



# For parents and guardians of disabled young people

*This resource is intended to support parents and guardians to have honest and open conversations about relationships and sex with the disabled young person they may be caring for. It has been created by sex-ed social enterprise [Split Banana](#), and disability awareness charity [Enhance the UK](#).*

## Reasons that parents and guardians might feel nervous about these conversations

Relationships and sex, and everything that surrounds them, are sensitive areas for many people.

They can intersect with people's beliefs and values, and are influenced by religion, culture, society and personal experiences.

Often, people avoid talking to young people about relationships and sex, as there is a concern about safeguarding or sexualisation of the young person. But young people have these curiosities, with or without your support. So it's better to provide them with honest guidance and information, than let them seek it somewhere else, potentially more dangerous.

It's normal to feel nervous, but we're here to help. This guide will set out a 'how to' best have these conversations, and then explore three building blocks that will support you to embed inclusivity when you discuss relationships and sex.

## How to have these conversations

The toughest part is starting, and we can assure you that the apprehension will be much scarier than the actual conversation. Here are some tips that will help you to ease your nerves and get chatting.

### Choose a neutral space

You don't want to trap a young person into a conversation they don't want to have, so make sure there's an easy way out, however this may work for them. Best to avoid approaching them in their space, as this may feel intimidating. Choose a space where you know they feel comfortable, perhaps outside for a walk or trip in the car, or casually when you're watching telly at home.

### Ask open questions

Avoid asking closed yes/no questions and instead ask open ones like 'are there any topics that you are curious about?' and 'is there anything you'd like to know more about?'

### Offer alternatives

Everyone expresses themselves differently. In school, our anonymous question box always works well and allows students to ask questions without embarrassment. If they'd rather not have these conversations with you, where else would they like to get the knowledge? You could direct them to informational videos, great social media accounts, books, drawings, or maybe they'd be happier speaking to someone else in the family.

### Safeguarding

Let them know that you're always there to offer judgement-free guidance. Alongside this, it is crucial to recognise your role to safeguard your child; from emotional, physical and sexual abuse and neglect.

There are specific issues that some disabled young people may face when it comes to relationships and sex. [Devoteeism](#), for example, is a sexualised interest in disability, that can range from sexual preference to fetishism. It's important to be aware of topics like this, so that you can educate your child, to keep them happy and safe.

Additionally, there is a grey area surrounding the legalities of enabling a young disabled person to masturbate. If you'd like to know more, see Enhance the UK's [Sex and the Law guide](#).



# Three building blocks to remember for truly inclusive and relevant sex education

Of course, it is impossible to attain or impart all of the knowledge that someone, or a group of young people will need when it comes to relationships and sex. However, you can set a valuable standard and fill the conversations you do have with inclusive messaging, approaches and narratives.

## 1. There is no normal

Society tells us that there is a way to look and a way to behave, every single day. Which is why it's important to know and teach that there is no normal.

No normal bodies, relationships, sex, orientations, teenage years and experiences etc. Many insecurities and anxieties are born out of the idea that we, or others, are somehow defaulting from a normal or 'right' way of existing. This can lead us to be disgusted or ashamed at ourselves and our bodies, and to judge others.

Some practical steps you can take:

### Representation

Follow social media accounts (on your phone and your child's) which make visible as many different bodies, relationships and experiences as possible (we've included some at the end of this).

### Share diverse experiences

Highlight a variety of different voices, stories and first-hand experiences when you're speaking to your child to share the lives of other people living with physical disabilities.

It's okay (and really important) to also be honest here, and share the tough stuff as well as the joy. It may well, for example, take a disabled young person longer to find a partner, or to feel comfortable and confident in navigating certain sexual positions in relation to their non-disabled peers.

This is, sadly, usual in the society we live in. It's more than okay to feel frustrated by this. Whilst encouraging hope is great and much needed, disabled young people need to know that they are not always expected to feel totally positive about the way disability is currently perceived, especially in the world of sex and relationships.

## Be subjective

Use subjective language, e.g. “for some people puberty means that your breasts will grow bigger”, “for some other people it’s different to this”, “some people may not grow breasts at all”. There is no ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ way of growing and being when it comes to bodies, and continually embedding this through your language is powerful.

