

Family Support Series

**How To Educate People With Developmental Disabilities
About Social-Sexual Relationships**

October 30, 2014

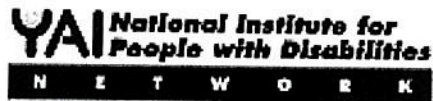
AGENDA

- I. Childhood Messages

- II. What Do People Really Need To Know About Sex?

- III. Ways to Teach People with ID/DD about Social/Sexual Issues

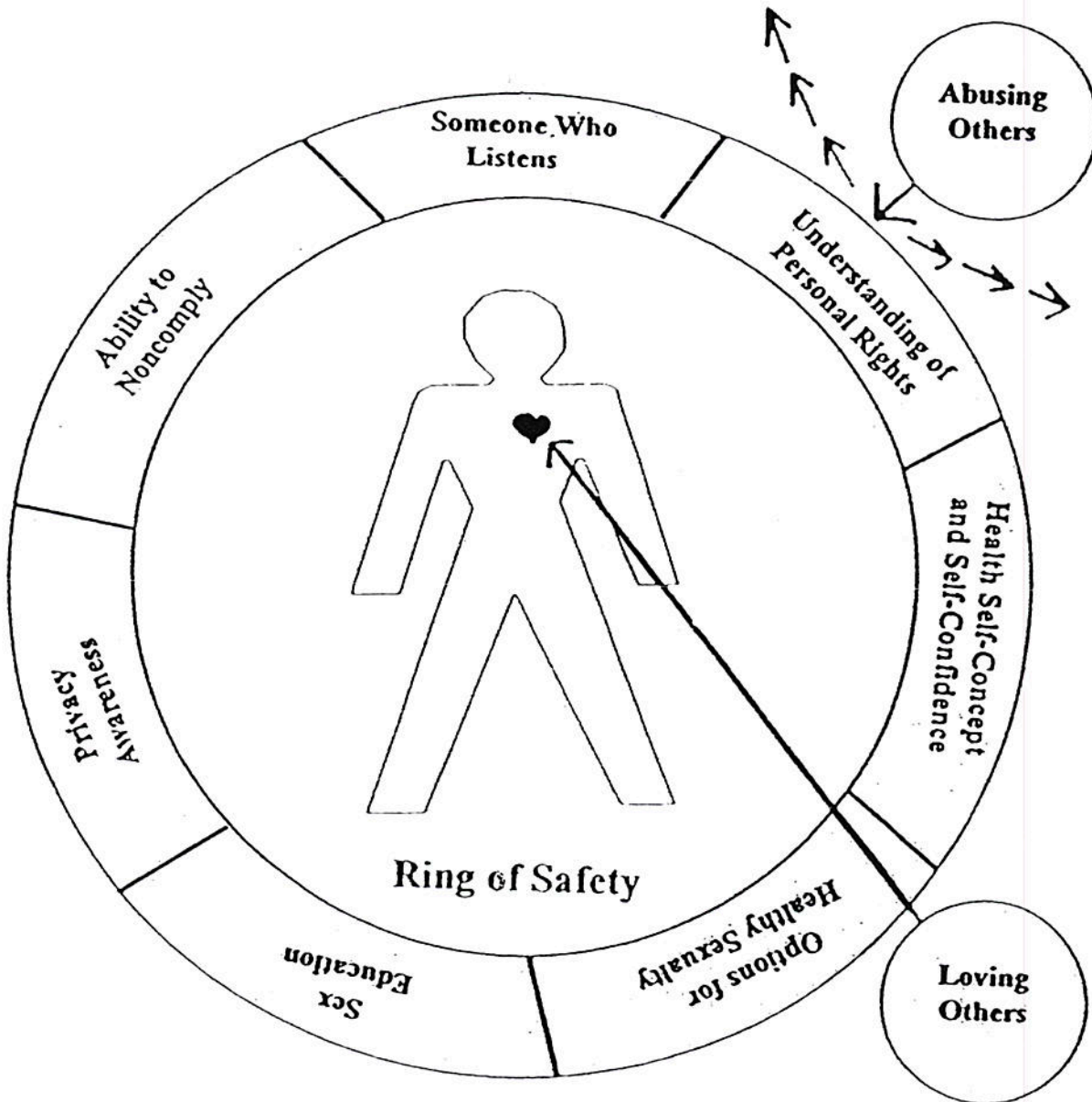
- IV. Keeping Sex Safe AND Fun



Goals of Sex Education for People with ID/DD

1. To help people with disabilities communicate about sexuality with others without unnecessary guilt or embarrassment in relations to their sexual orientation, their sexual interests and/or activities.
2. To provide accurate sex information at cognitively appropriate levels using multi-sensory modes of communication such as pictures, models, role plays, videos, etc.
3. To teach awareness about the body which allows people with ID/DD to see themselves to be like others. This generates self-confidence which in turn, will heighten self-esteem.
4. To help make it possible for people with disabilities to enjoy the company of both genders by acquiring social skills.
5. To enrich the lives of people with ID/DD by helping them to find sexual expression that best fits their abilities and needs.
6. To help people learn the responsibilities of being a sexual person including customary social patterns.
7. To train people so they will avoid situations where they could be sexually exploited, harmed or abused.
8. To teach people to avoid unsafe or illegal sexual behavior.
9. To help prevent the overprotection that arises from fear of procreation by offering people information about, and help with, birth control.
10. To help people achieve some insight into the commitments of marriage, parenthood and family so that they may set realistic goals for their future.

