensure we have armed them with the education, tools, and resources they need to succeed. We want people to be and get noticed for the good they possess and learn to navigate the complexities of social nuances.

To ensure people have the foundational interpersonal skills needed to establish and maintain working, natural, unpaid relationships, the first step is to teach and reinforce basic social greetings and manners. Remember, we are the examples, so make sure you are a positive role model yourself. When you notice someone walking behind you in the store, take the few seconds needed to hold the door open for them. While some may buck at this, a majority will find your kindness or "manners" goes a long way. It gets you seen for something good but also infiltrates kindness into the universe. We need this more now than ever before.

Degrees of social relationships/exchanges: Many may be familiar with the **CIRCLES** curriculum, which teaches about degrees of social relationships and corresponding physical acts. The key is to help people identify who they may be intimate with, family, friends, acquaintances, community helpers, and strangers. It is important to stress that anyone paid to be in a person's life constitutes a community helper. While we may be friendly and have long-term relationships, we are paid to be in their lives.

Work with the person to outline not just forms of touch for each degree of social relationship but also work on what you may say. Small talk and conversation skills should be reviewed and practiced with every available opportunity so that people know what to say and do under various conditions.

You can now access the **CIRCLES** program through an app by visiting www.circlesapp.com. This is a great resource that allows you to customize photos and icons.



Romantic interests,
friends,
and family may hold
hands.

Learning to wait and not interrupt: This is an area in which many neurotypical people struggle. Everyone wants a chance to communicate but reading the social nuances to know when is very important. During the conversation, point out a visible break or pause. Generally, this is about three seconds in length. While watching television or movies, note the delay and how this served as a cue for the other person to begin communicating.

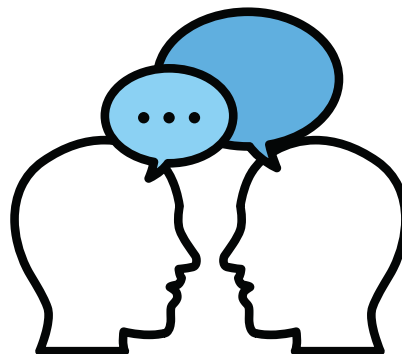
In everyday life, try not to scold or overcorrect a person who struggles in this area. Instead, cue them to wait for the break or even prompt them with, "it's your turn" or "now I would like to hear from you."

Compromising: No relationship will be successful if the willingness and ability to compromise are absent. While we do not need to share every thought or material item, we must learn to give in relationships through compromise. To begin with this, we must first teach the importance of asking questions about the other person in the relationship to share each person's ideas, activities, and events of importance and interest. If the connection is one-sided, it will inevitably fail.

Talk through various scenarios. For example, review and discuss multiple predicaments couples, friends, family, and coworkers face. Talk through and problem-solve how they may compromise in these situations. Also, when a conflict arises in everyday cases, discuss how the person may consider a compromise. I recently had a client who wanted to purchase 3" shorts for summer, but the mother was uncomfortable with this and indicated 5" was the minimum. They could not come up with a compromise for shorts but agreed to purchase other articles of clothing like leggings and skirts.

Listening: Another critical skill that is often difficult for any of us is the art of listening. My motto is that if you are busy talking (or spelling), listening is far more challenging, and there's a good chance you miss something important. It is essential to note those with motor planning challenges, such as people on the autism spectrum, may appear not to be listening. Rest assured, they are listening and taking in the information.

Even those with motor planning issues may need support and encouragement to tone down sounds or be prompted to redirect their "stims" to listen and take in information. Again, this is not the case for everyone, even though many people can and are listening and taking it all in.



A big "no-no" is looking at screens while trying to connect and be present with people. I'm continually shocked when I visit a restaurant and see people together. There is generally at least one person who is glued to their phone. Nothing says "you're not important" more than being ignored and replaced by a phone.



Eye Contact: Maintaining eye contact does not indicate a person is listening to you. I can sit at my computer typing while having a severe and in-depth conversation on the phone. Maintaining eye contact is a social construct and can be very difficult for a person to keep, even if they want to. I have encouraged people to try and look in the direction of the person they are interacting with. If examining a person in the eye is a challenge (it is for me), looking in the direction of their eyes, yet not directly in the eye, can help you get by a little better in the social realm.

