

*Teaching Sexual Health and Consent to Children and Young Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD)* is a series of two guides (one for teachers and school staff, and another for sexual health educators) developed by the North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault to support our goal of preventing sexual violence among children and youth.

### Who is this guide for?

This guide is for anyone who teaches sexual health, consent, or relationship skills to children and youth.

### What is an intellectual disability (ID)?

Intellectual disability is a disability characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior, which covers many everyday social and practical skills. This disability originates before the age of 22 ([aidd.org](http://aidd.org)).

### What is a developmental disability (DD)?

DD means someone has limitations in three or more of the following areas: self-care, language, movement, self-direction, capacity for independent living, or economic self-sufficiency. The onset of DD is before age 22 and often includes intellectual disability. Examples are; autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Down syndrome, fragile X syndrome, cerebral palsy, or spina bifida. In North Carolina, DD includes disability caused by a traumatic brain injury at any age.

# Teaching Sexual Consent to Children and Young Adults with I/DD

For Sexual Health Educators

It’s important to note that every person’s experience of disability is unique, and even within these definitions, there is a wide range of personal experiences. ID is considered a type of DD. People with cognitive disabilities may or may not have overlapping physical disabilities, and vice versa. For example, cerebral palsy is included in types of DD, but does not lead to any intellectual or cognitive impairment, as defined in the considerations for ID.

This toolkit was written for the NC Coalition Against Sexual Assault by Anna Wallin, MPH. Special thanks to members of the Sexual Violence Prevention Advisory Committee (SVPAC) K-12 Workgroup for editorial input: Morgan Parlier, Margaret DeRamus, Lauren Howard, Susanne Schmal, Lillian Pinto, Debbie Hamlin-Aggrey and Sol Pederson.

“People with disabilities are sexual and express their sexuality in ways that are as diverse as everyone else”  
- Advocates for Youth

*See our companion resource on Teaching Sexual Consent to Children and Young Adults with I/DD for teachers and school staff at [nccasa.org](http://nccasa.org)*



## INTRODUCTION

Dear Health Educator,

Your role in your community is crucial to increasing health and safety for everyone, especially youth. Youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) have historically been left out of settings where sexual education is taking place due to inaccurate assumptions about their experiences of puberty, sexuality, and romantic interests. This means they haven't been able to access and use critical information about their bodies, relationships, and consent that will keep them safe and improve their health. As a sexual health educator, you are uniquely positioned to partner with others in your community, including schools, parents, and I/DD specialists to enhance access to resources for these youth. This document includes basic systems-level concepts explaining why teaching sexual health to youth with I/DD is important and different ways to approach increasing inclusivity. [For a deeper dive into this topic, review this must-see primer from Advocates for Youth.](#)

As a reminder: while we refer to students in exceptional education settings throughout this document, we do not assume that all students with unique learning needs will be in exceptional education environments, or will have an I/DD diagnosis, or that all students with I/DD will be in exceptional education classrooms. Due to the wide range of neurodiversity among student populations, many of the needs and practices described in this toolkit and the linked resources (making the implicit explicit, breaking concepts down into simple pieces, not assuming that all social cues are readily understood by students, etc.) may be useful in all sexual and relationship health instruction. Increasing your competence in working with students with a diversity of learning needs will make you a better educator in all your work!



# Teaching Sexual Consent to Children and Young Adults with I/DD

For Sexual Health Educators

## How We Perceive Disability is Important

Disability isn't innate to the person; the experience of disability is created by environments and cultures that fail to serve everyone equally (referred to as the "social model of disability"). We all hold unconscious stereotypes and beliefs about people with disabilities that affect the way we interact with them. This can impact their experiences and ultimately their well-being on a broader level. Learning more about disability justice and the experiences of those who live with disabilities is an important parallel effort to learning about sexuality and sexual health education for people with I/DD. [Read this 2021 Report entitled Access, Autonomy, and Dignity: Comprehensive Sexuality Education for People with Disabilities](#), by The National Partnership for Women and Families and ASAN; the Autistic Self Advocacy Network.