THE RING OF SAFETY



Courtesy of Dave Hingsburger

Four Ways of Saying NO

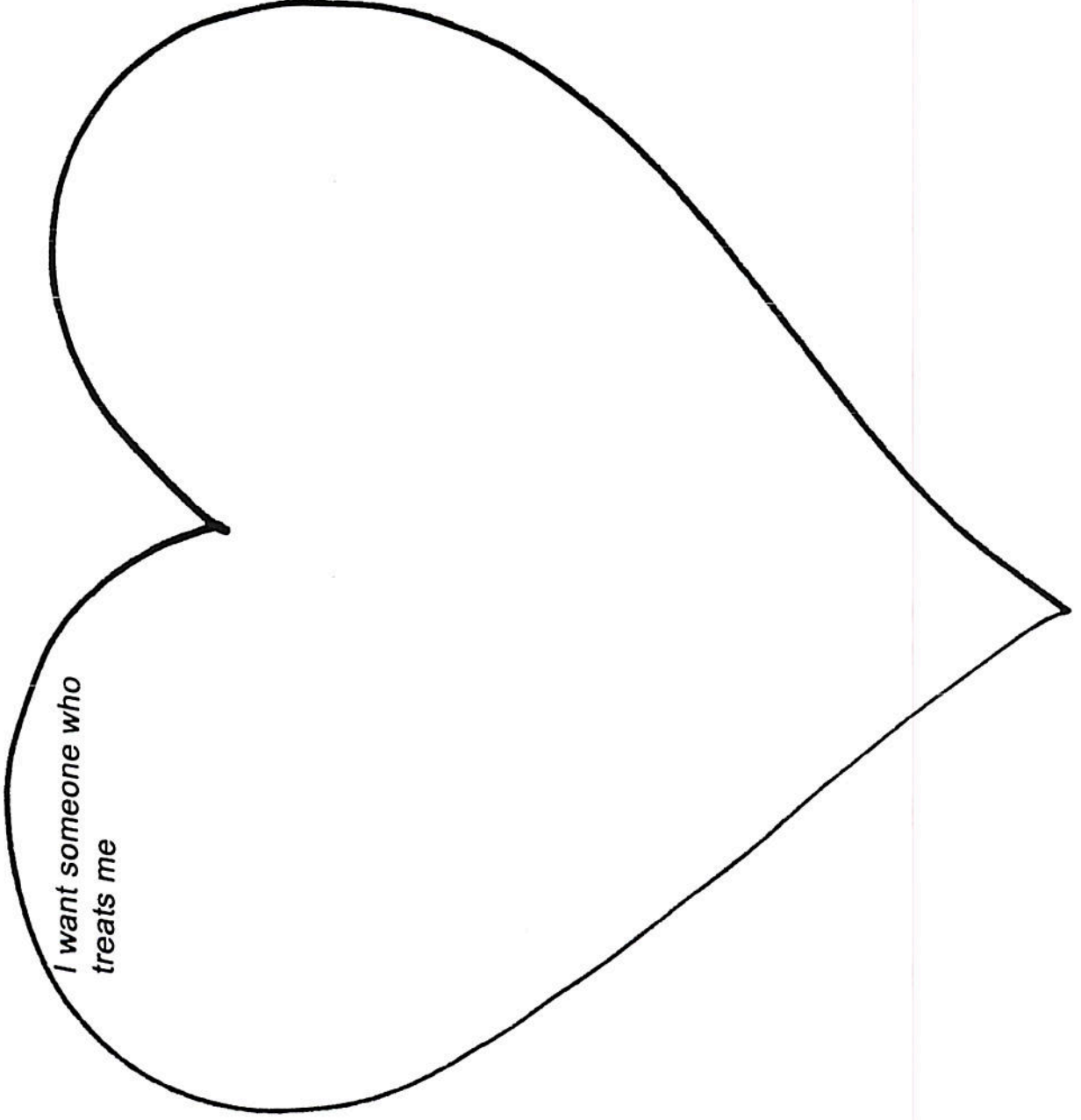
NO with an Explanation

NO with an Alternative

NO with a Feeling

NO And GO

I want a boyfriend/girlfriend who...



Pride Page

Name: _____

The thing that is good about me is

Something that I have learned to do for myself is

The thing that I never thought I would be able to do that I can do now is

People said I couldn't _____, but I was able to anyway.

I have a disability, but that doesn't stop me from being able to

The thing that I am most proud of is

I was once very afraid to _____, but I did it anyway.

The part of me that others like best is

The part of me that I like the best is

I Can't But I Can

I can't _____

But I can _____

I can't _____

But I can _____

I can't _____

But I can _____

I can't _____

But I can _____

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Ed
New York: Today, as
high 77. Tonight, as
low 48. Tomorrow,
clouds late, high 56,
73, low 51. Weather

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James Estrlin/The New York Times

Nicole Figueroa and Jeffrey Resnick, at left, with other couples at a dance by the Young Adult Institute.

Learning to Savor a Full Life, Love Life Included

By JANE GROSS

Mary Kate Graham's boyfriend, Gary Ruvolo, is fond of recounting every detail of their first date 13 years ago and each candlelight anniversary dinner since. "God help me," Ms. Graham said, rolling her eyes with affectionate indulgence.

Ms. Graham and Mr. Ruvolo, both 32, accept each other's foibles with tenderness. The one time their romance was in trouble — a girl "was spending too much time at Gary's house, and I didn't like it," Ms. Graham said — they went to couples' counseling and worked it out.

Their next hurdle will be moving from their family homes, both in Brooklyn, to a group residence. There, for the first time, Ms. Graham, who is mentally retarded, and Mr. Ruvolo, who has Down syn-

drome, will be permitted to spend time together in private.

The pair were coached in dating, romance and physical intimacy by a social service agency at the cutting edge of a new movement to promote healthy sexuality for the seven million Americans with mental retardation and related disabilities.

In what experts say is the latest frontier in disability rights, a small but growing number of psychologists, educators and researchers are promoting social opportunities and teaching the skills to enjoy them.