Reading body language: To advance in this area, the best place to start is helping a person learn to identify and express their emotions. Start with the basics like happy, mad, sad, and scared, and then move on to more advanced such as bored, frustrated, etc.

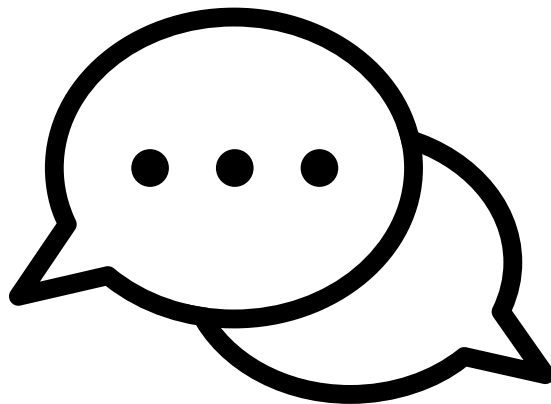
Go to Google and search for different emotions/feelings. You can search for just about anything. For example, "scared man" or "bored woman." Look at these pictures and point out our traits or characteristics that could lend "clues" to how a person may feel or what their body is expressing. Pay particular interest to the hands, mouth, eyes, and eyebrows, as they can give vital signals to follow.

Playing emotion charades can also be fun and a great way to learn if you have a group of people together. Once a person demonstrates a good understanding of what emotion or feeling another person's body language may be depicting, move on to discussing what they may do if they were in the situation with the person.



Look at the picture above. Why do you think her hand is resting against her face? What does this usually mean? (tired or bored). Now, look at her mouth and eyes. What do you think they are trying to communicate? (sad, tired, bored). How do you think she is feeling? (bored). What would you say or do to be a little more interesting if you sat with her?

Conversation: To have a reciprocal conversation, a person must first learn how to initiate one. I recommend focusing on time, place, and situationally relevant conversations. We are in February, which for most, means Valentine's Day. We would not go to a stranger in Starbucks and ask them if they have plans for this special commercial holiday. We may, however, as a coworker in the break room if they have plans. Before introducing and practicing conversation starters, ensure a person understands and can identify degrees of social relationships. This way, they know more about who they might speak with and what they may say to do just this.



Privacy & Personal Information: In this day and age, safety is an issue for anyone. Online hackers, catfishing, and phone scams are prevalent among us. A person must know what constitutes their personal information. Examples include but are not limited to their social security number, complete address, state identification (or driver's license) number, phone number, and email address. If someone is unsure about their personal information, it is good to reinforce the need to ask someone they trust. This is where identifying a "trusted supporter" or a very close friend or family member is essential to identify and reinforce as a "trusted" person to help them navigate uncertain or troubling situations. There is a difference between personal information and personal identifying information. We covered the latter just now, but with "personal" information, we also need to pay attention and teach. I am not keen on the word "appropriate," but this is generally where we cue in using the word. We don't want to see a situation where the person goes up to a stranger or even an acquaintance and reports on something very personal, like, "my mom and dad got in a fight because my dad is sleeping with another woman." Yeah, not good. As with previous skills discussed in this book, focus on review and practice. Sorting through information and identifying if it is "personal" or "shareable" could be an essential skill to teach.

