

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

Part 9 of 12: The Biggest Worry

From the moment of conception, the need to keep our children safe is forever in our thoughts. As parents we worry about the foods we feed our children, our parenting styles, our children's schooling and friends, and the list goes on. All of these worries pale in comparison with the fear that someone will harm our child sexually. Statistics support the sad reality that children with disabilities are at a greater risk of being abused. The question becomes, *how would I know if my child is being abused?*

Checklists for signs of abuse are readily available, but the challenge of determining whether abuse has occurred is increased when the child is nonverbal or has difficulty communicating. With only behavioural signs available to us, it is important to thoroughly assess the function of the observed behaviour.

- The presence of sexualized behaviour

The presence of sexualized behaviour is considered a red flag that abuse has occurred. However, these types of behaviours need to be investigated to determine if the cause is the result of abuse, normal sexual development, or is serving another purpose. Normal development includes sexual exploration and is not cause for concern. For example, it is not uncommon for preschool children to explore their bodies; even in public. The age of onset for sexual exploration in individuals with disability may be delayed, and result in the display of the behaviour at a later age than expected. Sexual behaviour can also occur for a variety of other reasons, such as, over or under stimulating environments. It's also important to consider that, children who have been abused do not always engage in sexualized behaviour.

- Change in behaviours

A change in behaviour is also considered a red flag that abuse has occurred. In regards to people with disability, the challenge is that behavioural changes may or may not be the result of sexual abuse. An increase in behaviour may have many causes. For example, behaviour can change in response to health issues or changes in

environment. Again, this highlights a need to investigate the reason the behaviour is occurring.

There is a need to be vigilant in our observations and attentive to communication so that we might determine if there is cause for concern. Express your concerns to medical professionals and those trained in abuse investigations to ascertain if abuse is occurring. The reality that abuse does occur cannot be ignored, and the need to protect will always be a paramount role for all parents.

References

Disability Studies Quarterly (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1058/1228>

Sexual Abuse of Children with Autism: Factors that Increase Risk and Interfere with Recognition of Abuse: Meredyth Goldberg Edelson, Willamette University, Department of Psychology, 900 State Street, Salem, OR 97301

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Part 10: Stage 10 – Keeping Safe (October 2015)