

# GET THE GO AHEAD

## Getting It Right

How workers can support Disabled people's  
consent and sexual & reproductive rights



This work was created on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people. We affirm that their sovereignty was never ceded and recognise that effects of colonisation are ongoing. We express our commitment to working alongside First Nations people for truth, treaty, and reconciliation.

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#### SPECIAL THANKS

This zine was written by a group of Disabled young people and represents their reflections and advice

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Nothing About Us Without Us



# GET THE GO AHEAD

Get the Go-Ahead has been driven by a codesign group of Disabled young people.

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# 10 Quick Tips for Supporting Neurodivergent Young People to Learn About Consent

By Ali Al Lawati



## Understand the Unique Challenges

Recognise that neurodivergent people may experience the world differently, including how we process social cues and understand relationships. It's important to acknowledge these differences and adapt support accordingly.



## Educate on Consent

Consent is a vital concept for all, yet it can be particularly nuanced for neurodivergent people. Offer tailored workshops that break down the concept of consent into understandable segments, using real-life scenarios to illustrate points.



## Provide Accessible Information

Ensure that all information regarding sexual health and consent is accessible. This includes using clear language, visual aids, and considering sensory sensitivities. Information should be available in various formats to cater to different learning styles.



## Promote Autonomy and Rights

Empower neurodivergent young people by promoting their autonomy and rights. Encourage self-advocacy and provide them with the tools to express their needs and boundaries.



## Address Social Cues and Interactions

Provide guidance on social cues and interactions, which can be challenging for some neurodivergent people. Role-playing and social stories can be effective tools for teaching and practising social skills. Consent is key here too: this should always be based on what the neurodivergent person themselves wants support with.



## Train Staff Adequately

Staff should be trained to understand the specific needs of neurodivergent people. They should be equipped to handle sensitive topics with empathy and without judgement.



## Collaborate with Experts

Work with healthcare professionals, educators, advocacy groups who specialise in neurodiversity, and of course neurodivergent people ourselves to develop programs and resources that are informed and effective.



## Continuous Improvement

Regularly seek feedback from neurodivergent individuals and their families to improve services and ensure that the support provided is relevant and respectful of their experiences. It's about creating an inclusive environment that recognizes the diversity of experiences and actively works to meet the needs of all individuals.



## Foster a Safe Environment

Create an environment where neurodivergent young people feel safe to ask questions and express themselves. This includes having a non-judgmental space and staff who are approachable and knowledgeable.



## Encourage Peer Support

Facilitate peer support groups where neurodivergent people can share experiences and learn from each other in a supportive setting.



# Hey Youth Workers, Let's Talk About Disability And Sex!

By Kurin

The rumours are true; Disabled young people are proud of ourselves, our relationships, our sex, our sexualities, and our expressions of all the above.

So how can you and your workplace ensure you're able to support young Disabled people in this act of self-determination?

The following is a handy, although hardly exhaustive, guide to help you as an individual, worker, or organisation support Disabled young people in talking about and pursuing everything from consent to sexual & reproductive rights.

Perhaps the easiest, and most obvious, place to start is to refer back to the rights of young people as a whole, and the key role of youth workers and those that work with young people; the goal is to support young people to make informed choices about our own lives, to empower young people to make those choices for themselves, and to advocate for those choices to be respected by those around us.

As both a young Disabled person and youth worker myself, providing genuine agency to all young people is, and should always be, the guiding force of youth workers and those that work with young people.

What genuine choice and empowerment looks like for a young Disabled person can vary from the general population however.

Through history, young Disabled people have been robbed of agency, adulthood, and personhood.

As people that work with young people, the duty thus becomes not feeding into this harmful way of thinking.

Start by letting us have genuine conversations; don't infantilise us by censoring, or deflecting, or downplaying our thoughts, feelings, and questions about sex... let us have access to the (age and place-appropriate) conversations, information, culture and even jokes that our peers are seldom denied!

Communicating about sex, sexual health, and relationships is, in a way, a two way street: make your workplace one that facilitates the opportunity for these discussions.

Having information about topics under the sex and sexual health banner openly available is the bare minimum here, but you can do more:

## Model consent

The best way to both communicate the concept of consent and encourage Disabled young people to learn about what it means for us is to clearly use it in your day-to-day life. Do you clearly ask someone what their preferred way to greet you is (is a handshake too much, or are they a huge hugger), and do you say what you prefer (maybe you're a fan of the classic bow/curtsy)?

We can model giving and receiving consent in so many areas of own lives, and it's so important to make this right clear to young people, particularly Disabled young folk, who are statistically more likely to either not know their full rights to consent or have them denied.

## Respecting boundaries

Consent is about more than sex. Disabled young people deserve the right to choose what kind of support we consent to, and to have our privacy respected by only sharing our info if we consent to that too. If a Disabled young person doesn't consent to something, how do you and your workplace uphold this decision? Do young people accessing your service have access to adequate information and supports to give informed, pressure-free consent?