Public Info

Neighborhood

Limited digits of a # linked

Comment on an item

Reference a family member

What you do for work

Private Info

Full Address

Full Social Security #

Report valuables @ home

Personal family details

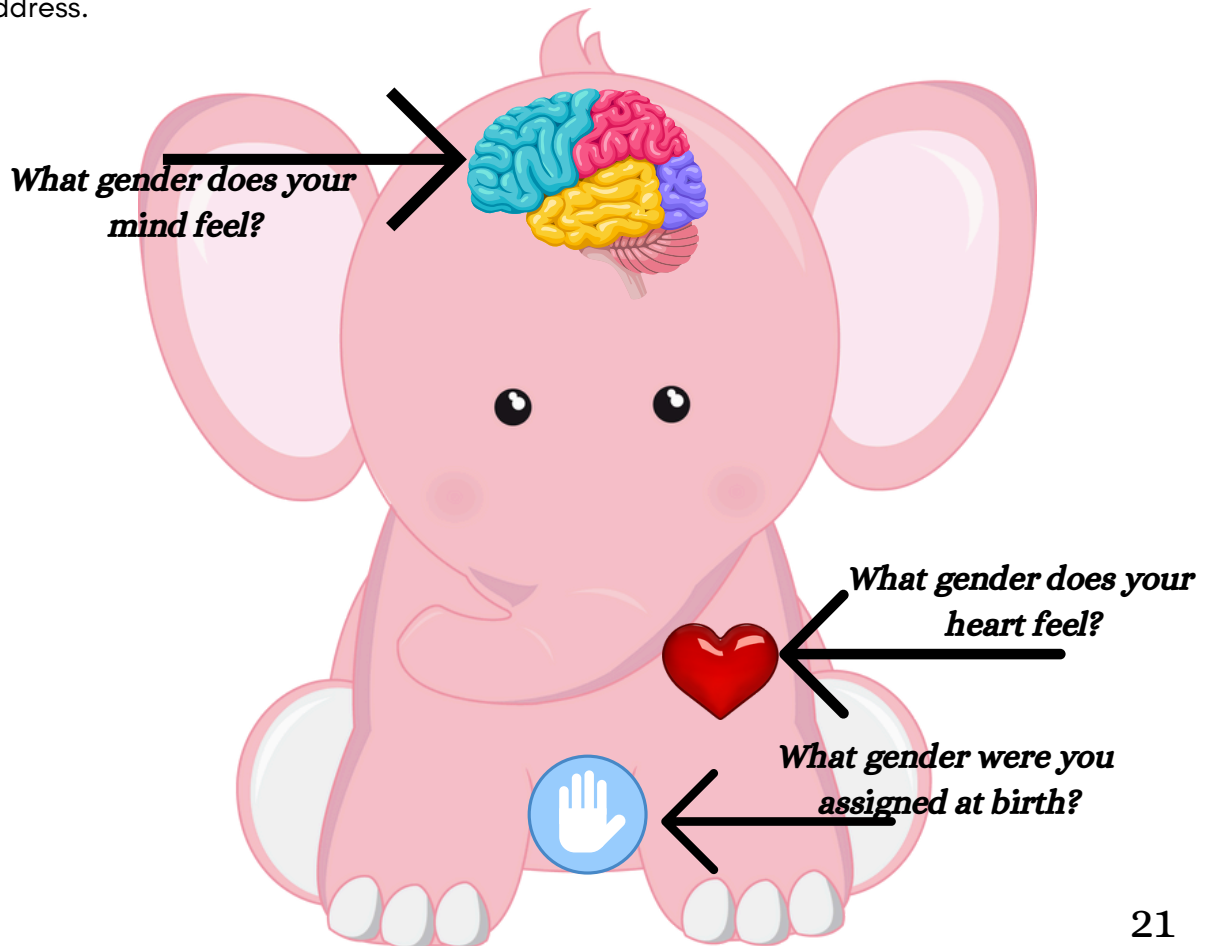
Bank account/credit card #

Gender Identity & Sexuality

In starting the discussion on gender and sexuality, it is crucial first to impress that these are not the same. We are assigned either male or female at birth. This doesn't mean. However, we identify our gender as such once we are born. Sometimes our biological sex and our identified sex match. This refers to being CIS or CIS-gender. This is not an acronym for anything specific. The term derives from Latin and indicates "the same." Some people do not identify as either male or female, and some identify as both. Like autism, gender is a spectrum. In some moments or situations, we may feel more like one gender, which can depend on social roles, "norms," and expectations. People and even the media can heavily influence us.

Like gender, sexuality is also a spectrum. Not everyone fits in a neat little box. Some identify an attraction to the opposite gender, some to the same gender, some to both genders, some to simply people and not necessarily genders, and some feel and express no sexual attraction towards anyone. It can all seem a little overwhelming and complicated. Imagine struggling with your gender identity and then dealing with your sexual identity or doing so simultaneously.