## Prevention Works

In order to protect kids and offer them opportunities to develop in healthy ways, we have to be proactive, not reactive. Society-wide problems like sexual violence don't go away overnight, but we can decrease their prevalence by working to change cultural systems and the ways we interact in the community. Like many health issues, once we recognize it as a problem, it is usually very entrenched, and more difficult to heal than if we had just worked to prevent it in the first place. Sexual health education is prevention. Healthy relationship and consent education is prevention. When we prioritize giving all people skills and knowledge to empower them to make their own health decisions, we create a generation that is healthy and free of violence. And that generation will in turn have the ability to keep their children's generation healthy and safe. Let's prevent sexual violence together.

The materials in this Guide shall not be altered or redistributed without prior, written approval from North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault. This guide may be posted, promoted, or otherwise highlighted without alterations. If citing, please use suggested citation: Wallin, A., 2022. Teaching Sexual Health and Consent to Children and Young Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), NC Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Raleigh, NC.

### VALUES WE CAN ALL AGREE ON

Some people worry that certain values are being taught in a sexual health education class. We encourage you to **let parents know that their own family's particular culture and values are important, and are not being replaced by a health curriculum.** Medically accurate information is provided so students are able to make informed decisions.

Some values implicit in the study of sexual health and healthy relationships:

- It is important to respect others by treating them well and listening to them
- It is important to get consent from anyone before being sexual
- It is important to be responsible in a romantic relationship
- Relationships should be equal and positive without violence or abuse
- Sex should be safe and pleasurable for all

### YOUTH WITH I/DD ARE OUR COMMUNITY MEMBERS

In 2016, 6 million youth ages 6-21 were served by the U.S. Special education system. The prevalence of any developmental disability has increased from 12.8% in 2006-2008 to 15% in 2016. In 2018, an estimated 5.4% of non-institutionalized youth ages 5-15 in the United States reported a disability (including physical), and 6.3% of people ages 16-20 reported a disability. (Erickson) That's one out of less than 20 kids. And, according to the National Survey of Children's Health, 1 in 5 children have a special healthcare need (NCDHHS). Given these statistics, **it's probable that at least one child in a standard-size classroom has a visible or invisible disability that may or may not be diagnosed.**

The materials in this Guide shall not be altered or redistributed without prior, written approval from North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault. This guide may be posted, promoted, or otherwise highlighted without alterations. If citing, please use suggested citation: Wallin, A., 2022. Teaching Sexual Health and Consent to Children and Young Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), NC Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Raleigh, NC.

- All adults can model consent across school culture - this teaches autonomy and healthy communication by example
- Use anonymous question boxes in home and schools
- Use correct terminology but don't correct students who use slang or colloquial terms
- Check back in with students in multiple ways to ask if they understood what was just discussed

### I/DD and Experiences of Sexual Abuse

A 2015 study found that between 40-70% of girls with disabilities experience sexual abuse before they turn 18, and up to 30% of boys with disabilities are at risk of sexual abuse during that period. (Wilczynski) Additionally, **it has been demonstrated that receiving ineffective sex education, or no sex education at all, is a correlating factor in the sexual abuse of youth with disabilities (YWD).** (Advocates for Youth) This may be because they are less likely to be taught about bodily autonomy, how to recognize abuse, or know how to tell someone if they have been abused. A 2016 study found that adults with I/DD identified lack of access to sexual health education as a barrier to their sexual development and that caregiver knowledge of the need for education on these topics is low. (Saxe) **All people need this information and skill-building opportunity presented in an accessible way, regardless of ability or an individual diagnosis.**

The materials in this Guide shall not be altered or redistributed without prior, written approval from North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault. This guide may be posted, promoted, or otherwise highlighted without alterations. If citing, please use suggested citation: Wallin, A., 2022. Teaching Sexual Health and Consent to Children and Young Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), NC Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Raleigh, NC.

