

# Your Child's Growing Sexuality

A guide for parents and carers of children with intellectual disability



family  
planning nsw  
Reproductive & Sexual Health

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## Disability and sexuality education

### The role of parents and carers

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human. It encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is important for all people, regardless of abilities, disabilities or age. All people need ongoing and age-appropriate sexuality education to develop positive attitudes about sexuality and an understanding of themselves. Learning how, when, where and with whom to express our sexuality plays a significant role in our wellbeing and how we're accepted and included by our community.

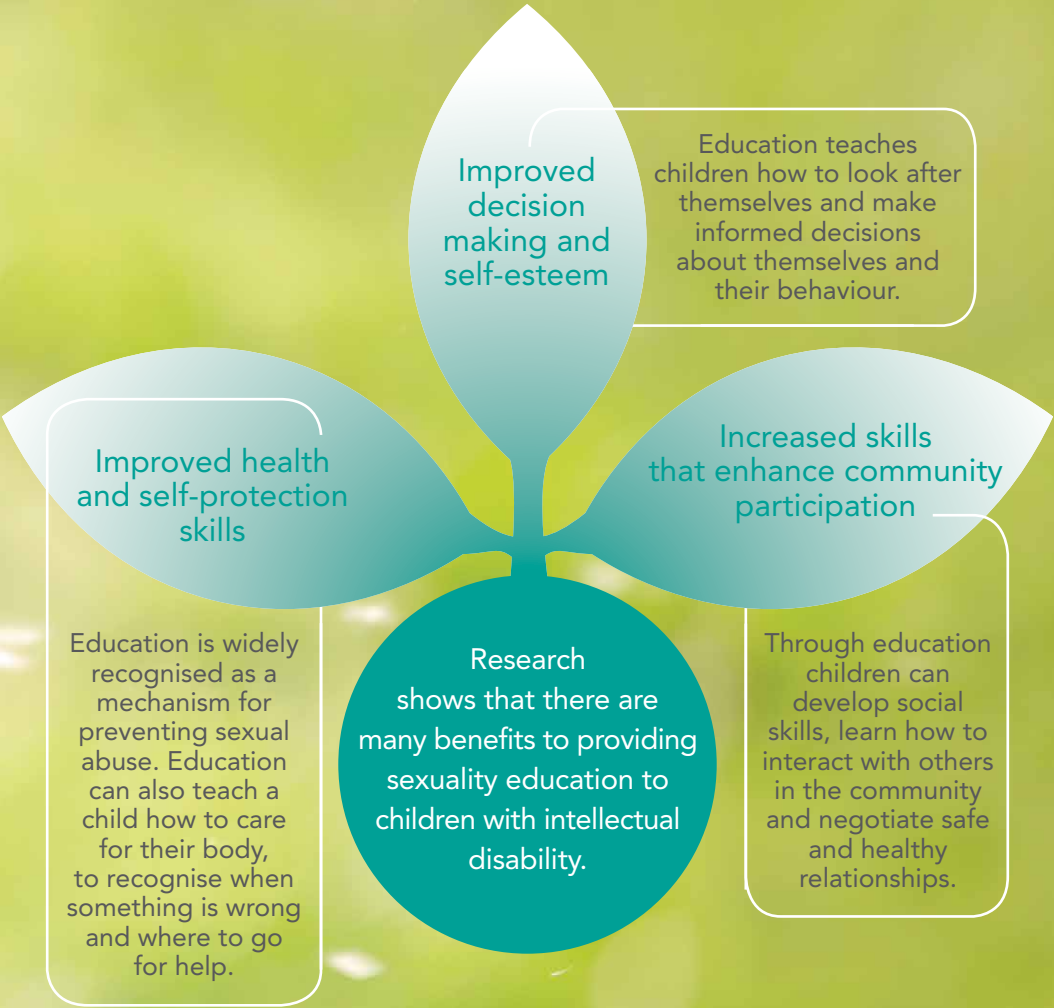
People with intellectual disability often receive less sexuality education than their peers without disability. It's often the case that the sexuality education they do receive focuses only on protective behaviours and preventing sexual assault. While this is important, it often doesn't provide information on the positive aspects of sexuality such as pleasure, healthy relationships and a healthy body.

