**A Parent’s Guide To Protecting Kids with Intellectual Disabilities from Sexual Abuse**

By [Marie Hartwell-Walker, Ed.D.](https://psychcentral.com/lib/author/marie/)

It’s a parent’s worst [nightmare](https://psychcentral.com/disorders/nightmare-disorder-symptoms/). Depending on the study, it is estimated that from 60 to 90 percent of women with an intellectual disability will be sexually exploited or abused in the course of their lives, in contrast to 25 percent of the typical female population. Boys aren’t exempt. From 16 to 30 percent also will be sexually abused before they turn 18. As hard as it is to understand or admit, there are bad people in the world who see a person with intellectual disabilities as a sitting duck. Abusers tend to be equal opportunity opportunists. They want sex and see people with intellectual disabilities as unlikely to report the abuse, or, even if they do report, unlikely to be believed.

**Why Abuse Happens**

Sometimes the fault lies at least partly with us. Parents sometimes don’t want to face the fact that their adolescent and adult children are sexual beings. For a long time, there was an idea in the world that people with intellectual disabilities were “eternal children.” The idea has its charm and certainly lets us off the hook from dealing with uncomfortable talks and instructions around sex. But it’s simply not true. People with intellectual disabilities do have sexual feelings. Those drives, coupled with insufficient information, impaired judgment, and lack of impulse control, can lead to inappropriate, even dangerous, encounters. If they don’t know what is normal, our kids can’t protect themselves. If they don’t know how to express their sexuality appropriately, they can get themselves into trouble. They desperately need us to give them the information.

Often parents want to protect their kids from some of the harsh realities of the world. Because parents want to believe that they can shelter and protect their kids, they often don’t tell them about abusive, abnormal, or illegal sexual activity. Unfortunately, unless you are willing to wrap up your kid in a cocoon of parental overprotection, it’s impossible to guarantee that he or she will never have to deal with unwanted and inappropriate advances.

Complicating things further is the sad fact that an abuser often is someone known to the victim. People with intellectual disabilities are abused by relatives; direct care staff; transportation staff; people who seem to want to befriend them; even other people with intellectual disabilities who are a bit more capable. It’s hard to know how to talk about this without making our kids afraid of their own shadows. It’s hard to face it ourselves without starting to look at everyone we meet as a potential abuser. While it is challenging, maintaining and presenting a balanced view is essential for keeping our kids safe.

Sometimes our good training backfires. We teach our kids to trust and comply with medical professionals, other adults, and staff as a way to keep them safe. Paradoxically, they can then be easily manipulated, threatened, and bribed by people who present themselves as having authority.

Then there is the desire of all young people to have a boyfriend or girlfriend. Kids with intellectual disabilities see the same TV shows and movies that everyone else sees and listen to the same music. American culture is full of references to romance and sex, particularly among teens and young adults. Having a partner is certification to many that they are okay. The need to be accepted and to be “like everybody else” can be so strong that a young person will accept painful or distasteful sex.

**Sex Education Includes Education about Abuse**

Education is the best protection. Parents who want to adequately protect their intellectually disabled kids from sexual abuse need to be willing to deal with the issue head on. This isn’t easy. Often it means first facing our own confusions about sex and what is and isn’t okay. It certainly means talking about sex in more concrete terms than many of us are comfortable doing. Kids with intellectual disabilities need us to explain it in detail. They need us to teach them what is okay as well as what isn’t. If we don’t, someone else who may be less caring and less invested in how the individual understands the information may well skew the facts to serve their own purposes.

**Good Touch, Bad Touch**

Because many people with intellectual disabilities require personal care, knowing the distinction between good and bad touch is essential. Children as young as three can be taught to recognize when someone is being appropriate or inappropriate in handling their bodies and their basic needs. Children and adults need to know how to say no and who to tell if something doesn’t feel right. *The Right Touch: A Read Aloud Story to Help Prevent Child Sexual Abuse* by Sandy Klevin and Jody Bergsma and *It’s My Body* (2002 edition) by Lory Freeman and Carol Deach both deal with a difficult topic in a non-threatening way. *Just Say Know!* by D. Hingsburger is one helpful book for teens and adults.

**Inoculating Your Kids Against Bribes and Threats**

Facts alone aren’t enough. It’s essential to teach children (and adults) how to recognize when someone is trying to manipulate them. Bribes and threats are the tools of an abuser. Protecting our kids means talking about what to do if someone tries to give them something they really, really want in exchange for doing something they aren’t comfortable doing. It means explaining what threats are like and what to do if someone tells them they will hurt them or someone they love if they don’t do what the person asks. And it means teaching your child to always, always tell a trusted adult if someone tries a bribe or threat — even if the person bribed or threatened them not to.

**Assertiveness Training**

Children (and adults) need to know how exactly how to refuse and exactly who to tell if their refusals aren’t honored. They need to be given specific, direct ways to say no when someone touches them in ways they don’t like or ways they have been taught are not okay. This may mean providing a “script” of a very certain and loud “NO!” and role-playing when and how to use it. Because people with intellectual disabilities often want to please, they also need to be taught that there are circumstances where it is absolutely okay to make someone angry or upset with them.

**Protection**

Predators count on isolation. Contact and involvement discourages them. It’s appropriate for a parent to ask to meet the new boyfriend or girlfriend. It’s important to get to know the person who seems to be becoming more than a casual friend. Young people with intellectual disabilities are no different than typical teens and young adults. They often count on us to help them sort out the complicated “dance” that goes on between people as they decide whether and how to be closer. Sometimes they also count on us to be the “heavy” to get them out of risky situations by imposing limits. If you see things you don’t like in the way someone treats your son or daughter, by all means talk about it and strategize with your child a way out of the situation that lets him or her save face.

**Alertness to Distress**

The first sign that something is wrong usually is a change in behavior. For all the reasons already described, kids with intellectual disabilities may not tell us when they’ve been sexually hurt. They may not understand that what occurred is abuse. They may have been threatened or bribed. They may be protecting someone they love who crossed a line. They may simply not get it. So they act out their distress. You won’t find what you don’t ask for. It’s important that we trust our own instincts if we feel that something just isn’t right and then ask. Fortunately, most kids and adults with intellectual disabilities will answer a direct question as long as they feel supported.

Our teens and adults with intellectual disabilities need affection and intimacy like everyone else. Often their bodies and desires mature at the usual time even though their cognitive and social skills lag far behind. Far too often, there are predatory people who are willing to take advantage of that gap. It’s only by managing our own discomfort with the issues and by providing education and protection that we can keep the people we love safe.