



What's the Big IDEA? # 25

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law ensuring services to children with disabilities throughout the nation. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. This series is designed to offer information about IDEA as amended in 2004. Each fact sheet will focus on a different aspect of IDEA.

Journey to Adulthood: Sexuality

Adapted from a curriculum by the National Family Advocacy Support and Training (FAST) Project, a PACER Center Project.

Growing up is hard to do! There are incredible physical and emotional changes that happen during puberty. While typically developing children may learn to adapt to these changes through observation and by trial and error, our youth with special needs may require a more structured approach. Often, families must prepare for these changes in a very different way than they do for their typically developing children. For example, puberty often begins earlier and lasts longer for children with special needs than for typically developing children. This means that a child with special needs may begin puberty as early as age eight.

Why is this important to know?

You may need to begin educating your child about puberty sooner than you thought you would. Giving your child information will help prepare him or her to understand the changes he or she will experience. This will make the transition to adulthood less frightening. Teaching your child personal care and social skills will help him or her to become more independent.

Information and skill development are powerful tools a child can use to keep safe from abuse. Tragically, children with disabilities are much more likely to be sexually abused than typically developing children. Some reasons for this shocking statistic are that children with special needs often have multiple caregivers or providers. Frequently, they are dependent on others for their physical needs. In addition, they are often accustomed to having their bodies touched by adults. Usually the abuse happens by someone the child knows and trusts.

"People at the greatest risk for exploitation are those who are insulated, protected, or sheltered from what could happen. Skill development and information are powerful tools."

*Terri Couwenhoven, 2007
Mom and Sexuality Educator*

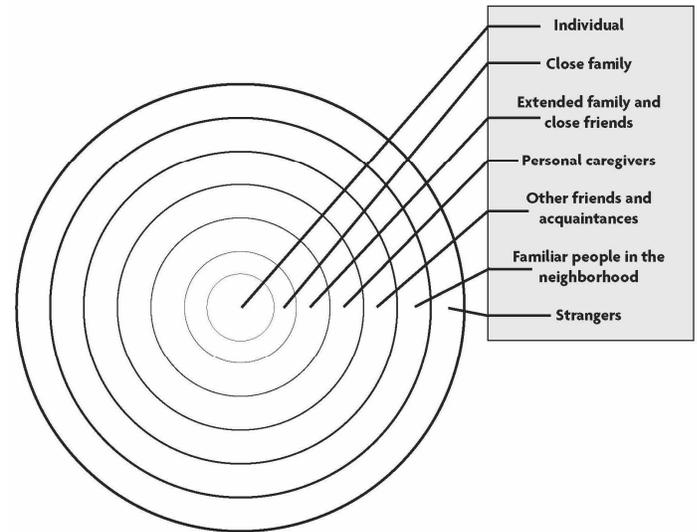
What should parents do?

- Teach your children the appropriate names for body parts and that their body is private and belongs to them. They can decide who can touch it.
- Teach your children personal boundaries and advocacy skills.
- Teach your children that everyone has the right to say "no" when uncomfortable, even if the action comes from a family member, a trusted professional, a friend, etc.
- Teach your children it is never their fault if someone touches them inappropriately.

Children with disabilities may have difficulty with socially appropriate behavior. They may not realize that their behavior or others' behavior is inappropriate unless this is explained to them in a way they can understand. A boundaries circle chart is a visual way to help children who struggle with the concept of personal space and relationship boundaries. This circle shows the varying degrees of relationships a child encounters, from close family to strangers. Explain that physical contact becomes less and less appropriate with each successive ring on the chart. For instance, you could discuss at which level it is appropriate to hug someone.

Social skills, personal hygiene, and grooming habits may need to be taught more directly. You will want to be aware that it may take your child a long time to acquire these skills.

Even if they seem very young, either mentally or physically, children with disabilities who are going through puberty often experience the same consequences of increased hormone levels as their typically developing peers. It is natural for them to experience the same urges, needs, and desires as anyone, so it is important to teach them what is appropriate and what is not. Self-touching can be a difficult subject, but children need to learn that there are public and private places, and appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, especially in public.



Learning socially appropriate behavior will help your child have a successful school experience. You may want to request that this area be addressed in your child's IEP. If so, you will want to share your specific concerns and work with the IEP team to come up with solutions. For example, you may worry about your child hugging every child and adult he or she meets. This may have been cute when your son or daughter was little. As your child matures, though, you and the school need to work together to teach personal boundaries. When is it ok to hug someone? Who is it ok to hug? A child who doesn't learn these boundaries may have his or her actions misinterpreted. Sexual harassment charges could even be filed against a child who simply hasn't learned about personal boundaries. The team should develop a plan that builds on your child's strengths and addresses his or her needs. A consistent, structured approach that is followed at home and school is the most effective way for your child to learn appropriate social skills.

Puberty is a difficult time for most children. For those with special needs, the journey can look different and be much more challenging. It's important for you to be prepared and consider in advance how to handle the changes that will occur. When it's time to discuss these topics with your children:

- Be an ask-able parent,
- Be an open-minded parent,
- Be an informed parent.

"What's the Big IDEA?" fact sheets are developed by Parents Reaching Out under a grant from the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education. Views expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the federal government.