Parents play a very important role in their child's sexuality education. The behaviours they model, their attitudes, beliefs and experiences regarding sexuality can all influence the way their children view their own sexuality. Parents are most often the people consistently involved in their child's life which makes them instrumental in supporting their child to learn about their sexuality and to express it in a healthy way. They play a vital role alongside schools and disability service providers.



# Benefits of sexuality and relationship education

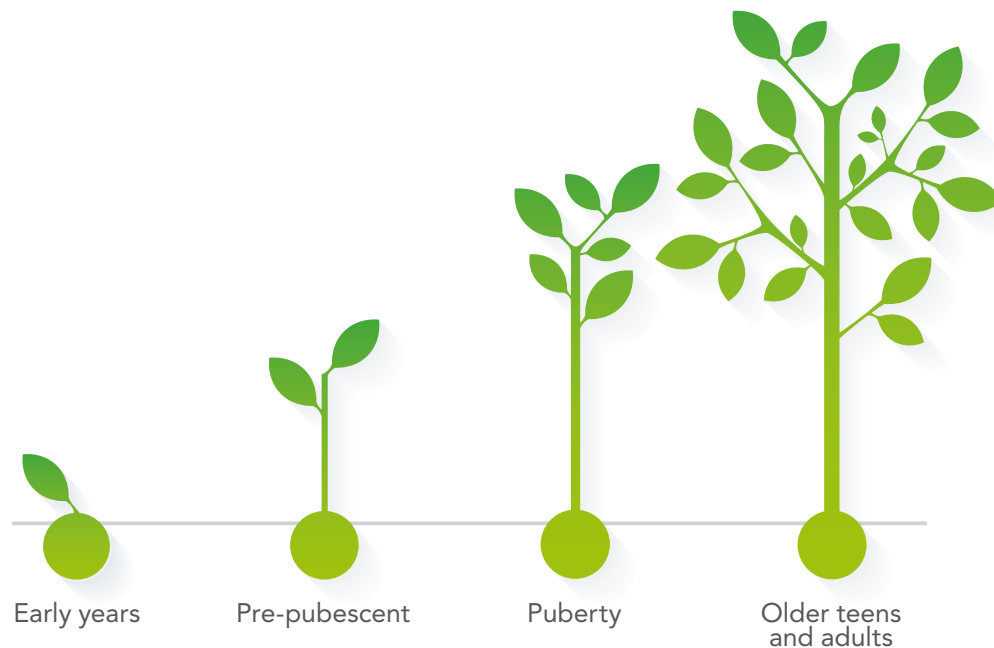
Supporting your child in their sexuality education will allow them to live a more independent, happy and healthy life as they grow.



# Getting started

There isn't a standard format by which parents should teach their children sexuality education. Each child learns at a different pace and style, and information needs to be tailored to the child's level of understanding, not just their age. Start with the basics and slowly build on this information over the child's lifespan. Even if it takes a long time, all learning is beneficial to your child.

The following is a general guideline for topics to discuss with your child at different stages of their life.



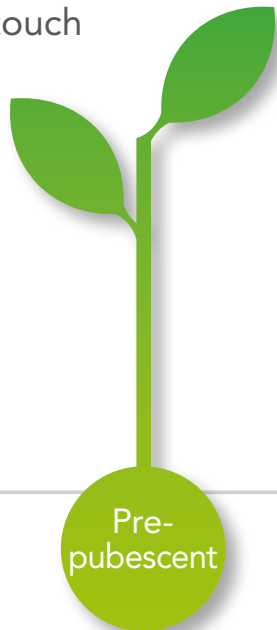
## Early years

- Correct names for private body parts
- Basic consent skills - saying 'yes' to wanted things and 'no' to unwanted things
- Difference between boys' and girls' bodies
- Public and private places and body parts
- Where babies come from
- Different types of relationships (e.g. mother, father, sibling, friend etc.)
- Basic hygiene