### WAYS YOU CAN COLLABORATE TO SUPPORT SEXUAL HEALTH EDUCATION EFFORTS FOR YOUTH WITH I/DD

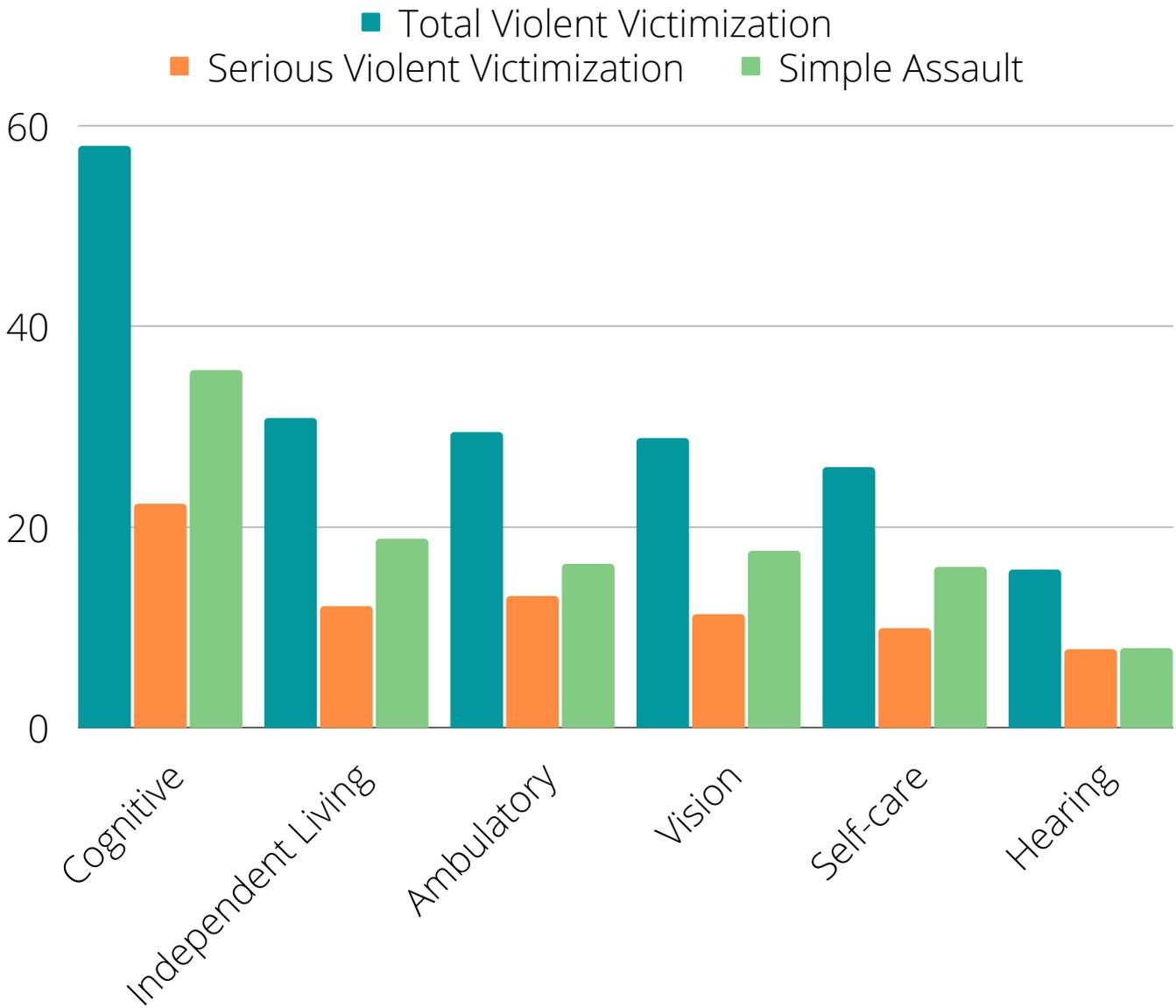
- **Attend trainings, conferences, and other professional development opportunities** to strengthen your understanding of youth with I/DD and their unique needs. **At least some of these should highlight the work of self-advocates**, as self-advocates often bring perspectives that parents or educators may be lacking.
- **Partner with local organizations that serve youth with I/DD** to coordinate agency-wide training for your rape crisis center or other sexual health organization to ensure I/DD competence in policy, prevention, and response.
- **Join an advisory council at a school or organization that serves youth in your community.** Advocate for inclusion of sexual health education for youth with I/DD.
- **Provide training to local exceptional education teachers, school administrators, and specialized instructional support staff**, e.g., school nurses, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and Health and Physical Education teachers.
- **Partner with local ECAC teachers and district curriculum specialists** to learn more about how you can "individualize" content or adapt it for your specific school district/specific student needs.
  - For example - **different school districts may use different communication symbols, terminology or graphics**, and using the same symbols in your sex ed facilitation may increase student learning
- **Partner on program delivery in non-school settings** like after-school programs, youth summer programs, or partnerships with local nonprofits that work with families.
- **Integrate universal design for learning (UDL) into your existing curriculum** to enhance accessibility for students with disabilities.
  - 5 Examples of UDL
- **Use a tailor-made curriculum specifically designed for students with I/DD.**
  - It may be appropriate to use a curriculum developed with students with I/DD in mind for a class that includes neurotypical students as well, as all the same topics are appropriate for everyone.
- **Advocate for additional positions in your agency** to be dedicated to health education specifically for students with I/DD.

