

Friendships and Dating

Adolescence is often a challenging time for young people and their families. It is a time when young people are trying to find their place in the world and when they experience physical and emotional changes. This is also a time when parents and teenagers must both make changes in their relationships. All parents want their teenagers to grow up, to be happy, and to be independent. However, parents often fear for their teenager's safety as they watch them venture into the world. This can be even more so when the teenager is someone with disability who learns in different ways and at a different rate to their peers.



Typically, teenagers alternate between wanting freedom and still needing the security of their family.

The teenage years are a time of growth and discovery concerning (among other things) personal identity, self-control, becoming interested in others' feelings, forming relationships and increased sexual awareness.

Many parents and carers worry about their teenager's ability to experience relationships safely and feel that they need to 'protect' them from information about sexual matters.

Having friendships and relationships is a very natural part of life. We all have people in our lives with whom we are friends and this helps to give us a sense of belonging. Young people with disability may need some extra help to make friends and to understand about relationships. Teenagers who don't get helpful information can find it difficult to make friends and have positive relationships. This can increase their risk of sexual exploitation. Parents and carers can minimise this risk by helping young people learn rules and rights about private body parts, sexual behaviours, and the right to say 'No' to anybody.

Understanding the complexities involved with friendships and relationships is difficult for people with intellectual disability. Helping the young person understand friendships and relationships helps them to develop.

What you can do

Friendships offer companionship and a sense of belonging that usually involves the sharing of everyday experiences and common interests. Some young people with disability can have difficulties making or keeping friends. Parents and carers often want to protect their teenagers from being hurt. It is important to give teenagers the opportunity to grow and develop socially.

The following are some ideas that can help your teenager develop and prepare for friendships and relationships:

- Thinking about the verbal and non-verbal messages you give your child and how these might affect their self-perception. Help them feel good about themselves by giving them lots of positive messages.
- Encouraging social interaction (eg at school or socially). Arrange time for social activities so teenagers have opportunities to mix with boys and girls their own age.
- Talking to your teenager about how to meet friends, what makes a good friend, and why some friendships end.
- Giving examples of the different types of friendships, for example the difference between acquaintances and close friends.
- Teaching the difference between public and private.
- Explaining your family's expectations and rules for privacy (and what is acceptable behaviour for public spaces).
- Encouraging skills like knocking on doors before entering a private space and changing clothes behind a closed door in the bedroom or bathroom.
- Encouraging your child to be as independent and responsible for their own personal care and hygiene as they can be.
- Explaining puberty, and answering questions honestly and clearly when they arise.
- Talking about your family's beliefs, culture and values in relation to sexual issues so they understand how you would prefer them to behave.
- Providing opportunities for your teenager to develop protective behaviours to keep themselves safe. The family can help them to develop and practice appropriate behaviour and problem-solving skills.

Social networking

Social networking through sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter is a very popular way of staying in touch with family, friends and people with similar interests. You can let people know what you've been doing, share pictures or videos, or play games together.

However, social networking has its risks, including stalking and bullying. Having friends is important but it's very likely that your teenager will want to 'friend' someone your family does not know. This will give strangers access to your teenager's personal information. Your teenager may receive unwanted contact, advertising or scams, or even have their identity stolen.

What you can do

Parents and carers can teach a young person to:

- turn on privacy settings and regularly check them.
- block people they don't want to talk to.
- talk to you before posting anything online, including photos and videos. Remember – you may not be able to remove them later.

- get permission from others before putting photos online.
- never put online anything that's a lie about someone, or that harasses or bullies them. Talking online is the same as real life.
- keep personal information private—including their home, work or school address and telephone number. Their friends will already know this.
- never agree to meet a new online friend in the real world unless someone else is present and the meeting is in a public place such as a shopping mall.
- never respond to a contact which makes them feel uneasy.
- report abuse, harassment, bullying or inappropriate content to the website, and if necessary the school and the police.

The Australian Government website, Cybersmart, has lots of great tips for parents and children about online safety: www.cybersmart.gov.au

Dating

Dating is a type of friendship that can change into a romantic relationship. Dating is a typical part of adolescent behaviour and culture. Different families have different expectations about their child dating, based on culture, values and beliefs. Discuss these with your child so they know what is acceptable. Use the terms and language you are comfortable with. Some things you could talk about are:

- What is the difference between a friend and a boyfriend or girlfriend?
- When are people ready to date?
- How do you feel when you like someone? How do you feel when you love someone? How is this different?
- What is appropriate behaviour with someone you like? What is not appropriate behaviour?
- If you are asked out on a date, what should you do?
- What can you do when you are on a date?
- What can you talk about when you are on a date?

SHine SA's booklet *Friendships and Dating - Information about relationships for parents, carers and young people with a disability* has more information you can use to discuss various types of relationships with your child:

www.shinesa.org.au/go/working-with-communities/disability-community

When your child is ready to date

When your child is ready to date, talk to them and teach them about:

- Getting ready for a date (eg have a shower, use deodorant, brush teeth)
- Acting respectfully and expecting the same. Make sure your child knows their right to say "No" to anything that they do not like or are unhappy about. Consider safety precautions such as mobile phones, protective behaviours etc.
- Keeping you informed about where they will be and what time they will be home.

Sexual relationships

Not all parents are comfortable with talking about sexual relationships and sexual health with their child. However, it is hard for the young person to make safe choices if they are not fully informed.

It is important for young people to know the facts. Consider your child's developmental level when you start talking about sexual relationships. What is their understanding of sexuality, and of sexual development? Provide information on the physical aspects of sexual relationships, on safe sex and contraception, and provide opportunities for them to develop protective behaviours.

It is important to know what information the school is providing so that you know what is being taught and the messages you want to reinforce with your child.

Another issue that may emerge for young people is determining their sexual preference. Many people experience same-sex attraction at some time in their life. While some people work out that their sexual preference is not for others of the same sex, some may be clear that they are same-sex attracted. It is important to support your child to find safe ways to talk about experiences and to explore what they like, and don't like.

SHine SA has a range of services, books, and resources that may be of assistance. More information is available at SHine SA: www.shinesa.org.au

- SHine SA General Enquiries Tel: 8300 5300 or info@shinesa.org.au.
- East/West team (Woodville) Tel: 8300 5300
- Northern team (Davoren Park) Tel: 8256 0700
- Southern team (Christies Beach) Tel: 8186 8600

References:

Cybersmart (Australian Government) [online] Accessed 2 May 2012 at: <http://www.cybersmart.gov.au/Parents.aspx>

Family Planning Queensland [online] Accessed 2 May 2012 at: <http://www.fpq.com.au>

Internet Safety for Children (Government of Victoria) [online] Accessed 2 May 2012 at: http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/bhcv2/bhcarticles.nsf/pages/Internet_safety_for_children?open

SA Parenting Guides, "Living with Young People" [online] Accessed 2 May 2012 at: <http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=99&id=1672>

SHine SA *Friendships and Dating– Information about relationships for parents, carers and young people with a disability* booklet [online] Accessed 2 May 2012 at: www.shinesa.org.au/go/working-with-communities/disability-community

Cyber Safety - Top Ten Online Safety Tips (Government of SA, Office for Youth) [online] Accessed 21 June 2013 at: <http://www.officeforyouth.sa.gov.au/resources/cyber-safety>