The act of giving consent is often not so straightforward for young people with a lived experience of disability; fear of retaliation or loss of supports, lack of access to understandable information, influence of others usurping our autonomy can be just some of the unique pressures facing Disabled young people in giving willing and informed consent. How do you and your workplace address and combat these pressures?

## Hold space for conversations

Yes, even "those" conversations! The truth is (as it has always been and will always be) that many young people are interested in sex and all that it entails; having a disability doesn't change this fact in the slightest! If we don't hold space for these conversations with young Disabled people, it furthers the harmful infantilisation faced by Disabled folk, stops us from contributing our knowledge and experiences, and stops non-disabled folk from learning about us and our experiences too. Of course, as a worker, your consent to conversations, and safety, is important. Outside of these considerations though, you may still find yourself uncomfortable talking about certain topics with young people, or in particular with young disabled people. Ask yourself 'why?' and work to address those feelings privately while still supporting young people to make choices in our own lives.

## Model safety

This of course fits into everything discussed thus far, but there's still so much more that goes into modelling safety when communicating with young Disabled people about consent. Open discussion and use of pronouns and their meanings, ensuring queer people and relationships are celebrated, ensuring confidentiality and safety when talking about heavy topics, having supported access to sexual health tools and materials... all of that and more can make, or break, a safe-space. Have conversations in your workplace about the other ways that you can ensure safety for young disabled people in your work when it comes to sex and sexual health.

## Inclusive, relevant and accessible resources

As mentioned above, having resources is the bare minimum in communicating sexual health information to young people as a whole. But as a Disabled young person myself, it can be incredibly hard to find resources that are inclusive, relevant, and accessible to my community and their platonic, romantic, and/or sexual partners.

Do the resources you provide include diverse voices and experiences of different disabilities? Do they include information that young disabled people are looking for or need to make informed choices regarding sex & sexual health (everything from contraption, to different relationship structures, to the different ways to express sexuality and even what sex can be)? Are the resources actually accessible to people who might need plain English or Easy Read, or visual aids, or who might have visual impairments or any other access need?

Disabled young people are not a monolith. We are as varied as the world around us, and often our experiences and needs are influenced by barriers placed on us in other circumstances or in conjunction with the barriers placed on us due to our disabilities. Make sure that when you're communicating sex & sexual health information to Disabled young people you:

- make sure your resources are inclusive, and portray information that is either reflective of the Disabled young people you work with or is written by young people themselves.
- don't just portray one way of doing sex, relationships and sexual health
- ensure information can be readily accessed in languages spoken commonly in the community, or communities, you work with
- elevate Disabled voices and opinions on key issues faced by the communities you work with

So, what if you want to do all these things but have no idea where to start? My final piece of advice is to not just work for Disabled young people, but with us. Have us in visible roles as advisors, leaders, creators, consulters, co-workers, and bosses. Seek out our opinions not as an afterthought but as a given. And fairly compensate and credit us for the invaluable knowledge, talent, and impact we give.

In the meantime, make efforts to educate yourself on our experiences, our stories, and how you can strive towards allyship with Disabled young people.

Seek out those of us who have decided to share these thoughts and experiences online, through music, through essays and books, through film, and through all other facets of expression, and seek out voices that come from a diverse experience, who talk about sex, and anything that includes: gender, sexuality, sex work, pleasure, gendered violence, safety, and more.

Seek out views that challenge your worldview. And, finally, use this knowledge and positions at the table to empower young people to talk about sex and relationships in ways they're comfortable and in their friendship groups, families, and communities.

Approaching topics surrounding sex and sexual health with young Disabled people should be something that's the standard so, with the above tips, you and your workplace can now make meaningful steps towards inclusive, supportive, and helpful engagement.

Disabled young people deserve the right to sexuality, to relationships, to dignity of risk in their choices and to unbiased and informative information. We deserve equal opportunity and equal consideration, so let's make our youth spaces a place where Disabled young people's rights are ***always*** respected.





# Understanding Ableism and Consent

**Ableism refers to the oppression that Disabled people face. Ableism is systemic. We live in a society that's built around non-disabled people**

## We need to know our consent matters

For many Disabled people, we grow up having our consent ignored. Some of us are pushed to go through medical interventions aimed at 'curing' or 'normalising' us, without anyone ever asking us if that's what we want, or what we think of the potential risks or side-effects of any given surgery or medication.