The materials in this Guide shall not be altered or redistributed without prior, written approval from North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault. This guide may be posted, promoted, or otherwise highlighted without alterations. If citing, please use suggested citation: Wallin, A., 2022. Teaching Sexual Health and Consent to Children and Young Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), NC Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Raleigh, NC.

# Teaching Sexual Consent to Children and Young Adults with I/DD

For Sexual Health Educators

As you can see in the graph below, people with cognitive disabilities are much more likely to report being a victim of violent crime, including sexual assault than people with other types of disabilities (OVC). Between 2011-2015, almost **60/1000 individuals ( 5.79%)** 12 or older with a cognitive disability reported being a victim of a violent crime.



The materials in this Guide shall not be altered or redistributed without prior, written approval from North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault. This guide may be posted, promoted, or otherwise highlighted without alterations. If citing, please use suggested citation: Wallin, A., 2022. Teaching Sexual Health and Consent to Children and Young Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), NC Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Raleigh, NC.

In addition to being at increased risk of victimization, **people with intellectual or developmental disabilities may be at risk of perpetrating or being accused of perpetrating sexual abuse or harassment.** Possible reasons may include increased difficulty understanding non-verbal communication, complex social behavioral cues, concepts of privacy, and boundaries that seem implicit throughout the neurotypical culture. People with I/DD may need an explicit or specialized explanation of these concepts in order to fully understand things that neurotypical youth might think are common knowledge.

Access to plain-language education about concepts foundational to consent and healthy relationships is a right that all people should have. **Sexual health and consent education for all young people is a society-level prevention tool that should be administered equitably across the whole population,** regardless of demographic, in order to fully prevent sexual violence and abuse. See [these resources](#) from the National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth that focuses on the sexual behavior of children with I/DD.

**You may want to use the power and control wheel to illustrate types of power imbalances in different types of exploitation.**

[Power and control wheel for people with disabilities in romantic partnerships](#)

[Power and control wheel for people with disabilities and their caregivers](#)

#### Remember:

- Some disabilities are visible, and some are invisible.
  - Many people have disabilities that affect their lives in ways we can't automatically tell just by looking at them.
    - Examples of invisible disabilities might be autism/asperger's, depression, chronic health conditions.
  - They may or may not choose to disclose their disability to others depending on the situation and how safe it feels.
  - People with visible disabilities cannot choose whether or not to disclose and have less control over discrimination and bias towards them.
    - Examples of visible disabilities might be cerebral palsy or down syndrome

**Integrate universal design for learning (UDL) into your existing curriculum to enhance accessibility for students with disabilities.**

When we use universal design to ensure materials will be accessible, it makes the content more useful for everyone, including neurotypical students. UD is a way of presenting information and designing materials that makes learning more accessible for everyone. One example is repetition, such as posting learning goals visually on the wall somewhere in the room, and also saying the goals verbally every morning during circle time. Everyone can benefit from a streamlined and simplified learning environment, regardless of the presence or absence of disability.

There is a vast difference in the experience and support needed among different students with I/DD. Some may just have a physical disability, some may have varying levels of understanding. Many will communicate differently, some may have co-occurring disabilities that affect vision, hearing, or speech. It is important to ask students what works for them in terms of learning and communication and be willing to adapt and adjust.

