

# Teaching Human Sexuality to Students with Differing Abilities



## Why Youth with Differing Abilities Need Sexuality Education

Sexuality is important for the health and well-being of everyone, no matter their ability. Students with differing abilities (DA) experience many of the same celebrations and challenges of growing up as their typically developing peers, but many miss out on learning what they need to manage these changes and develop healthy relationships. Learning about relationships and social skills may be limited for students who are excluded from mainstream social activities.

Every student has individual needs, strengths, and challenges. Students with DA may include students with mild to severe cognitive disabilities, physical disabilities, complex medical needs, hearing and vision, and/or behavioural needs. Working with the family and other professionals involved with the student will help to meet their individual needs. If a student has an issue at school related to sexuality (e.g., difficulty with physical boundaries), engaging their family and any professionals who work with them can help to resolve the issue. Many issues need lots of time, practice, and reinforcement to resolve, so it's important to ensure that every adult involved with the student's care is included. Group sexuality education can support individual student needs as they watch and learn from others around them, and can help to normalize concepts related to sexuality.

Children and youth with differing abilities are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. However, when provided with sexuality education that meets their needs, they develop personal and relationship skills that considerably reduce risk. Sexuality education can help students develop independence, resilience, personal regulation, and respect for others. Sexuality education is a protective factor for all youth, especially youth with differing abilities, and lowers the risk of sexual assault, relationship violence, STI transmission, and unintended pregnancy. It also helps them to understand and celebrate their own sexuality.

## Goals of These Lessons

These lessons and resources are for teachers to use with students with mild to moderate learning needs to ensure equitable access to quality sexuality education that is provided to their typically developing peers. For these students, gaps in learning related to healthy sexuality is often more about a lack of accessible information than cognition.

The goal of sexuality education is to support students to:

- build knowledge, skills, and attitudes to lead sexually healthy lives.
- explore values consistent with physical, social, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being.
- identify strategies to talk about sexuality and access natural supports (e.g., parents) and community supports (e.g., healthcare providers) as needed

*Please note that specific learning outcomes are outlined in individual lessons.*

## Using These Lessons

All the lesson plans available for teachers to use can be adapted to the needs of individual students and groups. The lessons are *scripted*, meaning there are answers and explanations for every question asked. The questions, answers and discussion points are prepared for you using plain and simple language at a level best suited to students with DA.

*Text in italics* is the script designed to be read directly to students. Possible answers to questions, activity instructions and other teacher information, are not in italics.

The lesson plans often give options e.g., activities for students who may need more support versus activities where students can work more independently in small groups. The scripts and activities are all optional for use at your discretion. You can mix and match to produce a lesson that fits.

Teachers can use this resource to teach throughout the school year. Teachers are encouraged to:

- simplify and repeat this content as appropriate for their students.
- pull out and repeat simple key messaging.
- weave these topics in during teachable moments or in relation to other topics being taught in the class.

Students with intellectual, neurological, or developmental differences typically benefit from repeated information, so it is acceptable and expected that students will receive education about these topics over many of their school years.

## Language and terms

Talking about anatomy, physiology, and sexual development in terms of people, parts and processes is more accurate than talking about it in terms of assigned sex (female and male) or gender identity (girl and boy). For example, not everyone who gets periods is a girl, so saying “when someone gets their period” is more accurate than saying “when a girl gets her period.” This also helps make sure that everyone is included in the discussion, including trans, nonbinary and intersex youth.

However, some students may find this language confusing and will benefit from using gendered terms more frequently e.g., “when a girl gets her period, she may choose to use period underwear”. It’s important for students to be clear about what may happen to them and saying people who get periods may be too abstract, resulting in confusion. Terms can be used together when explaining concepts e.g., when someone is first starting to get their period, it may be irregular. Not all girls have a regular period at first.”

Students may have questions about their sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE). Teachers play an important role in helping students feel seen and affirmed when they come to school so that they feel good about their gender expression and identities. These lessons use inclusive language and acknowledge different identities and relationships to acknowledge all students as they develop their sexuality. Learn more about [gender identity and expression](#).

## **Students with mild to moderate learning and adaptive behaviour needs**

Many students with mild to moderate learning and adaptive behaviour needs are likely attending sexuality education classes with their peers in their health or CALM classes. However, they may benefit from receiving additional sexuality education as part of specialized classes such as Paced Learning Programs (PLP), Assisted Learning Programs (ALP), Knowledge & Employability (K & E) or unique settings. Social interactions and discussions in group settings are important to healthy development and integrating health into daily living skills. Students with mild to moderate learning and adaptive behaviour needs often need additional support to understand and integrate learning. The teacher and supporting staff can use this resource to guide that support using specific scripts, strategies, and activities to supplement the regular classroom education. There is a possibility that individual students may benefit from a one-on-one therapeutic approach to teach about specific topics.

