

Sex is for everyone

**Occupational therapists
supporting sexuality for people
with intellectual disability**

Rainbow Inclusion

Your very rainbow and disability friendly place

- ✓ People with intellectual disability are sexual beings
- ✓ Occupational therapists are already well equipped to address sexuality
- ✓ Sexual and intimate occupations are activities of daily living
- ✓ Sexuality is an essential aspect of being human

Occupational therapists are well equipped to address sexuality and sexual participation. We understand conversations can be daunting – and we've all been afraid of getting it wrong. Just like any other aspect of occupation, we need to focus on what is meaningful to the person. This is a resource co-designed with occupational therapists who specialise in sexuality and/or working with people with intellectual disability. We want you to feel confident raising and addressing sexuality and sexual participation.

**feel confident raising and
addressing sexuality and
sexual participation**

Why should I talk to clients about sexuality?

People with intellectual disability and occupational therapists alike are embedded in a culture that is simultaneously saturated with sexual content, while conversations about sexuality and intimacy remain taboo. The media and marketing we consume are inundated with sexual representations, and pornography is free and easily accessible.

People with intellectual disability are sexual beings.

People with intellectual disability experience the same range of sexual, emotional, and physical desires as the wider population.

Conversations about sexuality are relevant across the life span.

There are elements of sexuality relevant to any client age. Sexuality is an important part of who we all are. It includes how people feel about their bodies and who they are in the world, as well as puberty, menstruation, reproduction, sexual health, menopause, bodily autonomy, consent, intimacy and more.

Our occupational therapy skillset equips us with an opportunity to educate people in this space. We can draw on our theoretical frameworks and clinical reasoning to address the person, environment, occupation dynamic. This ensures people can express their sexual identity and engage in safe sex practices, free from coercion, violence, and discrimination.

Occupational therapists play a key role in supporting sexuality for people with intellectual disability. Incorporating conversations about sexuality into everyday practice with people with intellectual disability can help you to:

- ✓ Promote a person-first, occupation focused approach to sexuality
- ✓ Support safe sexual expression

These conversations are an opportunity to support people with intellectual disability to feel safe in their bodies and in their environments.

How do I prepare myself to have the conversation?

Many of us are not used to having conversations about sexuality in our professional lives, and our personal experiences can also vary. Some things to consider are:

✓ What personal biases am I bringing into this space?

Reflect on your own experiences, beliefs and values around sexuality and intellectual disability.

✓ What do I need to learn to make my practice safe for LGBTQIA+ people?

Language is evolving. Understanding the diverse ways people identify themselves makes interactions safe and comfortable for everyone.

✓ Who is supporting my client?

Having the conversation doesn't mean you have to do it all on your own. Draw on the client's support people (family members, partners, teachers) and your multidisciplinary colleagues to inform and implement conversations. Be ready to offer follow-on conversations with a client's family members, support team and others. While others may have different values and beliefs, each practitioner can still work *within* the values and beliefs of their client and their client's support network to educate and assist.

✓ What enablers or barriers can you identify in your work supporting your client's sexuality?

Use occupational therapy models of practice to identify the range of strengths and/or barriers for the person in relation to their sexuality.

✓ How can I tailor my approach to suit my client's needs?

Adapt your approach and any supports provided to suit the communication needs of your clients. Consider a person's executive functioning, cognitive capability and how they process abstract concepts.

Adopting a **trauma-informed, person-centred** approach in your conversations involves acknowledging:

- ✓ Many people with intellectual disability have experienced breaches of their bodily autonomy and privacy and/or practices which restrict or deny their sexual or gender identity.
- ✓ Research indicates people with intellectual disability experience higher rates of violence and abuse including sexual assault. These rates are higher again for women with intellectual disability.
- ✓ Look out for **sign posting** (words, tone or gestures) in conversations that may not be explicitly related to sexuality but indicate there might be an unmet support need.
- ✓ **Know who you can refer to** – it isn't within the scope of occupational therapy practice to address *every* aspect of sexuality. A client-centred approach to other aspects of occupation routinely involves interdisciplinary engagement. There are aspects of sexuality that might require you to support your client by referring them to another professional (e.g., Psychologists, Speech Pathologists, Physiotherapists, Behaviour specialists, Psychosexual Therapists etc.).

a trauma-informed
person-centred
approach

But how do I initiate conversations about sexuality?

We routinely ask questions around many aspects of occupation. **Sexuality is no different.** It is okay not to have all the answers. The important thing is to start the conversation.

.... okay, but then what?

You are equipped for this with the core understandings you have as an occupational therapist. Addressing sexuality is no different to any other aspect of occupation. It's helpful to think about next steps in terms of the occupational therapy models of practice and the goals and intervention you will work on with the person.

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"Occupational therapists like me help people do the day-to-day activities that make us people. Sex is part of that. Is that something you would like to talk about?"

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Note: Always use the **correct anatomical terms and language**

Where can I find resources?

Rainbow Inclusion
www.rainbowinclusion.org.au

A website for and by LGBTIQ+ people with intellectual disability. From Inclusion Melbourne, Deakin University and Rainbow Rights and Advocacy

Rainbow Rights and Advocacy
www.rainbowrights.com.au

Self-Advocacy group for and by LGBTIQ+ people with intellectual disability

SECCA
www.secca.org.au
A Western Australian organisation that supports people with disability to learn about relationships, sexuality and sexual health

Occupational Therapists for Sexuality & Intimacy
www.OTSI.com.au
A website under development for Australian Occupational Therapists addressing needs related to intimacy and sexuality

Australian Occupational Therapy Sexuality Special Interest Group
join by contacting
getintouch@otsi.com.au

Occupational Therapy Australia
www.otaus.com.au
Refer to 'Practice Support' > 'Areas of Practice' > 'Sexuality'

Planet Puberty (from Family Planning NSW)
www.planetpuberty.org.au
Helping parents of kids with intellectual disability and autism navigate puberty

The Birds and the Bees
www.asdsexed.org
American resource focusing on sexuality education for autistic people

Supported Loving
<https://www.choicesupport.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/supported-loving/supported-loving-toolkit>
A series of guides created in the UK to support people with learning disabilities, autistic people and their allies with issues surrounding sexuality and relationships

Sexual Health Victoria
www.shvic.org.au

Thrive Rehab
www.thriverehab.com.au
See the 'Resources' tab

Family Planning NSW
www.fpnsw.org.au/who-we-help/disability/disability-resources

World Health Organisation
www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health

Minus 18
www.minus18.org.au
An Australian charity working to improve the lives of LGBTIQ+ youth

OT After Dark
otafterdark.com
A podcast hosted by two occupational therapists who aim to challenge societal views about disability and sex

For more information about trauma informed care, visit:
professionals.blueknot.org.au

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From our hearts, we acknowledge the First People of Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We show our respects to Elders past, present and future and to Mums and Dads, Aunties, Uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews and family. Brotherboys and Sistergirls are part of the rainbow flag.

For all the self advocates who are people with intellectual disability: Nothing about us without us.



Point your phone's camera at this QR code to be taken to the **Rainbow Inclusion** website