

12-Part Sexuality Series for Parents with Children with an Intellectual Disability

Part 7 of 12: Family, Friend, Acquaintance, Stranger?

“Did you make any friends?” is one of the first questions we ask when our children broaden their world to include day care, camps and schools. This sounds like a simple enough questions but understanding different relationships and social norms is complex and often confusing.

The need to ensure that our children have an understanding of different types of relationships and their associated behaviours is important information in helping develop social connections as well as safeguarding them from being exploited. Consider what makes a friend different from an acquaintance or a relative or a stranger. The Circles Intimacy & Relationship Program by James Stanfield Publishing Company, Santa Barbara, California provides a useful resource to organize relationships in a concrete manner. The Circles program uses six colour coded concentric circles to illustrate the different type of touch, trust and talk that is appropriate for different groups of people.

The middle circle is the purple private circle and focuses on the uniqueness of each person as an individual and is the point of view for all other relationships. The next circle is the blue hug circle which encompasses the people who are emotionally and physically closest to the person in the person in the purple private circle. This circle is surrounded by the green far away hug circle. This circle typically involves friends or people that would be greeted with a hug. The yellow handshake circle involves acquaintances followed by the orange wave circle which involves people we may know but have no physical or emotional

closeness. The outer circle is the red stranger circle and includes strangers, community helpers and complete strangers.

Community helpers, whose only contact is related to their profession, include doctors, mail carriers, hair dressers, etc. Any touch between the person in the purple private circle and the community helper in the red stranger circle is related to the job of the helper. The other group in the red stranger circle is the complete stranger with whom the person in the center circle has no interaction of any kind.

The beauty of this program as created by James Stanfield is the ability to tailor the program to the need of each person and the visual nature of the program. You may decide to only use two or three circles based on the needs of the child and no two circles will look alike.

The important message is that we treat people differently based upon our personal relationships and that it is often necessary to teach these differences. It is not okay to hug the family dentist who is a stranger but it is okay to hug a grandparent with whom you have a close and trusting relationship. To generate some guidelines to help teach these social skills to children it may be useful to consider who you would feel comfortable with your child touching and what kind of touch you would feel comfortable.

Having developed the rules of touch for your child, decide how best to teach this information. A visual circle diagram of relationships, posters, discussion or social stories are all options. It is also necessary to review the concepts on an ongoing basis and to be aware that relationships with people may change through time.

Making friends is an important part of growing up. Knowing the difference between friends, family acquaintance and strangers is also an important part of growing up.

References

Circles Curriculum (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://www.stanfield.com/products/family-life-relationships/social-skills-circles-curriculum-intimacy-relationships/>

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Part 8: “You Want to What?” (August 2015)