

Comprehensive Sexual Health Education (CSHE) for Students with Disabilities: Adaptations, Tools, & Tips

Each student is different and has unique needs. Learning as much as possible about each young person is key, including learning about their family, cultural traditions, disabilities, and other identities.

Whether or not they are diagnosed or disclosed, educators can assume that every classroom has students with disabilities. Therefore, you can combine techniques from the sections below and rely on what you know about your students to determine the most effective path forward. When in doubt, trust your students as the experts of what they need to succeed!

For all students with disabilities:

- **Use the power of choice.** Allow students to assert their independence. Students with disabilities may not have full personal agency; prioritizing student decision making will empower your class. Ask students to contribute to group agreements, encourage participation, and focus on teaching students the power of saying “no.”
- **Address boundaries and limits.** Learning to set boundaries and respect others’ boundaries are critical for all students, including those with disabilities. Use role play and interactive exercises when feasible.
- **Keep discussions engaging and interactive.** Find ways to pique students’ interest and make learning about sexual health exciting.
- **Use concrete examples.** Abstract concepts can be difficult to comprehend. Use concrete examples that are relevant to students.
- **Reinforce learning and core concepts.** Add to your students’ knowledge throughout the year and repeat the basics to ensure student comfort with core concepts.
- **Provide multiple means of engagement.** Optimize students’ autonomy, minimize distraction, foster collaboration where possible, and tailor instruction to meet students where they are.
- **Provide multiple means of representation.** Offer diverse ways of displaying information and include auditory and visual alternatives such as touch and taste. Clarify symbols and vocabulary.
- **Provide multiple means of action and expression.** Vary the methods you use for student engagement. Incorporate movement as a response method, as students are able, and use multiple media methods for communication. Tailor the ways you monitor progress to fit the way in which students process information and make choices.

For students with physical disabilities:

- **Use inclusive storytelling.** Provide examples of people with similar disabilities who have loving, satisfying, and intimate relationships to help students feel seen. Include representative pop culture/social media in instruction.

- **Broaden your definition of sexual content to any intimate touch.** Certain ways of having sex may be inaccessible to students, depending on the nature of their disability. Widen your definition of sex to any touch that feels intimate, arousing, and/or personal/private. Do not assume that students are not sexually active or do not desire intimacy.

For students with intellectual disabilities:

- **Use visual strategies if the learner is not blind/does not have low vision.** People with intellectual disabilities are often visual learners. In addition, students with intellectual disabilities may have difficulty thinking abstractly. Models, dolls, pictures, videos, photos, role playing, or other concrete techniques can help to facilitate understanding.
 - Anatomically correct dolls can support understanding of body differences.
 - Role play may be useful when discussing relationship skills, saying no, and/or communicating the difference between private and public places.
- **Use simplified language and an appropriate pace.** Sexuality can be a difficult topic to teach. When a topic is uncomfortable, it is common to unconsciously speak faster, use big words, or insert analogies. Try to use language that makes sense to your students and slow down. Give them time to process what you are teaching.
- **Use developmental age to adapt information.** Use your students' level of understanding to inform your communication style.
- **Use chronological age to determine boundaries and societal expectations for behavior.** Many people cannot distinguish between chronological and developmental age and expect students to act socially appropriately based on their chronological age. Use chronological age to define expected social behaviors.

Before teaching, review the images and language used in the curriculum. Even if the curriculum is designed for students with disabilities, it often has visual representations that are not inclusive. In addition, curricular language is often ableist. If you need to make language more inclusive, here are some substitutions you can try. Always ask how your students how they identify!

Instead of...	Try this
"See," "view," "watch"	"Access," "Check," "Learn about," "Experience," "Catch up on," "Explore"
"Listen," "Ears on," "Listen up"	"Focus in," "Pay attention"
"Able-bodied"	"Non-disabled," "Does not have a disability"
"Afflicted with," "suffers from," "living with"	"Has"
"Harelip"	"Cleft palate"
"Dwarf"	"Little person," "someone with dwarfism"
"Wheelchair-bound"	"Someone who uses a wheelchair," "wheelchair user"

Resources

- Identity-First v. Person-First Language:
 - [AskEARN](#)
 - [Autistic Advocacy](#)
 - [Language Matters: Combatting Stigma Through Adjusted Language](#)
 - [The Body is Not an Apology](#)
- CSHE-Specific Resources:
 - [Crippling up Sex with Eva](#)
 - Eyes Open Iowa's [Guide for Health Educators](#)
 - [Pleasurable](#)
 - [Q&A/Op-Ed with Madison Lawson](#)
 - [SIECUS's CSHE and Disability Call to Action](#)
 - Teen Vogue, [Disabled People Need Sex Ed Too](#)
- Guides:
 - [Disability-inclusive language guide](#)
 - [Universal learning guidelines for ability equity](#)
- Videos:
 - [Amaze CSHE and Disability Video](#)
 - [Consent and Sex Ed for People with I/DD Video](#)
 - [Sex Ed for People with I/DD Video](#)
- Inclusive Visuals:
 - [Disability Visuals](#)
 - [Representation on TV](#)
- Fact sheets and resource lists:
 - [Advocates for Youth](#)
 - [Parent Center](#)
 - [RespectAbility](#)
 - [Talking to Children about Disability](#)
- Book Lists:
 - [Spice Institute's Book List](#)
 - University of Illinois's [Disability Resources and Educational Services](#)
- Resources for Specific Disabilities:
 - Students with ASD (autism spectrum disorder):
 - [Psychology Today](#): Sex, Asperger's, and Autism
 - [Raising Children](#): Sexuality and Sexual Development: Autistic Teenagers
 - [US News](#): New Study Examines Sexuality of People with Autism
 - Students with Deafblindness:
 - [Introduction to Sexuality Education for Individuals Who Are Deaf-Blind and Significantly Developmentally Delayed](#)
 - [Video: Sexuality Education for the Student with Deafblindness](#)

- Students with a brain injury:
 - [Video: Maturing Sexually as an Adolescent with a Brain Injury](#)
- Students with spinal cord injury (Content Warning: these articles are not sexuality/gender inclusive):
 - [Sexual Function for Women after Spinal Cord Injury](#)
 - [Sexual Function for Men after Spinal Cord Injury](#)