## Show an awareness of overarching narratives

Be conscious of the wider ‘defaults’ that society gives us - such as heteronormativity and whiteness, and how you can name, avoid and challenge them.

It is important to be aware that although there is no normal behaviour there is still harmful behaviour. If your child expresses that they are doing something which is worrying them or others, it is important to listen and help them to find guidance and support.

## Case study:

Safety around sex is important, and the correct knowledge for disabled young people can greatly improve it.

Claire, a Children and Family Support Officer, advises that:

*“However embarrassing or awkward it may seem, it is vital that, if your child is deaf, they are taught all the appropriate sexual signs instead of being encouraged to merely fingerspell words. In this way, they are equipped with a language to discuss sex properly, and given the tools to encourage safe, fun and satisfactory sexual relationships that meet their needs.*

*It’s important to instil your child with the notion that everybody is different and there is no ‘normal’, but you also need to ensure they have the specific information that they need - relevant to their lived experience - to keep themselves safe.”*

## 2. Penis-in-vagina sex is one kind of sex

From a very young age, we are told that sex is when a penis enters a vagina. And whilst it is true that this is one example of sex, it is not solely what sex is.

What about sex when there's no penis involved? Or vagina? Or when penetration isn't an option?

Instead, it's helpful to think of sex as both outercourse and intercourse. Outercourse is any sexual activity which is non-penetrative, such as kissing, touching, oral sex and solo or shared external masturbation. Intercourse is penetrative sexual activity, such as vaginal or anal, or solo or shared internal masturbation.

It's important that young people know that:

### **All sex requires consent**

By showing that outercourse also counts as sex, we are expanding what it means to have an intimate experience - and that every intimate experience requires communication and consent.

### **Consensual sex and sexual pleasure are healthy parts of our lives**

It is important that pleasure is not shamed or stigmatised. Whether with yourself, or with others, pleasure comes in all shapes and sizes, and is an important part of mental wellbeing.

### **People's consensual sexual choices are equally valid, even if they are different from our own**

Some people will have sex with genders different from their own. Some people won't. Some people will have sex with multiple partners. Some will only ever have outercourse sex. Some will choose not to have sex at all. As long as it's consensual for all involved, people's sexual practises are equally valid, and should be respected.

### **Whilst penetration and intercourse aren't possible for everyone, the ability to be sensual and sexual is**

And this sexual expression should be celebrated in equal measure to penis-in-vagina sex.

### **Case study:**

Whilst penetrative sex is not possible, or desired, for everyone, most of us still want to feel good, and know how to make ourselves feel good. It is possible to remap the erogenous zones, so that if due to injury or impairment, orgasming through touching the genitals is not possible, it may well be through the ear or thumb, for example.

Take a look at this [video](#) to find out more.

### 3. Brush up, but take it easy

The majority of adults we talk to lament their lack of RSE. Few people had the conversations they were yearning to have, or received the information they needed to build healthy relationships with themselves and others.

As a result, many of us don't have a template for how to have these conversations. Instead, the very idea can bring up feelings of dread, embarrassment and shame. And that's fine.

Often these feelings can come from a lack of knowledge or our own confusion around a specific topic. In which case, using the topic guide we provided and the resources below, consider what you feel uncomfortable in talking about with your child, why this might be and what resources you could look to for further information and support.

This can especially be the case when you're trying to have conversations about something you don't have lived experience of, like being physically disabled. Again, looking to stories and good resources, as well as contacting user-led charities for advice, can help you to fill in these gaps.

Sometimes, due to personal experience, trauma or for no clear reason at all, some things might be just too painful or embarrassing to talk about. In this case, it's good if you can find other resources or services that you can signpost young people to.

Some practical steps you can take:

#### **Be transparent**

When signposting, you can say something like: "I was never taught how to have these kinds of conversations, so I find it awkward / embarrassing / tough to talk about this subject. But I want you to have the information you need."

This affirms to them that learning about the topics isn't shameful, but that some subjects can be difficult for people for multiple reasons.

#### **Play the long game**

Everyone needs time to process, question and explore these kinds of topics. Focusing on creating a relationship and atmosphere where your child feels comfortable to ask questions - rather than thinking about one-off conversations - actually makes these interactions less awkward in the long run.