When trying to help a person navigate their gender identity, I start by talking about the pink elephant. This is not to make a person feel uncomfortable, or even as though they are different, but to shed light on a subject that is still uncomfortable for many people to address.



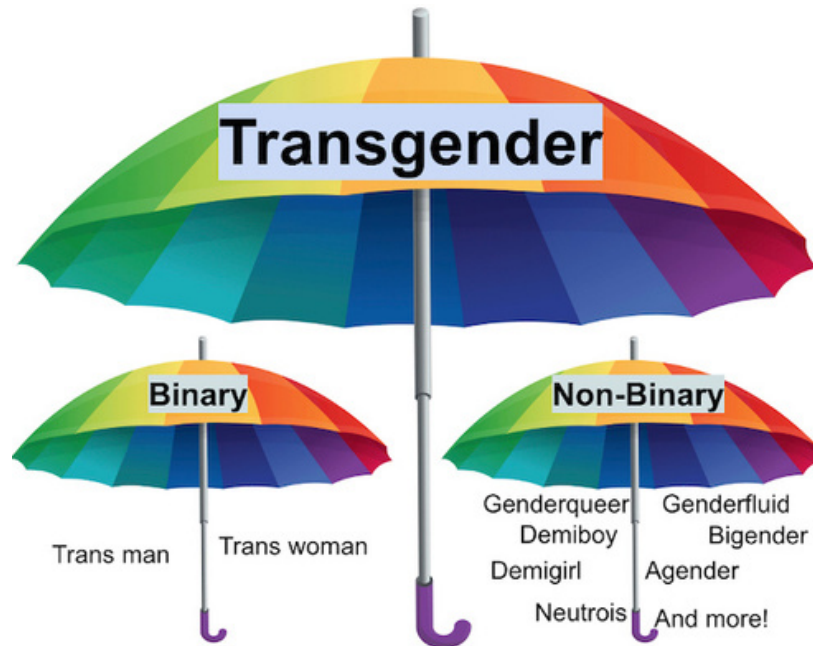
It is critical to talk through what a person feels or identifies within their heart and mind. This simple exercise can open the platform for further discussion, allowing the person to think through how they identify. More importantly, how they want to live their true, authentic self. Research shows 82% of transgender individuals have considered suicide, and 40% have attempted suicide. Transgender youth are the most vulnerable (3). This statistic does not seem to have improved over the years. We owe it to those we love and serve to offer non-judgmental support and a safe place always.

Coming to terms with one's sexuality is another layer. Sexual attraction (or the awareness of lacking it) is generally identified in the pubescent stage. It is not uncommon to see a person not always stick to one gender in attraction or sexual experiences. I have met and talked to many transgender people who indicated hormonal treatment may have been a catalyst to questioning their sexuality, whereby this may be the first time (even in later life) they feel a sexual attraction towards a gender they historically were opposed to. I also know many CIS-gender people who do the same. We've all heard it, reference to a "college experience" or those people who are brave enough to be aware or even express a sexual attraction to a person, and not based upon what is or is not between their legs.

One tool that can help to gauge a person's sexual attraction (or lack thereof) is called the "**Look Assessment**." The use of this instrument does require testing. Therefore, it is not widely available for use. I generally use it with those identified with problematic sexual behaviors when we are trying to gather more information regarding their sexual preferences, including deviant sexual interests. This being said, it has also been used to shed some light on general sexual preferences for non-offenders. A series of pictures are displayed on an iPad. The person taking the test is rating their sexual attraction to each photo. The results compare ratings with how long a person studied the image before selecting their choice. The results show us patterns but also discrepancies we can use during treatment. You can find more information on this instrument by going to www.lookassessment.com.



Before we move further, it is important to understand the difference between binary and non-binary when discussing gender. Both terms fall under what I describe as the "transgender umbrella." Binary refers to trans men (biologically born female but live/identify as male; and trans women refer to biologically born male but live/identify as female. Those under the non-binary category are others who do not identify as solely trans, nor are they CIS gender. You may hear various terms, like "gender fluid," used.