*"My parents viewed a wheelchair as giving up, and they resisted it for me for years. They dragged me to appointment after appointment, trying to find the right surgery or physical therapy even when we were told the chance of it working was low. 30 years later, I love my chair. Once I finally got it, I was able to start learning how to move around the world in the way my body needed."*

**-Gemma, they/them**

*"ABA (Applied Behavioural Analysis) taught me it didn't matter if something hurt, like making eye contact or holding my hands still, an adult would demand it over and over and would take away the things I cared about until I was compliant."*

*Compliant. That's what ABA was about. Even today it's still hard sometimes to tell what I really like or notice when something is uncomfortable, because I got so used to suppressing those feelings for other people."*

**-Aaron, she/he**

Many of us need support to know that our consent will be respected, in any context. From sharing personal information about us with dozens of other staff we don't know, to making assumptions about what our goals should be and then steamrolling us or pressuring us to go along with it, there are a lot of ways health workers, social workers, support workers, and other people in similar positions of power can damage our trust and show us they don't care about our consent.

Give us time to think about decisions. Let us think and process if we need rather than demanding an answer on the spot. Tell us how we can come back to it if we change our minds. Be patient, and start with questions rather than assumptions. Share information with us and ask us

what we want.

## Trust us about our own experiences

One of the most common ableist ideas that gets spread by our society is the idea that Disabled people don't, or even can't, know what's best for ourselves. We're seen as inherently less reliable, and our words are much more likely to be dismissed and disbelieved.

When Disabled people face abuse in institutional settings, like segregated schools or group homes, especially from people in positions of authority in those settings, people often don't take us seriously. They defer to the staff, even when it's a staff member who hurt us, and assume we must have misunderstood.

We might need more time to process, or ideas explained in different ways. We might communicate differently, or rely on supports in ways you're not used to seeing. But we need you to listen to us, and take us seriously.

## Communication

There are many different ways to communicate, and every organisation should be ready to communicate with us in our language.

### Simple language, precise language

Some of us need simple language- we might find it easier to understand short sentences, plain casual language, and pictures or other visuals. Having plain English and Easy English versions of resources and documents is great.

Some of us need precise language. Context can be an access need too! We might find it easier to understand more specific terms (even if some people might call it 'jargon'), and need a lot of detail even if that means reading longer pieces.

Neither style of writing is inherently more accessible- they're accessible for different people. Having multiple versions available is the best way to be accessible to as many people as possible.

### Multiple methods of communication

Let people contact your organisation, ask questions, request or apply for support in a range of ways. Relying just on phone calls excludes people who can't hear, have a harder time processing audio, or find it difficult to speak out loud. Relying just on email or web forms excludes people who have trouble with reading, writing, or typing.

Offer both, and do what you can to make sure that both forms of communication are equally supported. If a phone call gets answered right away, but emails are only checked once a week, that's not equal access.

### Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)

AAC refers to a range of ways to communicate besides spoken language. That might mean using a text to speech app on a phone or tablet, writing things down on a device or paper, using a dedicated AAC device, or using a picture or letter board and pointing at the relevant image or word.

Some tips for supporting people who communicate with AAC

- Don't interrupt us! Let us finish our thought and express ourselves
- Check your understanding- it's okay to tell us what you think we meant and ask us if you're right
- If we're using it to communicate, don't touch it without our consent. It's our voice, it's part of us
- Never take someone's AAC device away
- AAC devices, for picture boards to dedicated apps, should have a full range of vocabulary. That includes words about gender and sexuality. It includes swear words. It includes words about sex, and about our bodies. Help advocate for us to have access to every word- it's our right, and it helps keep us safe

## Auslan

Auslan is Australian Sign Language. There are many signed languages around the world, just like there are many spoken languages, and they aren't all the same.

## Some tips to remember

- When booking an interpreter, earlier is better to make sure there's one available
- Some d/Deaf people might have preferred interpreters- if this is a one-on-one appointment or you're booking an interpreter for a specific person, it's good to ask
- If you're communicating with a d/Deaf person and using an interpreter, speak directly to the d/Deaf person, not the interpreter. Don't turn to the interpreter and say "can you tell them...", just tell the d/Deaf person directly and the interpreter will interpret
- Not all d/Deaf people know or prefer sign language. Some people might speak out loud, some people might write things down, some people might want you to write things down. Just ask, "how would you like to communicate?"



# Nothing About Us Without Us

The best way to make sure your events, services, and resources are accessible and inclusive for Disabled young people is to include us from the start!

**Hire Disabled people** in roles at every level of your organisation, from peer workers through to leadership roles and the board.

**Support projects led by Disabled people** and organisations, from conception to design to delivery to evaluation.

When you're running a project, **engage with community members**.

**Consultation, codesign, and coproduction** are three different ways of engaging with community.

The key differences are the amount of participation, decision-making and power-sharing involved.

These three approaches can blend into each other, and one project might have a mix of both



## Some tips for codesign and coproduction

- Be ready to listen- the suggestions you get might not be what you're expecting, but that's the point!
- Have a good idea of what kind of constraints or obligations you're working with, and be up front about them. It's okay to need to include something because it's part of the funding agreement, or to have organisational policies about how work gets done. Just be transparent, and work **with** Disabled people to find solutions that work for everyone
- Pay people for their time, expertise, and labour. Be upfront about how people will be paid, and offer both bank transfers and gift cards as the person chooses