Early years

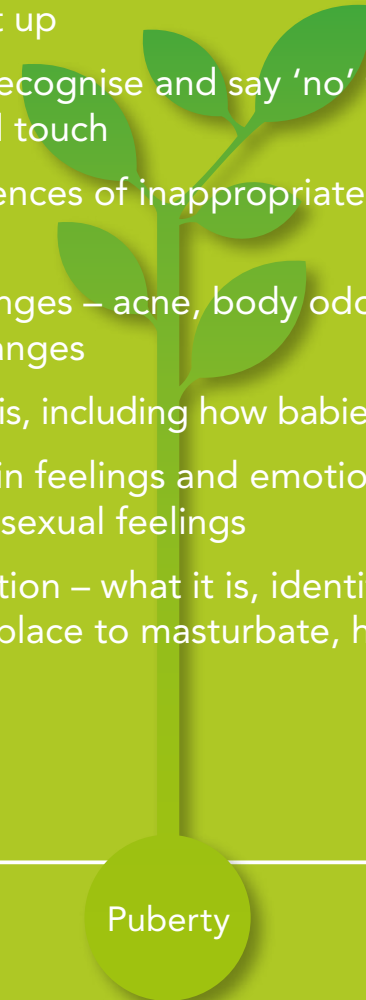
## Pre-pubescent

- Basic introduction to periods – what they are and when to expect them
- Wet dreams – what they are and when to expect them
- Introduction to body changes – growing taller, pubic hair, changes to private body parts
- Different relationships and appropriate types of touch
- Ways to recognise and say 'no' to unwanted touch



## Puberty

- Practical management of periods
- Wet dreams – why it happens and how to clean it up
- Ways to recognise and say 'no' to unwanted touch
- Consequences of inappropriate touching of others
- Body changes – acne, body odour and mood changes
- What sex is, including how babies are made
- Changes in feelings and emotions, including sexual feelings
- Masturbation – what it is, identifying a private place to masturbate, hygiene



## Older teens and adults

- Sexual feelings
- Sexual attraction, including what lesbian, gay and bisexual means
- Sexual relationships – dating skills, progression of intimate relationships, rejection, having sex and consent
- Safe sex – how to use a condom correctly
- Contraception – what it is and the different types available
- Sexually transmissible infections (STIs) – what they are and how you get one
- Sexual health – cervical cancer screening, STI checks, breast checks etc.
- Parenting – the good and challenging things about being a parent

Older  
teens &  
adults

## Strategies for talking about sexuality

Before talking to your child about sexuality it's important to consider the following things:

- What are my attitudes and beliefs about puberty and sex? Do I want to pass these on to my child?
- What do I wish I'd been told about puberty and sex when I was growing up?
- What is my child learning at school? Can I support this at home?
- What resources could help my child to learn more about sexuality?

How can I make learning about puberty and sex a positive experience for my child?



# Talking about sexuality

The earlier the better! Children with intellectual disability often take longer to learn new things. This means that it's better to start talking about sexuality early and prepare your child well in advance for things they will experience in their lifetime (puberty, dating skills, safe sex or menopause).



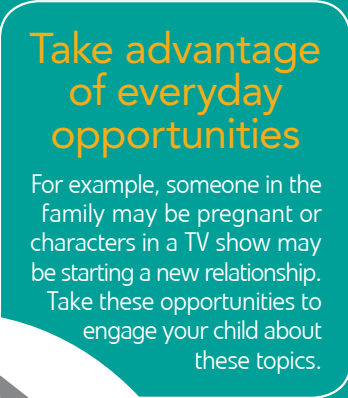
## Talk soon, talk often

The one off 'sex talk' at puberty should be a thing of the past. Children with intellectual disability learn best with repetition. Revisiting discussions about sexuality can take away some of the embarrassment and encourage your children to come to you for information and advice.



## Repetition

Keep coming back to the conversation and acknowledge your child's learning.