In recent years, researchers have paid attention to and studied the higher rates of autistic individuals identifying as gender diverse. One research study found that 3–6% of transgender or gender-diverse people are diagnosed with autism. However, of this group 70% indicated they needed gender identity care and treatment but could not get it due to their autism diagnosis (4).

Like the cause of autism, researchers and scientists continue to debate the link to gender diversity. The research, however, seems to lean more towards the correlation and not specifically the causation. We can all, individually, speculate but the jury remains out. Regardless, the need for well-rounded clinicians to tackle this area is paramount. Even those living in residential facilities have the same right to pursue gender affirming mental health and medical care. As with the neurotypical population, specific standards of care must be met in order to proceed with medical intervention to change one's physical traits and characteristics to align with the gender they feel within their hearts and minds.

Safety & Sexual Consent

I am now in year 28 of my career. I have seen a lot, I have heard a lot, and I have learned a lot. One of the most notable teachers over the years has been David Hingsburger. If you aren't familiar with him, I encourage you to become acquainted. David had a way of teaching us about sexuality with humor, stories, and a sense of realism. We lost David a few years ago, but his stories and information can be shared infinitely.

Many years ago, I had the privilege of attending an invitation-only workshop with David, where he taught others how to address abuse prevention and safety for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Up to this point, I had heard David speak many times, and I read many of his books. Somehow with this training, I became a loyal fan and follower. I vowed to be even a bit like him in my work, or at least try.

David brought to our attention a sexual consent tool he helped to develop during his tenure working with YAI. There are several sexual consent tools available for use. I have adopted the use of the YAI instrument. It focuses on five areas of sexual consent: 1) sex acts, 2) avoiding unwanted pregnancy and STIs, 3) private vs. public sexual behaviors; 4) sex and the law; and 5) abuse prevention and safety. We will briefly review each one.

What David and YAI did, which needs to be considered in our service system, is push for sexuality policies within organizations. I believe this should be a requirement of provider organizations. In Pennsylvania, we are required to conduct regular fire drills for those living in group homes. Still, there is no policy or requirement to teach people about abuse prevention and safety. To me, getting out of a dangerous or exploitative relationship is just as important as knowing how to get out of a burning building.



"Answering questions is a major part of sex education. Two rules cover the ground. First, always give a truthful answer to a question; secondly, regard sex knowledge as exactly any other knowledge."
~Bertrand Russell

#1: Sex Acts

We are not talking about you having to be an expert with ***Fifty Shades of Grey***. I certainly do not know every sex act or position, and I likely do not want to know. It is important to assess whether a person can talk about what they are comfortable engaging in and what they may want to abstain from when it comes to both sexual activity and a partner. In this area, people should also give a sense of who they are sexually attracted to. We want to see a person who knows to speak up if they are asked to engage in anything sexual they are not completely comfortable with.

If you question your own knowledge in the area of different sex acts, do not worry, there are resources for this too. One book that was shared with me by my dear friend, mentor, and ***Two Old Sexperts*** podcast cohost, Sharon Potter, is the ***Cookie Sutra*** by Edward Jaye. This fun, colorful book uses gingerbread people to demonstrate different sex acts, and captures in text how cookie partners would navigate this. At the end of the book is a cookie recipe, so it's really a win-win.



#2: Avoiding Unwanted Pregnancy & STIs

Here we are examining if a person can report on how a baby is made and demonstrate some knowledge related to sexually transmitted infections (STIs). They should be able to talk about safe sex practices and know how to reduce risk. This being said, abstinence is the only way to prevent pregnancy and STIs. Here we also want to ensure a person knows how to use a condom safely. This starts with checking the package for tears or punctures and paying attention to the expiration date. Using a dildo (not a banana or a cucumber), we practice rolling on and safely rolling off and tying up a used condom for disposal.



