

Sexual Health and Behavioral Changes in Youth with IDD

It can be difficult to know when to talk about sexual health topics with your youth. You might wonder, "How do I know they're ready for this?". DSHN created this resource to help you identify when your youth might be in need of sexual health support through observed behaviors. The idea behind this project is to identify behaviors that could be associated with sexual health topics and provide a list of strategies to support parents, caregivers, community partners, and educators support youth in that area. This is a living document that is continuously being updated and changed. If you have examples or experiences you would like to share that could be an addition to this list, please contact sexedva@jmu.edu.

Disclaimer: This list of observed behaviors and possible sexual health connections was created through the observations and experiences of educators, sexual health professionals, caregivers, parents, and youth with IDD. It is not a comprehensive list and should not be used as a definitive guide to these behaviors in youth with IDD. If you notice significant changes in your youth, please contact their health care provider and seek medical advice.

Behaviors	Potential Reasons for Behavior	Sexual Health Topics	Resources
Social Boundaries			
Hugging strangers in the community	Seeking social connection, unaware of social boundaries	Boundaries; Consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent and Body Autonomy • Boundaries
Taking off clothes in public or in front of strangers	Unaware of social boundaries	Boundaries; private vs. public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private vs. Public • Boundaries
Getting in people's boundaries/zones/spaces	Unaware of personal space; unaware of boundaries	Boundaries; Consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent and Body Autonomy • Boundaries
Touching others inappropriately	Unaware of personal space, boundaries, and consent; onset of romantic or sexual feelings or urges	Boundaries; Consent; Healthy Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent and Body Autonomy • Healthy Relationships • Boundaries
Touching others and then touching themselves	Unaware of social boundaries; onset of romantic or sexual feelings or urges	Boundaries; Consent; Private vs. Public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent and Body Autonomy • Private vs. Public • Boundaries

Behaviors	Potential Reasons for Behavior	Sexual Health Topics	Resources
Inappropriate sexual commenting	Curiosity about new concepts and sex; onset of sexual feelings or urges; attention-seeking; unaware of social boundaries	All sexual health related topics; sexual activity; healthy relationships; consent; boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The HUB - All Sexual Health Topics
Stalking (in-person and online)	Unaware of social boundaries and privacy; onset of romantic or sexual feelings or urges.	Boundaries; Consent; healthy relationships; online safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent and Body Autonomy • Boundaries • Healthy Relationships • Online Safety
Saying sexually explicit words without knowing meaning	Curiosity about new concepts and sex; Onset of sexual feelings or urges; attention-seeking, unaware of social boundaries	All Sexual Health Related Topics; sexual activity; healthy relationships; consent; boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The HUB - All Sexual Health Topics
Trying to sit on a staff members lap when they are too old to be doing so	Unaware of social boundaries and personal space; seeking social connection; onset of sexual or romantic feelings or urges	Boundaries; consent; relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent and Body Autonomy • Boundaries • Healthy Relationships
Asking staff or others to tickle them	Sensory-seeking; unaware of social boundaries and personal space; seeking social connection	Boundaries; healthy relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundaries • Healthy Relationships • Types of Relationships
Approaching strangers with socially unexpected comments	Seeking social connection; unaware of social boundaries; attention-seeking	Boundaries; private vs. public; social skill	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundaries • Private vs. Public
Taking pictures of people without their consent	Seeking social connection; unaware of social boundaries and consent	Consent; boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent and Body Autonomy • Boundaries

Behaviors	Potential Reasons for Behavior	Sexual Health Topics	Resources
Spending too much time talking to, pursuing, spending time with one particular person despite the person expression discomfort	Seeking social connection; unaware of social boundaries; attention-seeking	Boundaries; relationships; consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundaries • Healthy Relationships • Consent and Body Autonomy

Self-Stimulation

Rubbing private parts in public spaces on objects in environment	Sensory-seeking; unaware of social boundaries	Boundaries; private vs. public; sexual activity/masturbation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private vs. Public • Boundaries • Sexual Activity, Contraception, Masturbation
Using objects and sensory related objects on private areas of body	Sensory-seeking; onset of sexual feelings or urges; curiosity about body	Sexual activity/ masturbation; puberty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual Activity, Contraception, Masturbation • Puberty
Engaging in sex acts in the bathroom at school	On-set of romantic or sexual feelings or urges; curiosity about body; unaware of public vs. private	Private vs. public; boundaries; relationships; consent; sexual activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private vs. Public • Consent and Body Autonomy • Healthy Relationships • Sexual Activity, Contraception, Masturbation