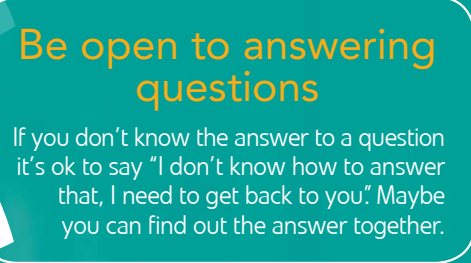
## Take advantage of everyday opportunities

For example, someone in the family may be pregnant or characters in a TV show may be starting a new relationship. Take these opportunities to engage your child about these topics.



## React calmly

...and without judgement to your child's question. They will be more likely to come to you for information and advice in the future.



## Be open to answering questions

If you don't know the answer to a question it's ok to say "I don't know how to answer that, I need to get back to you". Maybe you can find out the answer together.



Include sexuality symbols on communication boards.



## Where possible, use demonstrations and models

..when discussing sexuality topics. For example, using anatomically correct dolls when explaining private and public behaviours like undressing.

## Frequently asked questions

My child hasn't started school yet. I don't think it's necessary to teach sexuality at such a young age. What if I tell my child too much too soon?

Often when people think about sexuality they think about sex and attraction. In reality, this is only one part of sexuality. Sexuality includes the whole person and covers a range of topics to prepare a child for adult life and decisions. When children are young they begin to learn about their bodies, the difference between boys' and girls' bodies and how to socialise with other people. Ideally, education should start at a young age and be taught in stages according to the child's age and ability.

Parents are often concerned about the appropriate time to begin sexuality education. The one off 'sex talk' at puberty should be a thing of the past as it doesn't give the child time to learn about their bodies before puberty begins. Education can start as early as bathing and toilet training. It can be as simple as teaching the correct names of the private body parts. Information about sexuality will not shock or embarrass them if started early and given in a matter-of-fact and sensitive way. Having frequent, age-appropriate conversations can build knowledge over time. The rule of thumb is 'talk soon, talk often'.

Often when a child masturbates at an inappropriate time or place a parent's first reaction can be one of embarrassment and desperation to stop their child from touching themselves. They might reprimand their child and remove their hands from their private body parts. This negative reaction sends the wrong message to the child that masturbation and their private body parts are a bad thing and something they should be ashamed of.

It's important for parents to consider why their child may be touching themselves. There are a number of reasons a child could be touching their private body parts including uncomfortable pants or underwear or sore or itchy private body parts. It's important to find out the reason for the behaviour first before any behaviour change can begin.

If a child is touching their private body parts in a public place solely for the purpose of masturbation then parents should remind their child that masturbation is a private behaviour and should only be done in a private place. They can then redirect the child to their private place (bedroom with the door closed).

'My child masturbates at inappropriate times and places. How can I teach them that this is not ok?'



# Frequently asked questions

My daughter will be getting her period shortly and I don't think she'll be able to cope once they start. Should I talk to the doctor about managing it through the pill or some other form of contraception?

Starting periods can be a difficult and anxious time for any girl and her parents. Many girls and women with intellectual disability can successfully manage their own periods. Education is important before a girl gets her period so she can be prepared for the changes to come.

Some things that you might like to try with your daughter to help prepare her for menstruation are:

- Practice wearing pads. Try out different styles of pad to find the most comfortable fit
- Associate periods with things your daughter enjoys e.g. wear a pad and go out for ice cream
- Use dolls, books and DVDs to talk about and explain menstruation. Explain that it's part of growing up for all girls and it's normal

Contraception shouldn't be used pre-emptively. Doing so doesn't empower your daughter to understand puberty and how her body works. It also doesn't build her skills in being independent and making decisions. Contraception to manage periods should only be considered if education and training is unsuccessful, and always in consultation with a medical professional.

Generally, children begin to develop a sense of modesty at the age of 5 or 6. For children with intellectual disability, learning the concept of private and public can take longer to understand and may require extra guidance.

There are a number of ways that parents can help their children to understand private and public.