#3: Private vs. Public Sexual Behaviors

This section looks at whether or not a person has a good understanding of different sex acts that may need to be reserved for private settings. This includes discussion related to the person knowing where it may be okay to have sex if they and their partner decide they want to. Often people, especially those in group homes, feel as though they can't have sex or fear getting into some form of trouble if they do. Determining their skills to give and receive consent is not the only thing to consider, but seeing they have a private space to engage in sex acts is viable. Participants are even challenged to problem-solve what they would do if the most handsome or gorgeous person approached them and asked to have sex in a private space, such as a bathroom stall.



#4: Legal vs. Illegal Sexual Behaviors

By this point, you should feel like you are experiencing some form of Deja Vu. Remember all the talk about private and public, and legal and illegal? This is where it comes into play, but the application piece must continue to be monitored. Here the person must be able to describe sex acts that may be deemed illegal. They must also understand the dire consequences a person could face if they engage in these sex acts. In this section, we also discuss the person's understanding of rape. I am always struck by how television and film play a role in the description. It's generally a very violent recall and includes bondage and kidnapping. All people need to understand that rape can occur in any relationship. They must know what it is to recognize, stop, and report it.



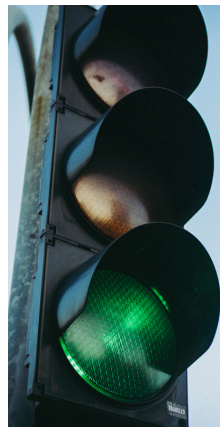
#5: Abuse Prevention & Safety

Here we go over two specific scenarios; one that could indicate financial exploitation and abuse and another that could mean physical, verbal, and emotional abuse. I tend to change up the scenarios to fit the person a little. I have discovered that people are generally very good at identifying abuse when it is not about their own lives. People seem less inclined to view the interaction as potential abuse when we do this. This is a challenge for all people. It is not easy to accept or see what is happening in a relationship or have the resources within them to get out of the relationship. Many people have expressed fear of leaving a relationship, and the answer is, "I may never find love again." We must encourage people to spend time alone, be comfortable with and proud of themselves as a human being, and know and stand up for what they want in a relationship. My best advice has been what David taught me; if a situation or person hurts or continues to hurt your heart or make you feel scared, it's time to get out.

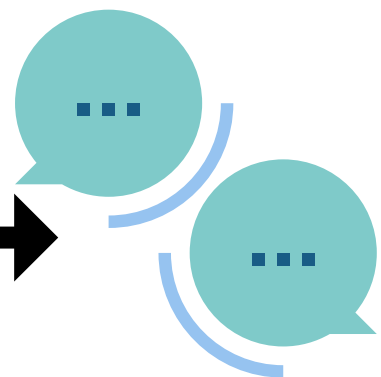
We must always find ways to reinforce the steps a person should take if they find themselves in an exploitative or potentially abusive relationship. The motto is "Stop," "GO," and "Tell." Even with nonspeaking individuals, we must persist in teaching them to protect themselves. A part of the training with David I still use today. Presuming the intellect of all people, I talk to them as I would anyone else. I explained I would be walking close to them, and when I got too close for comfort, I wanted them to put out their arms and yell, making as much noise as possible. We practice this over and over and over. Why? Because we know that when someone is being hurt or attacked, making noise is the best way to deter or scare the assailant away. Some people have told me I'm trying to teach a person to be aggressive or "non-compliant." I say, "you're darn right I am."



STOP



GO



TELL

Dating

The nuances and challenges of dating could be an entire book. For this book's purpose, we will review some basic information. Years ago, I did clinical work in a residential program for men with intellectual disabilities who had sexually offended. We worked on relapse prevention strategies to minimize recidivism for offending, but we also began to provide education on healthy, consenting sexuality. Another great mentor, Jim Haaven, once told me that even with sexual offending, we must "put healthy sexuality on the front burner" of treatment and support. The best compliment I ever received as someone saying we had a "very kind group of sex offenders." This may sound like an oxymoron to the ordinary citizen, but to me, it affirmed the work and commitment that went into teaching these men, who ranged in age from their 20s up to their 70s. They were managing their risk, but they were also getting jobs, making friends, and in some cases, even starting to have sex.