Romantic Interest

Having a crush (ex. showing specific interest in one person, stating they have a crush)	Seeking social connection; interested in relationships; onset of romantic or sexual feelings	Healthy Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy Relationships • Consent and Body Autonomy
Talking about dating	Onset of romantic or sexual feelings or urges	Healthy relationships; consent; boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boundaries • Healthy Relationships • Consent and Body Autonomy

Behaviors	Potential Reasons for Behavior	Sexual Health Topics	Resources
Developing feelings for someone and thinking they are in a relationship	Interest in relationships; onset of romantic or sexual feelings or urges; unaware of health relationships; unaware of social boundaries	Relationships; boundaries; consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent and Body Autonomy • Boundaries • Healthy Relationships
Online Activity			
Looking up key terms related to sexual health; i.e. typing "sex" into Google	Curiosity about new concepts; onset of romantic or sexual feelings or urges; curiosity about body	All sexual health topics; sexual activity; healthy relationships; consent; boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The HUB - All Sexual Health Topics
Looking up porn	Curiosity about new concepts; onset of romantic or sexual feelings or urges; curiosity about body	Internet safety/porn safety; sexual activity; consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent and Body Autonomy • Sexual Activity, Contraception, Masturbation • Online Safety
Sexting pictures or sexually explicit talk	Onset of sexual feelings or urges; interest in relationships; curiosity about new concepts and sex	Internet safety/porn safety; sexual activity; consent; boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual Activity, Contraception, Masturbation • Consent and Body Autonomy • Boundaries
Attempting to hide online and/or phone activity	Potentially engaging in communications of sexual or romantic nature	Internet safety; healthy relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Safety • Healthy Relationships
Posting pictures or personal info about oneself or others online	Unaware of online privacy; seeking social connection; desire to keep up with peer group	Internet safety; boundaries; consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Safety • Consent and Body Autonomy • Boundaries
Biological Changes			
Increase in erections throughout the day	Processes of puberty; onset of romantic or sexual feelings or urges	Puberty; healthy relationships; consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy Relationships • Consent and Body Autonomy • Puberty

Behaviors	Potential Reasons for Behavior	Sexual Health Topics	Resources
Physical/body changes	Processes of puberty	Puberty; body autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent and Body Autonomy • Puberty
Self-Image			
Acting sensitive and private about body	<p>Low self-esteem or self-image; body or gender dysmorphia; consciousness about body changes with puberty; unaware of menstrual cycle or hygiene</p> <p>**this could also be a potential sign of abuse**</p>	Body autonomy, body image and self esteem, hygiene/puberty, gender identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender Identity • Consent and Body Autonomy
Showing interest in caring for body (i.e. face, hair, exercise)	Self-consciousness about body image; interest in relationships; interest in hygiene; desire to keep up with peer group	Hygiene/puberty; relationships; body image and self-esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy Relationships
Stating or posting negative comments about oneself	Low self-esteem or self-image	Self-esteem and body image; body autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent and Body Autonomy
Advocacy and Autonomy			
Submitting to unwanted attention or demands from peers and adults	Unaware of bodily autonomy and self-determination; unaware of consent; unaware of self-advocacy; low self-esteem	Consent; Body Autonomy; how to seek help; self-esteem; self-advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent and Body Autonomy
Difficulty expressing discomfort, likes/dislikes, preferences, or opinions	Unaware of autonomy and self-determination; unaware of self-advocacy; low self-esteem	Self-esteem; self-determination and self-advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Esteem

Behaviors	Potential Reasons for Behavior	Sexual Health Topics	Resources
Doing or saying something inappropriate because peers told them to	Unaware of bodily autonomy and self-determination; unaware of consent; unaware of self-advocacy; desire to keep up with peer group; seeking social connection; unaware of social boundaries	Relationships; social skill development; self-esteem and body image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consent and Body Autonomy • Boundaries • Healthy Relationships
Hesitating to engage in social interactions or make friends	Low self-esteem or self-image; self-conscious about body image; unaware of social skills	Relationships; social skill development; self-esteem and body image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy Relationships • Self-Esteem

This resource was designed by the Disability-inclusive Sexual Health Network, a SexEdVA program at the Institute for Innovation in Health and Human Services at James Madison University.



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