



# Romantic Relationships in the Lives of People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Accessing Safety in Hennepin County

A collaboration between The Arc Greater Twin Cities and the Sexual Violence Center

Romantic Relationships in the Lives of People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Presenter note: The intended audience of this webinar is SVC advocates and The Arc Program Office.



# Learning Objective

- Understand the barriers people with intellectual and developmental disabilities face when developing relationships

The learning objective of today's webinar is to understand the barriers people with intellectual and developmental disabilities face when developing relationships.

# Accessing Safety in Hennepin County (ASHC)



Collaboration between The Arc Greater Twin Cities and the Sexual Violence Center

## **Mission**

The collaboration will improve how both agencies support victim/survivors with intellectual and developmental disabilities. ASHC will work together to provide services that respect and empower victim/survivors. ASHC will help victim/survivors get the skills and resources they need to heal.

First, let me tell you about the program that brought this training together.

Accessing Safety in Hennepin County is a collaboration between The Arc Greater Twin Cities and the Sexual Violence Center. The mission of the collaboration is to improve how both agencies support victim/survivors with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The two agencies will work together to provide services that respect and empower victim/survivors. Accessing Safety in Hennepin County will help victim/survivors get the skills and resources they need to heal.



## What barriers prevent people with disabilities from developing romantic relationships?

What barriers prevent people with disabilities from developing romantic relationships?

Can you think of a few barriers?

Before we start taking a closer look, I want to say that people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are a diverse group! People with disabilities have many different experiences based on their family, the type of disability they have and the community that live. The following slides include some broad barriers that may be more common among people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and things that people without disabilities take for granted when forming relationships.

- Lack of privacy
- Where they live



Let's talk about some of the barriers folks with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities face in developing romantic relationships.

- Lack of privacy - If you live in a group home you may have a private room, but staff can access that room at anytime. You may not be able to have your partner alone in your room. If you have a guardian, they may try to have more control over who you date.
- Where they live - If you live with your parents, they may not approve of your partner staying over. Or they may not approve of your partner in general. The person may be uncomfortable asking their parents to let a partner spend the night.

- Thoughts/values/opinion
- Little or no sex education
- Less knowledge or experience forming romantic relationships



- Thoughts/values/opinion- This could be thoughts from family, guardians, care givers or their own ideas. Values could be about dating and relationships as well as opinions about sex and marriage. Some people may assume people with disabilities are asexual or not able to or should not have a romantic relationship. No matter what disabilities someone has, people with disabilities mature sexually just like everyone else.
- Certain cultures are more protective of their daughters dating and that protection may be stronger if the woman has a disability. Therefore, it's harder for women with disabilities within certain cultures to date. Parents/guardians/care givers' thoughts on people with disabilities raising children may lead to outdated thoughts about forcing women with disabilities to go on birth control. Or they may not allow the person with the disability to access birth control at all.
- Little or no sex education- Again, the idea of people with disabilities being asexual sometimes means that this group gets left out of sex

education at school and at home. Therefore, they may not learn what is a healthy relationship, warning signs of abuse, etc. This may also lead parents/guardians/caregivers to be more involved in the relationship between people with disabilities because they think the person with a disability doesn't know how to be in a relationship and needs protection. This leads to a lack of privacy as well.

- Less knowledge or experience forming intimate relationship- and people with disabilities may be unsure of how to form a relationship or scared of safety concerns
- Note: picture is from a Star Tribune Article called "Intimacy Denied," about people with disabilities in relationships in MN. We've included a link to the article with the webinar.

- Dependent on others for day to day living
- Transportation



- Dependent on others for day to day living- some people with disabilities might have a personal care attendant or family member who supports them every day for sometimes very private care, like bathing, dressing, and using the bathroom. It can be hard to have any privacy with a partner if the person always needs a personal care attendant or family member nearby.
- Transportation- Some people rely on metro mobility or family for rides, that can make it difficult to spend time with someone. If a person uses public transportation - like metro mobility or the bus - It can be expensive and often must be planned days in advance. If a person relies on family, the family members must be both willing and available to give them rides.
- There are many more barriers that people with disabilities face when forming romantic relationships. These barriers are problems with the world that we live in, not making relationships accessible to people with disabilities. Now that we understand some of the barriers to

forming relationships, lets talk about sex and specifically, consent.



# What is consent?

Giving consent is like giving permission or say “Yes!” to something

Consent for sexual activity is more than just a yes.

So, what is consent? Giving consent is like giving permission or saying “Yes!” to something, but consent for sexual activity is more than just a yes.



# What is consent?

Consent is a positive agreement between people to have sexual activity

- Consent is based on choice
- Consent is active
- Consent is possible only when there is equal power
- Giving in because of fear is not consent
- Going along with something because of wanting to fit in with a group, being tricked or feeling bad is not consent

This slide has the definition from the Sexual Violence Center. Just a note: this is not a legal definition of consent, and we will not be discussing consent laws today. The laws about consent are pretty complex and confusing, and we won't have time to discuss them here.

Consent is a voluntary, positive agreement between participants to engage in a specific sexual activity.

Consent is based on choice: free choice, without guilt, pressure, or threats

Consent is active: verbal and physical, consent can be taken back at any time

Consent is possible only when there is equal power: People share power in the choice to give consent. True consent cannot be given when someone has power over the other person (like a therapist or a court-appointed guardian)

Giving in because of fear is not consent: If you are afraid of something you may say yes and you may act like you are happy. This can be a way to protect yourself and limit the harm that may come to you. This is not consent.

If you are going along with something because of wanting to fit in with a group, if you are being tricked or feeling bad, it is not consent.

# What is consent?

Consent is needed for:

- Relationships
- Sexual Activity
- Safe sex practices



Consent is needed for more than just sex. Consent is needed for

- Being in a relationship
- Any type of sexual activity from kissing to intercourse
- And safe sex practices like using birth control and condoms



## Role of the advocate

- Victim/survivor-centered and person-centered
- Not our role to decide if a person has the capacity to consent
- Provide options and advocating for whatever the person wants
- Making sure the person's voice is heard and prioritized when working with guardians, parents, family members, social workers, doctors, nurses, etc.

Let's talk for a second about the role of the advocate. Some of the people watching this webinar are advocates from the Sexual Violence Center and advocates from The Arc Greater Twin Cities.

There are two terms used frequently at each agency: victim/survivor-centered and person-centered. Victim/survivor-centered is a term the Sexual Violence Center uses to mean that they are supporting the victim/survivor and what they want. Person-centered is a term The Arc uses to mean that the person is more important than the disability. Advocates at the Sexual Violence Center and The Arc are doing similar things, putting the people first who come to us for support.

It is not the advocate's role to decide if a person has the capacity to consent. We may wrongly assume a person was assaulted because they have a disability, and this may not be correct. Listen to the person. Keep in mind, we are not the legal experts, and the laws about sexual consent for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are confusing and unclear.

Advocate for the person and what the person wants whenever possible: provide options and let them decide what to do next. Make sure the person's voice is heard and prioritized when working with guardians, parents, family members, social workers, doctors, nurses, and other professionals.



Pursuant to 28 CFR Stat.70.36(a), the **recipient** [emphasis added] may copyright any work that is subject to copyright and was developed, or for which ownership was purchased, under this award. The Office on Violence Against Women reserves a royalty-free, nonexclusive and irrevocable right to reproduce, publish or otherwise use the work, in whole or in part (including in the creation of derivative works), for Federal purposes, and to authorize others to do so.

That completes the training on Romantic Relationships in the Lives of People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Please complete the related survey and check out additional resources found on the website. Thank you for your time.