The materials in this Guide shall not be altered or redistributed without prior, written approval from North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault. This guide may be posted, promoted, or otherwise highlighted without alterations. If citing, please use suggested citation: Wallin, A., 2022. Teaching Sexual Health and Consent to Children and Young Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), NC Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Raleigh, NC.

### THINGS YOU CAN DO TO SUPPORT YOUTH WITH I/DD IN THEIR LEARNING ABOUT SEXUAL HEALTH

- Think about "dosage" and length of sessions, i.e. you may need to do shorter, repeated sessions over a longer period of time than you would typically do in a mainstream class/setting
- Allow students to select their favored way of learning new material (e.g., drawing, writing, or playing a game to incorporate new vocabulary work).
- Design content using a student's interests (e.g., use Minecraft, dogs, planes).
- Create materials with variable levels of difficulty, allowing students to level up or down, depending on their need for support.
- Create materials that allow students to add their own words, images, or ideas.
- Vary work tasks based on students' abilities- seek feedback from parents or teachers on how a certain student needs to learn
- Use a variety of means to present material (discussion, texts, charts, audio, video, role-playing, experiences, think-alouds).
- Use visual supports for written language.
- Allow for adjustable font and size of written materials.
- Allow for adjustable volume and speed of audio and video materials.
- Highlight key concepts.
- Make sure you're facing the class, or as many people as possible when speaking. This helps people with various audio, visual, and cognitive differences.
- Use social stories (visual examples of real-life events, and how to handle it-looks similar to a comic book).
- Utilize more role-playing and real-life scenarios to explain concepts.
- Provide more opportunities to practice decision-making.
- Use a 5-point scale to explain many concepts, from emotions to boundary-crossing <https://www.5pointscale.com/>

**Remember: Don't make assumptions about who knows what. Regardless of ability status, children of similar ages can have a wide range of development and understanding of various topics.**

You will want to **make the implicit explicit!** This may mean explicitly describing the concepts of **“public” and “private”**. Many people assume these differences are understood passively, or by observing others socially. **It's important to explain what these words mean and give examples** (ex: “private body parts are the ones covered by your bathing suit - no one is allowed to touch these without permission; in public spaces, people can see everything you do, so private activities (like sex or masturbation) should be done in private spaces like in your home, in your own bedroom, when you are alone”).

Another example of making the implicit explicit is an example used in the Elevatus curriculum, which offers explicit guidance on **how to receive a “no” or uninterested response** from an invitation to a date or touch. In this activity, if someone says they “are busy” when you ask them out, it often means that they are not interested. Explain that there is a chance they really are busy, and you could ask to clarify if they would like to choose a different time or pick a different activity. But if they say no again, they are probably not interested, and it is not polite to continue asking them out. By exploring concepts from existing curricula to teach relationship and sexual health skills to people with a diversity of intellectual and developmental abilities, you will learn strategies for breaking concepts down into accessible lessons and activities.

**Remember: Be aware not to project your assumption of hardship or burden onto people with disabilities. Avoid saying things like “you are so strong to deal with this” or “you are a hero”** when referring to their life or living as a person with disabilities. This can be received as condescending, and it's important to recognize that people do what they need to so they can survive and thrive in their lives, not because they are exceptional or different.

The materials in this Guide shall not be altered or redistributed without prior, written approval from North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault. This guide may be posted, promoted, or otherwise highlighted without alterations. If citing, please use suggested citation: Wallin, A., 2022. Teaching Sexual Health and Consent to Children and Young Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), NC Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Raleigh, NC.