I remember one young man coming into my office for a session and indicating his goal in treatment was to have me (Shawn) get him a girlfriend. I chuckled and let him know I do not have a trap door from which girlfriends fall from the sky. I let him know the first place to start was to ensure he was clean, neat, and smelling good. He didn't like to shower. He didn't like to use deodorant. He didn't like to brush his teeth. He tended to grab whatever clothing was lying around and throw it on. This will get you noticed, but usually not in the best way. I asked him to prioritize this next week, and then we'll move to the next phase. The next week he came back into my office, lifted his arms, and asked me to smell his armpits. I kindly declined but reveled in the glory that he looked and smelled fantastic. It got him noticed, and in a very good way.

I realize not everyone has the resources to buy brand names and fancy clothing. This is okay. Some people are susceptible to smells, textures, etc., and may not be able to tolerate wearing the latest fashion trends. This is okay too! There are conditions in which we may tote around in ripped jeans and a sweatshirt with grease stains. The key takeaway here is this may not be the look that gives a good first impression if we are on a quest to find a date. It is important to look at sensitivities and support a person to maintain hygiene, and look together if they are looking specifically to date. Love bites you when you least expect it. More importantly, we know that people often feel their best when they look their best. We don't all love the idea of getting into a shower, especially when it's bitter cold. Once it is done, we can almost certainly say we usually feel much better.



Two other important areas we focused on with the offender group were even more ways to get you noticed in a good way. Aside from the critical skills listed earlier, we focused a lot on manners. Perhaps I am a little old school when it comes to this, but I do still believe that kind gestures and acts not just get you noticed; they get you remembered. Picture you walking in the front door of a store. A person is about three feet ahead of you, and you believe they have seen you...at least out of their peripheral vision.

As you step towards the door, the person in front goes through and...wait for it...they let the door shut in your face. I don't know about you, but my first impression is, "what an a#\$. " Then I harbor resentment and tend to give death looks my entire shopping trip. Yeah, you got noticed, alright.

Now, move to the flip side. Your child is having a meltdown, and you're holding onto his hand while carrying four bags of groceries and trying to exit the building. This person is leaving in front of you. They stop, hold the door open, and nod or gesture for you to go ahead of them. Is this a saint? No, it's just an average person doing a kind act. Trust me, and it gets you noticed.

Why am I talking about all of this? Some people have shared with me how society has not readily accepted them and how they feel they get noticed not because of who they are but because of how they look. Sometimes other people do not understand the nuances or mannerisms of other people, especially things like scripting or repeating phrases. Some have to work much harder than most to be seen in a good way, which can be very taxing. It doesn't sound or feel right, but sadly this is often the case. We as a society do need to have more understanding, empathy, patience, and more acceptance.



*"A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions,
and the roots spring up and make new trees".
~Amelia Earhart*

Finding love is no easy task. Our idea of love can be very convoluted. Our experiences shape it; what love we grew up with as children, our first love, and the messages we receive from Hollywood and other outlets in media and film. We may be driven by love or finding that perfect soulmate at first sight. I will not deny this exists, but I believe we grow in love. Like our youth, lust fades over time. Finding that person who balances us, who makes love feel easy, is when we know we may be falling in love.

Online dating has become ever-present. There is an app for almost anything, and finding that perfect love match is no exception. You have your pick of groups that host some form of online dating. Some are for sexual hook-ups, and others promise a magical love connection that will span a lifetime. Still, they are hard to navigate and come with all types of problems. Today I was listening to a random podcast that mentioned that over 50% of people using online dating lie in their profiles. It went on say that women tend to be dishonest about their looks, using pictures from when they were younger or performing some altercation in their photos. Men, on the other hand, tend to be dishonest about their finances and careers. It speaks to what genders tend to see as "important."

If the neurodiverse person you love or support wants to consider online dating, the first order of business is to see if they understand and use good judgment with online safety. Suppose a person is quick to disclose personally-identifying information or immediately propose a private in-person meeting. In that case, limiting them from using this without supervision and paired education and support is probably best. The goal is not to restrict people but to provide a platform where they can learn and grow and move towards safely navigating independently. You will not make progress without opportunity.