### Case study:

There are times where, as a parent or guardian, you may also have to fight for your child to receive the same sexual health care and considerations as non-disabled young people.

Whether this may involve taking the contraceptive pill or morning after pill for the first time, or receiving sexual health checks and appropriate resources and information around contraceptives and STIs, it is not unusual for this to be deemed unnecessary for disabled young people as they are often not considered to be sexually active.

There have been numerous cases of disabled young people and adults initially being refused this support and education by medical professionals, or being expected to justify their sexual activity.



## Some brilliant resources to get you started

### Made for you as a parent:

[Outspoken Sex Ed](#). A platform to support parents to have open conversations about relationships and sex with their children. Filled with heaps of articles, lesson plans, talking guides etc. They also run regular events.

[Nadine Thornhill](#). Nadine runs pay-what-you-feel online classes to support parents to feel more confident talking to their children about sexuality.

[Girls & Sex](#) and [Boys & Sex](#) by Peggy Orenstein both offer valuable insight into the reality of what it is to be young cis-man or cis-woman in today's culture. Although based in American research its perspective is still invaluable.

### More specifically about sex and disability:

['This is How We Do It'](#) by VICE: interviews of people with a wide range of impairments, medical conditions and trauma about their romantic and sex lives.

Spencer Williams is a journalist with Cerebral Palsy and writes a [very candid column](#) (also for VICE) on navigating sex.

[Disability After Dark](#) covers everything you can think of when it comes to sex and disabilities. It's also very queer-friendly.

[URevolution](#) is a content podcast that describes itself as body positivity without the ableism. Also has a great sex and dating section.

[Disability Visibility](#) is a platform created by disability activist Alice Wong. Alice also hosts an amazing [podcast](#) and has just released a [book](#).

### To share with your 11+ year old:

[Fumble UK](#). A digital media platform for young people to learn about relationships and sex.

Fumble article: [Yes, People With Disabilities Are Having Sex \(And Loving It\)](#)

Fumble article: [Disability Visibility](#)

[Sexwise](#) for all of their sexual health and contraception information. Engaging little video snippets.





## To share with your 18+ year old:

[Salty](#). An unapologetic newsletter and website filled with brilliant articles by and for women, trans and non-binary people.

Salty article: [‘Eight Tips For Meeting New Partners When You’re Living With A Disability’](#)

Salty article: [How to Find Sex-Positive, Queer-Friendly Disability Aides](#)

## Inspiring pages and people to follow on social media:

[Hannah Witton](#). Talks frankly about sex and relationships with a stoma, and is a podcaster and author.

[Aaron Phillip](#) is the first black, transgender and physically disabled model to be signed to a major agency, and is an advocate for disability and queer rights.

[Chellaman](#) is a deaf, trans, genderqueer artist and model. He’s also a major advocate disability and queer rights.

[Lucy Edwards](#). The first blind Cover Girl partner. Lucy is also a BBC reporter, YouTuber and author.

[Voices4Ldn](#) are a direct action group for the LGBTIQ+ community. They make excellent content including a lot of disability advocacy.

[Lauren ‘Lolo’ Spencer](#) is a model, actress and disability influencer.

[SimplyEmma](#). The UK’s leading disability and travel blogger, Emma writes about moving around the world in a wheelchair.

[Dis-sexuality](#). A Mumbai-based platform for women with disabilities to share their experiences of sexuality and connect with others.

[Gynaegeek](#) (Dr Anita Mitra). An NHS doctor committed to spreading the word about sexual health.

[Crippling Up Sex With Eva](#). Sex educator Eva delivers sex education for disabled young people. Although US-based, there are also online classes and events.

[Andrew Gurza](#). A queer activist, disability awareness consultant and [Disability after Dark](#) podcaster.

**Have a look at our resources for young people to see more people and platforms we recommend.**



**And if you still want more:**

[Sex, Power, Money](#) by Sara Pascoe. Sara explores the sex industry, objectification and the allure of wealth in relation to them.

[The Curious History of Sex](#) by Kate Lister. A fun, informative read that uncovers the root of some of the language and practices used today.

[Queer Sex](#): A Trans and Non-Binary Guide to Intimacy, Pleasure and Relationships.

[Sex Ed in Color](#) is a candid podcast about being a person of colour working as a sexuality professional.