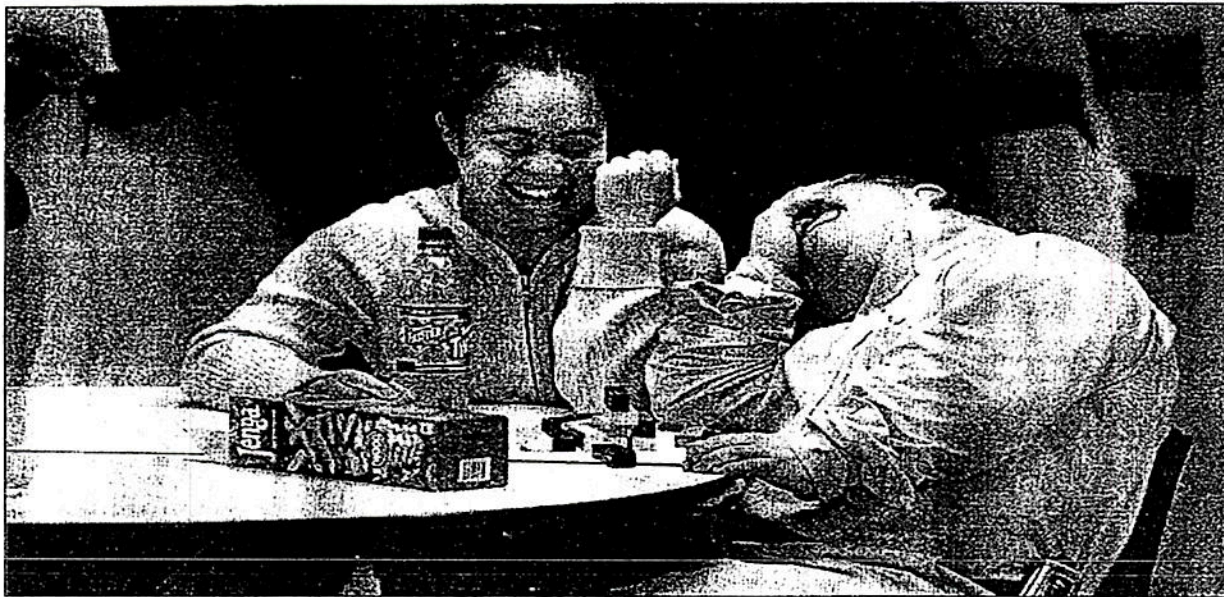
A generation ago, young adults like Ms. Graham and Mr. Ruvolo were generally confined to institutions, with no expectation of a normal life. All that changed in 1975, when a court order closed the notorious Wil-

lowbrook State School on Staten Island and moved its residents, and others like them across the country, into community settings to live as fully as their limitations allowed.

That could include attending neighborhood schools and holding salaried jobs. Now many men and women in their 20's and 30's, encouraged from childhood to be independent, expect the same when it comes to expressing their romantic and sexual needs.

The prospect of their children being sexually active often alarms protective parents mindful of the high rates of molesting among the mentally retarded. And agencies, whose programs are at least partly paid for by the government, have been more likely to emphasize the prevention of abuse, disease and pregnancy than to

Continued on Page A25



Photographs by James Estrin/The New York Times

For Nicole Figueroa, 26, and Jeffrey Resnick, 25, who met in a theater group, jealousy has been an issue in the relationship from time to time.

Learning to Savor a Full Life, Including Love Life

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prepare clients for intimacy.

"Plenty of people still believe that the answer to this is abstinence," said Philip H. Levy, president of the Young Adult Institute, a 50-year-old agency for the developmentally disabled that has been a trailblazer in offering sexuality workshops and social activities like the ones Ms. Graham and Mr. Ruvolo attend.

"But if you hide from this issue, it will come back to haunt you," added Mr. Levy, whose agency serves more than 20,000 people of all ages in the metropolitan area. "Plus, once you train people to think for themselves and give them a sense of promise, to not follow through is really cruel."

Virtually all agencies endorse the right of a consenting adult to have a sex life, but formal classes in dating and sexuality, like the institute offers, are rare. "Informed choice is a major theme in the field, but actual programs to support a sexual life aren't out there," said Charlie Lakin, director of research at the Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota, who says that other agencies are buying the Young Adult Institute's staff training materials and inviting their professionals to speak.

Recently, for instance, Perry Samowitz, the agency's director of education, lectured in North Carolina. From the back of a hall, a disabled young man asked how old he had to be to have sex.

"How old are you?" Mr. Samowitz inquired. The answer was 35. "Sounds old enough to me," Mr. Samowitz said, expecting an argument from the young man's father, a Baptist minister.

The father surprised him. "I'm here to learn," he said.

Indeed, Maureen Graham's first reaction was fear when her daughter Mary Kate's social workers asked permission to teach her about dating and sex. "My eyes got wide when they said this could happen," Mrs. Graham said. But more quickly than most she saw the logic: "I always wanted Mary Kate to have as close to a normal life as possible. So how could I not want this for her, too?"