While anyone can use apps like Tinder or Bumble to find love, there are specific apps and dating sites available for those who are neurodiverse. My favorite is one specific to autistic people. It is called **Hiki** and can be found in Apple or Google stores. It's free to download and it is free to use. An online site for anyone who identifies with a disability is called **Special Bridge**. It is not free to use, but the cost is not outrageous. It does tend to favor more people with either intellectual or physical disabilities.

So where do people go to find love with an intimate partner? It is first essential to consider the opportunity. Just like I couldn't make a girlfriend fall from a secret door above, we cannot simply go and find love. It seems to find us when we least expect it or are not even looking for it.

We have to produce opportunities. For many, this means working through significant amounts of stress and anxiety with even the thought of socializing, especially with a stranger, and working with a person on ways to manage their emotions and the nervousness that goes along with dating. In years past, our company hosted a "speed dating" event. We had several registered people. At each table, we had example questions and conversation starters to support the interaction. In the end, we matched people who expressed an interest and supported them by setting up a date.

Reviewing and rehearsing every aspect of dating is often needed. Again, unless this has been shared with us, we will go by what information we picked up along the way. This includes everything from asking and planning the day to successfully getting through the date. If the stars align, the goal is to get a second date or have another date altogether lined up. With open dialogue and feedback, practice dates have also been a support tool.

Looking at a person's passions, interests, and talents can help guide you in creating opportunities for them to meet people. We have to meet people to consider dating them. Take the person who enjoys rollerblading or some other sport. Instead of signing them up for a disability-specific event or activity, consider connecting them with groups. Is there a tennis league that meets? Is there a rollerblading club? **Meet Up** is a great way to explore groups and activities within your city or neighborhood and connect with people by doing things you love and enjoy. Even if you form one connection, the connection with this person can lead to more opportunities and social relationships. Get out there. You are ready to take on the world.



*"I love you, and that's the beginning and end of everything."
~F. Scott Fitzgerald*

Conclusion

It has taken me nearly 12 years to put together the work I have created and used with thousands of people. I have examined many materials, all of which did indeed have helpful information. I discovered there usually is not a "go-to" manual or book that covers a dichotomy of sexuality, especially when considering the complexities faced today. After so many years of focusing on this scope of work, I realize that many people are still very scared or embarrassed to talk about aspects of sexuality. Throw in the complexities and misunderstandings associated with gender identity, and you can see we come up with a highly complex situation.

Each reader must know their subject. In other words, get to know the people you support (or love). Please pay attention to them. Listen to them. Honor them. Respect them. Give them a chance. Be willing and unafraid to provide information and have complex, maybe even scary, conversations. Who will if you, as supporters, parents, and teachers, don't? That who can be the Internet, perhaps a problematic peer, or even someone abusive or just plain misleading.

While I have tried to include as much as I could outline in this little book, I have not and cannot cover every situation or scenario. Take what information you can use right now and go out there and use it. What you may not use (or find helpful), just let it sit here on the pages. You may find down the road; you refer to the information again. The point, situations change and evolve, and so do people. What may not be relevant today could indeed be tomorrow.

Do not be afraid. Heck, challenge yourselves to be creative in the work that you do. You can create all kinds of visuals, including social stories. You can play more fun games than sitting and talking to people, which may even be educational. You can create groups within your organizations or peer groups and ask someone to facilitate talking or learning about relative topics. What you make can cover and support just about any issue.

Finally, make sure you are having follow-up conversations. Even if a person is nonspeaking, it is crucial to presume their intellect and talk with them like any other person. Please give them the information they deserve, and many crave having. We can no longer wait. We can no longer assume or insist it is someone else's job to provide this information. The criminal justice system can no longer take our students, children, or those we support. Nor can people continue to be abused at the alarming rate they continue to endure. As we each learn to know better, we must acknowledge a will to do better.

"First disabled people were locked away in institutions then they were locked behind the opinions and expectations of others. The power to say 'this is who I am and I expect that your respect for me will define your support of me' is something that people with disabilities have longed to say."

-David Hinsburger

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