## **Students with moderate learning and adaptive behaviour needs**

Students with moderate learning and adaptive needs will benefit from receiving separate sexuality education from a teacher specifically trained in complex and diverse learning as part of classes such as Complex Needs, ACCESS, or ALP. Students may benefit from a one-on-one therapeutic approach to sexuality education and/or a group education approach.

## **Students with moderate to severe learning and adaptive behaviour needs**

Students with moderate to severe learning and adaptive behaviour needs will benefit most from a one-on-one therapeutic approach to sexuality education on topics the teacher deems relevant. Although these lessons aren't specifically designed for use with students with severe needs, at the teacher's discretion, students may also benefit from the social aspect of group sexuality education, and these lessons contain information that can help with that.

## **Scope and Sequence**

These lessons reflect the sexuality outcomes of the Alberta curriculum, but with lesson goals addressing the learning and practical needs of students with DA. These lessons are by topic, not grade level, to meet the diverse cognitive needs of students. Teachers are encouraged to use their professional judgment to determine the most appropriate topics for their students. Some teachers will touch on each topic every year; others may teach specific topics for specific grades. It is possible to cover all appropriate topics when planned and spaced out over the school year. It may be useful for teachers to consider what is taught to the mainstream peers of the same grade.

Below is a suggested outline to help you choose which lessons to use with your group.

This is a suggested approach; every group is different and may require a review of topics from earlier grades/ages e.g., some students in a senior high class may need a hygiene refresher lesson.

Lesson	Mild to Moderate Learning Needs			Moderate Learning Needs		
	Grade			Grade		
	4-6	7-9	10-12	4-6	7-9	10-12
Understanding my Body	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	✓
Puberty	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	✓
Hygiene	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	✓
Private & Public	✓	✓	○	✓	✓	✓
Boundaries, Personal Space & Consent	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Being a Good Friend	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Healthy Dating Relationships		✓	✓		○	✓
Reproduction, Pregnancy & Birth		✓	✓		○	✓
Decision Making		✓	✓		○	✓
Safer Sex		○	✓		○	✓

✓ = likely a good fit

○ = Use professional discretion, consider:

- the need for review
- whether topic has been missed for some students
- if student need has arisen etc.

## Tips for Teaching

Teachers play an important role in supporting the comprehensive sexuality education of their students with differing abilities. The following tips may help you do this effectively.

- Remember that you are well placed to teach this topic because:
  - You have relationships with your students.
  - You understand and can respond to their learning needs.
  - You can take advantage of emergent teachable moments.
  - You can model healthy boundaries with students and staff.

- Find out what students have already learned about in school or at home. Avoid assuming they have no knowledge about sexuality. Regardless of ability, youth watch siblings, family and friends and pick up on media messaging.
- Ensure that [group agreements](#), also known as ground rules, are established before starting your lessons. Sexual health education occurs most effectively in a classroom where there is a mutual feeling of trust, safety, and comfort.
- Understand that students need information and skills that align with their chronological age. Avoid assuming that lower developmental and/or cognitive age determines content. A teen with differing abilities needs all the same information about puberty, sexual decision-making, and consent as any other teen.
- Avoid infantilizing and accept that, although they may be on a non-typical developmental path, your students are growing up. Skills for healthy sexuality and relationships are life skills.
- Teach sexuality in a way that is accessible to meet student developmental needs. Use the lessons as a content guide then adapt methods to your students' needs. This includes using plain, simple, accurate and objective language along with activity types and strategies that work best for your students. You may need to consider how students can use communication devices, ASL interpreters or translators and this may require updating vocabulary and concepts.
- Review, repeat, and revisit key concepts throughout the school year. Students may tell you that this is a review for them, that they have covered the content, but students require a review to help clarify key concepts and adapt the information as they grow and change. A student may not be interested in dating in grade 8, but repeating content about relationships, dating and consent in grade 11 could be more of a fit for them.
- When possible, use hands-on approaches and develop social stories and routines that can be integrated into students' lives. Use simple role plays and scenarios to practice and solve problems. Some of the lessons use videos as another way to demonstrate concepts. Consider slowing the speed of videos and enabling closed captioning to improve accessibility.
- Allow students to talk about topics and situations that may be new to them. For example:
  - Talk about dating - it might not be their current reality but it lays the foundations for future healthy, happy relationships.
  - Talk about social media - even if they do not have a device themselves, many students have access to social media through friends and siblings.
- Reinforce that growing up and changing can be fun! Recognize individual needs and celebrate individual strengths and challenges.
- Challenge the ableist myths and stereotypes that have been perpetuated about people with differing abilities that don't allow them to have healthy relationships and healthy sexuality. Many students are excited to learn about feelings, emotions, and sexuality.
- Remember that, as with all students, adolescence is a time of personal, relationship, identity, and values development for youth with differing abilities.



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