"This" includes the ring Ms. Graham wears, two hearts intertwined, a gift from Mr. Ruvolo. The couple talk on the telephone several times a day, and go bowling, to the movies or to a restaurant most weekends, usually with their mothers in tow.

"They are so good to each other, so supportive," Mrs. Graham said. "I don't know if they've already had



Above, Mary Kate Graham and Gary Ruvolo, who began dating 13 years ago, at a weekly social. They will soon move from their family homes to a group home. Below, Ms. Figueroa and Mr. Resnick.



sex, but they've been pretty intimate with each other, and that's O.K."

Her blessing aside, Mr. Ruvolo and Ms. Graham say they intend wait until marriage. "Before that, it'd be no good," Mr. Ruvolo said.

Marriage rarely comes up in the institute's workshops. Many are led by Bobra Fyne, a sex educator who welcomed a group of 30 first-timers one recent evening, ranging in age from 20-something to past 60.

Ms. Fyne urged them to pose one sex question they had always wanted to ask. Questions included "How can you get a girl to wear sexy lingerie?" and "How do you stop somebody from being in such a hurry?"

The second drew a quick reply. "The short answer is, 'You go first,'" Ms. Fyne said, to waves of laughter.

The six-month curriculum includes birth control and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and abuse. But it also includes masturba-

tion and what the syllabus calls "pleasuring your partner," topics avoided by even the few other agencies experimenting with basic social skills training, often because of parental objections.

The parents' fears are understandable, given an array of studies that found 50 percent to 85 percent of women with mental retardation were sexually assaulted before the age of 18, and 25 percent to 50 percent of men. Of those assaulted, 49 percent had been abused 10 times or more. Some experts think safe opportunities for sexual relations can prevent abuse, although there is no research on the subject.

Dr. Levy described an incident involving a client at a group home before the institute's current policies evolved. The 25-year-old resident was arrested in a public bathroom having group sex with several men he did not know. When Dr. Levy went

to bail him out of jail, the young man was in tears. "Where am I supposed to go to get my needs met?" he asked.

Far safer, Dr. Levy said, is allowing such needs to be met in the group home, after a consent evaluation by a psychologist. That evaluation tests knowledge of birth control and disease prevention, the need to limit sexual activity to private locations, the difference between legal and illegal sexual acts and how to avoid exploitive situations.

At the institute, despite freewheeling talk, the goal of staff members and clients alike seems to be fostering loving and lasting relationships. "We talk about loneliness," Mr. Samowitz said. "We use soft, easy words like 'sweetheart.'"

Indeed, Ms. Fyne and others have learned that social isolation is a more pressing issue than sexuality. At an early class, Ms. Fyne asked students whether it was "O.K. to have one partner in the afternoon and another in the evening?"

The response was a wake-up call. "I don't know how to get a date, Bobra," one student called out. "So the rest of this is just garbage."

Now the dating lessons often come in a casual aside from a social worker during a recreational activity. That is how Ms. Graham and Mr. Ruvolo wound up in couples therapy, with a gentle nudge from Karuna Heisler, who supervises weekly dances as well as a theater group.

The theater group is where Nicole Figueroa, 26, and Jeffrey Resnick, 25, met. An on-again-off-again couple, they are now inseparable, under the watchful eye of Ms. Heisler. Again, their issue has been jealousy, since Mr. Resnick is very sociable and Ms. Figueroa has difficulty accepting his friendships with other women in their circle.

"We're all trying to teach her that even if Jeffrey talks to someone else, he still loves her," said Marion Resnick, his mother, who was tickled to find the pair walking in her son's bedroom one day.

Ms. Figueroa and Mr. Resnick are more physical with each other than Ms. Graham and Mr. Ruvolo. Ms. Heisler said that was more a matter of personal style than a predictor of sexual activity. Mrs. Resnick said, "We don't have the nerve to ask" what they are doing.

The couple themselves get giggly when asked about their sex lives.

"If she wants to sleep with me when we move to the group home, I'm O.K. with that," Mr. Resnick said. "And if not, I'm O.K. with that, too, because what I feel is happy."