



Fact Sheet

Teenage Pregnancy and Youth with Intellectual Disabilities

Some studies have shown that being a teen with intellectual disabilities places he/she at greater risk for becoming a teen parent. These teens are already at greater risk for poverty, lower self-esteem, having an earlier age of initiation of sexual activity, and/or of being sexually abused before the age of 18. Half of all women with two or more teenage births have lower IQs.

Teens with intellectual disabilities also lack exposure to sexuality education. These students are more likely to have difficulties with social perceptions, making it hard for them to learn from their peers. As they watch media and participate in social settings where teen and adult behaviors are seen, they may misconstrue and adapt social behaviors by mirroring others, including mirroring of risky activities like stealing, substance use and/or sexual behaviors. Explicit training in rules, social skills, issues of puberty and sexual feelings, relationships and safety become very important.

What Information Do Teens with Disabilities Need?

As with all teens, those with intellectual disabilities need accurate information about emotions, values, morals, friendship, dating, love, and intimacy. They also need to know how to protect themselves against unwanted sexual encounters and pregnancies, and they need to be educated about positive parenting styles and responsibilities. For some teens, issues addressed earlier in the education process, such as public versus private behaviors and body parts, safe touch, and strangers versus friends, may need to be retaught more than once in the academic process. Addressing gender identity issues becomes even more complex when working with students with disabilities who may not understand their own feelings, societal stigmas or have a means to learn about issues such as homosexuality within their environment and family. Jones and her associates in 2005 stated, "It is the responsibility of educators and policymakers who work directly

Continued, page 2





Teenage Pregnancy and Youth with Intellectual Disabilities

Continued from page 1.

with youth with disabilities to ensure that they receive the same opportunities for information related to pregnancy and parenting that all teens receive.”

It is also important to assess individually whether a student with a disability may have unique learning needs that prevent he/she from retaining and utilizing information as presented in general programs through community service agencies and schools. Individuals with mild intellectual disabilities represent a diverse group of learners who possess a variety of learning strengths and weaknesses. Yet as a group they are at significantly increased risk to succumb to peer pressure and risky behaviors. Unfortunately, individuals with intellectual disabilities continue to receive inadequate sexuality education due to its failure to address the “ignored curriculum,” or curriculum learned incidentally outside the classroom through peer interactions. According to the board of directors of the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States, “Persons with physical, cognitive, or emotional disabilities have a right to sexuality education, sexual health care, and opportunities for socializing and for sexual expression.”

What Teaching Methods Are Most Effective?

Youth from special populations often learn better through direct experience, cooperative learning and collaboration, and high levels of interaction, rather than more traditional classroom lecture and reading formats. Recommended teaching methods for sexuality education encourage use of a multi-method approach, particularly with inclusion of illustrations, the use of video, and demonstration. General tips when approaching sexual education for groups of teens with disabilities are:

- assess the student’s knowledge level;
- keep teaching brief, specific, and clear;
- use visuals;
- break skills into small steps; and,
- repeat instruction and practice skills.

Reinforcing the teaching of vocabulary and concepts in both school and home environments is also very valuable.

Continued, page 3



Teenage Pregnancy and Youth with Intellectual Disabilities

Continued from page 2.

Once teens with disabilities are pregnant, they are likely to require a more direct and supportive approach to healthy pregnancy and parenting. Family and consumer sciences teachers recommend a number of services to help teach and support parenting teens with disabilities, including counseling, health services, tutoring, daycare, mentor support, and work/life skills classes. ♦

References

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Sex Information & Education Council of the United States www.siecus.org

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities <http://nichcy.org>

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