- Children often learn by imitating the way their parents behave. It's important that parents model the behaviours that they want their children to exhibit. For example, being fully clothed in shared (public) areas of the home and getting undressed in your bedroom with the door closed (private)
- Identify private and public spaces in the home. Take photographs of different places in the home and ask your child to sort the pictures into public and private places
- Teach your child that private body parts are those that are covered by your underwear or swimmers

These are just a few examples of how parents can teach their children about private and public. Depending on your child's learning needs, some strategies may be more successful than others. It's worth using a few different strategies so the learning is reinforced through different activities. The important thing to remember is that repetition and allowing your child time to learn is the key. Behaviour change won't happen overnight.

My child doesn't understand the concept of private body parts and behaviours. How can I teach them this?

# Frequently asked questions

My child is a teenager but has the mental capacity of someone much younger. How can they possibly understand sexuality?

Regardless of a child's disability, their body will inevitably change at puberty. It's often the case for children with intellectual disability that their intellectual development doesn't keep up with the physical changes during puberty. However, it's still important for the child to understand the changes that are happening to their body. Ideally, education needs to start at an early age as this ensures the child has extra time to learn about puberty before their body begins to change. Many children with disability can learn a great deal if education proceeds slowly and repetitively in small steps.

It's also important to recognise the role that the developmental age of your child plays in deciding what educational materials are appropriate for them. For example, if your child reads at a first grade level, the books and information you provide will need to match that level. If your child doesn't read, try picture books, dolls and demonstrations.

Every person communicates in some way whether with facial expressions, sign language, a communication device, gestures, or words. Teaching your child about sexuality is the same as teaching them any other skill or information. It's about adapting information and presenting it in a way that suits your child's learning needs.

There is communication software available that includes images depicting various reproductive and sexual health words. These can be added to communication boards and used to familiarise your child with different terms and their meanings. These pictures can also be printed out and used in sorting and sequencing activities. For example, you can use the pictures to talk to your child about private and public behaviours and ask them to sort the picture cards into a 'private' pile and a 'public' pile.

Social stories can also be a useful tool for teaching children who don't use verbal communication about sexuality. Presenting topics like getting undressed or masturbating and listing the steps involved in a story format can be a useful way of teaching the concepts of privacy and social rules.

My child communicates non-verbally. How can I teach them things about sexuality?