### Resources

- [Sexual Health Education](#) online videos and resources handout with more links
- Advocates for Youth. [Sexual Health Education for Young People with Disabilities: Research and Resources for Educators](#). 2016.
- SIECUS: [Comprehensive Sex Education for Youth with Disabilities](#)
- [Sex Ed for People with IDD videos](#) from National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) and Rooted in Rights, with support from the WITH Foundation.
- NESCA Webinar on [How to Talk to Youth with I/DD about Sexual Health](#)
- [Supporting Success in Relationships for Teens with Autism](#)
- [Sex Education for Physically, Emotionally, and Mentally Challenged Youth](#)
- [OAR Sex Ed for Self Advocates Self-paced Curriculum Website](#) for people ages 15 and up with Autism Spectrum Disorder
- [In Their Own Words: Guidelines for Supporting the Sexual Health of Young People Experiencing Intellectual And Developmental Disabilities](#)
- [Elevatus Training](#): Offering evidence and trauma-informed curriculum, with on/offline training to help professionals, educators, self-advocates and parents skillfully and confidently navigate the topic of sexuality and healthy relationships.
- [Sex Talk for Self Advocates](#) video series
- [Sexuality For All Abilities](#) from Mad Hatter Wellness
- [Respect Ability](#)
- [“Let’s Talk”](#) discussion guide from Planned Parenthood
- [The Incredible 5-point Scale](#)
- [“A 5 is against the law!”](#)- teaching social boundaries with a 5 point scale
- [Free Body Safety and Communication Cards](#)

### Curriculum Examples

- [Teen Talk: Adapted for All Abilities](#)
- [FLASH](#)- Contains 28 lessons for a self-contained special ed classroom for high school or middle school
- [Intimate Relationships and Sexual Health from AAPC](#) (Autism Spectrum Specific)
  - 11 sessions, includes media literacy, language/descriptions specific to I/DD (includes lessons about public/private concepts and how to recognize and avoid illegal behaviors)
  - Could be used in a mixed class with non-autistic youth as well
- [Sexuality Across the Lifespan for Children and Adolescents with I/DD](#)
  - [En Español](#) (LA SEXUALIDAD A LO LARGO DEL TRANCURSO DE LA VIDA)

The materials in this Guide shall not be altered or redistributed without prior, written approval from North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault. This guide may be posted, promoted, or otherwise highlighted without alterations. If citing, please use suggested citation: Wallin, A., 2022. Teaching Sexual Health and Consent to Children and Young Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), NC Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Raleigh, NC.

## CURRICULUM

*All curriculum should be de-stigmatizing, body-positive, and empowering.*

### Content Elements That Should Be Included In Comprehensive Sexual Health Curriculum:

#### Sexuality

- Sexual orientation and gender identity
  - Must be 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusive
- Sexual practice
  - What is sex?
    - What activities constitute sexual practice
    - Masturbation
    - Why do people have sex?
  - Safer sex practices and abstinence
    - Birth control
    - Information about Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)
  - Relationships
    - Romance/crushes/physical attraction
    - How is friendship different from romantic relationships?
    - Healthy and unhealthy behaviors and dynamics
      - Types of abuse
        - Emotional, physical, psychological, social, sexual
      - Boundaries
      - Consent
        - Verbal and non-verbal communication about consent
        - Saying "no" and saying "yes"
        - Hearing and accepting "no" respectfully
        - Changing your mind -- it's okay!
      - Touching
      - Healthy Communication

The materials in this Guide shall not be altered or redistributed without prior, written approval from North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault. This guide may be posted, promoted, or otherwise highlighted without alterations. If citing, please use suggested citation: Wallin, A., 2022. Teaching Sexual Health and Consent to Children and Young Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), NC Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Raleigh, NC.

### Bodies

- Teaching accurate names and functions of body parts
  - Including sexual and reproductive organs: genitalia and internal sexual organs.

### Hygiene

- Teaching the necessity and practice of hygiene
  - Avoiding physical illness/infection
  - The social side of hygiene

### Puberty

- Related to bodies, sexuality, and hygiene education
- Covers physiological development, hormone functioning, mental, emotional, and physical changes associated with puberty
- Explains menstruation, erections, and related common experiences and how to manage them
  - Should be de-stigmatizing, body-positive, and empowering

### Private/Public Concepts

- Explain how the above topics relate to privacy
- Describe which behaviors related to bodies and sexuality are for public social display, and which are for private social or personal engagement

### Internet and social media literacy and safety

The materials in this Guide shall not be altered or redistributed without prior, written approval from North Carolina Coalition Against Sexual Assault. This guide may be posted, promoted, or otherwise highlighted without alterations. If citing, please use suggested citation: Wallin, A., 2022. Teaching Sexual Health and Consent to Children and Young Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD), NC Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Raleigh, NC.