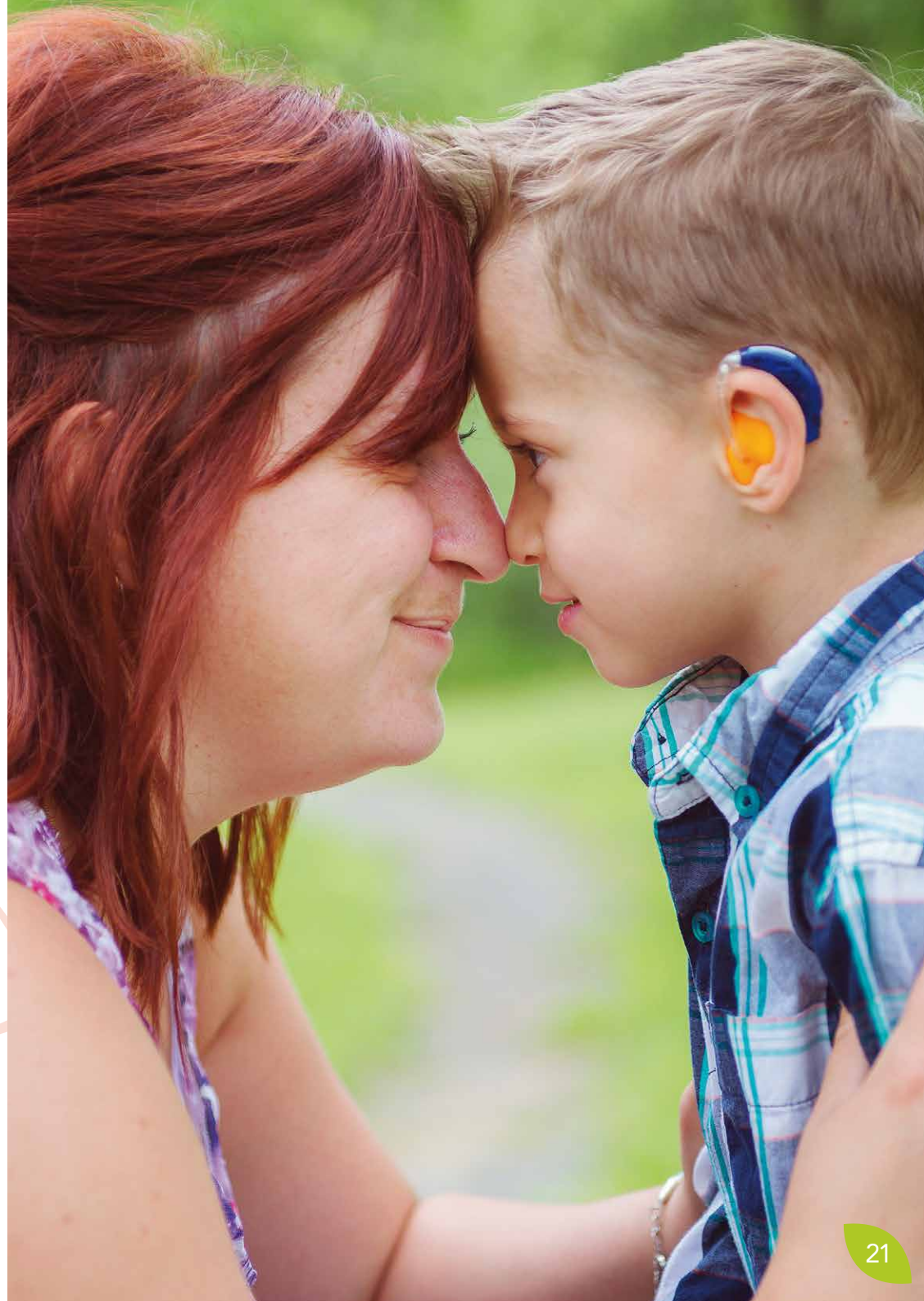
## For resources and further information

Family Planning NSW Disability Resource Collection includes an extensive collection of sexuality and reproductive & sexual health resources. Many of the resources are easy to read and are available for loan or sale to community members, disability workers, clinicians and students. You can borrow these resources by contacting [healthpromotion@fpnsw.org.au](mailto:healthpromotion@fpnsw.org.au) or purchase them at [www.fpnsw.org.au/shop](http://www.fpnsw.org.au/shop).

The Body Talk website provides a fun, interactive and engaging new way for young people to explore the body and see how the reproductive system works. [www.bodytalk.org.au](http://www.bodytalk.org.au)

Family Planning NSW Talkline: A confidential telephone and email service staffed by experts in reproductive and sexual health. Family Planning NSW Talkline is open 8:30am to 5pm weekdays for information and advice. Call 1300 658 886 or go to [www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline](http://www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline)

You can find more information about our disability resources, education services and programs at [www.fpnsw.org.au/disability](http://www.fpnsw.org.au/disability)



# About Family Planning NSW

Family Planning NSW is the state's leading provider of reproductive and sexual health services. We're experts on reproductive and sexual health and provide clinical services and health information to people throughout NSW. We have five fixed clinics and use innovative partnerships to deliver services in other locations across NSW.

Family Planning NSW is committed to recognising and supporting the rights of people with disability to live full and meaningful lives. We believe that people with disability have the same rights as everyone else to express their sexuality.

Our clinics provide a safe place for people with disability to talk about intimate and sometimes challenging issues. We produce easy to read resources to support people with disability to learn about their sexuality and relationships. We also provide training and support to parents, carers, and service providers around disability and sexuality topics.

Family Planning NSW also offers individual programs through our Newcastle clinic as part of our Sexuality and Disability Service. Participants of the service are supported to develop skills across their lifespan in the area of sexuality and disability. For more information about this service go to [www.fpnsw.org.au/SDS](http://www.fpnsw.org.au/SDS)



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Family Planning NSW online shop:  
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