

Healthy Connections

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Objective:

Individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) and/or developmental disabilities (DD) are more likely to be sexually assaulted and abused than nondisabled individuals (Grove, et.al., 2018) and less likely to receive sexual health education (Stoffelen, et.al., 2019). Moreover, access to information on sexual health education and resources can be limited by the dependence status of ID/DD individuals. A lack of appropriate health education increases the likelihood of engagement in risky behaviors that can lead to unnecessary health complications such as sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, and poor general health (Scheepers, et.al., 2005). Research indicates that delivery of evidence based sexual health curriculum for individuals with ID/DD can decrease health disparity, encourage empowerment, and decrease potential for negative outcomes such as sexual assault, abuse, and institutionalization (Blamingame, 2018 and Grove et.al., 2018).

Method:

A literature review informed our research design of a quasi-experimental study, as we found it is necessary to assess what correlation may exist between an individual with ID/DD's knowledge of sexual health and self-advocacy, following the development of Pre & Post Assessments to evaluate sexual self-advocacy skill attainment, a workshop was developed. Highlighting findings from the literature review, the *Healthy Connections Workshop* aims to build skill attainment in a cohesive and consistent approach. Lastly, a survey was developed to measure the perceptions on sexuality and individuals with ID/DD held by parents, legal guardians, and Legal Authorized Representatives.

Healthy Connections is a sexual health seminar for individuals with ID/DD delivered through the Transition Clinic at the Center for Disabilities and Development. It was developed to replicate several models, including ElevatUS (2018) and PEERS Program (Hill et al., 2017). It aims to equip young people with ID/DD skills to be safe and autonomous by emphasizing sexual self-advocacy and responsibility through focused instruction covering rights, choice, connection, identity, autonomy, and self-care. Comprehensive sexual health education must be multifaceted and dimensional, empowering the recipients. It is the intent of this research to lessen sexual risk through the production of a seminar designed specifically for individuals with ID/DD. Pre and post tests will be used to measure individual knowledge attainment through the intervention. For comparison, parents and guardians are similarly assessed on their romantic expectations and understanding of sexuality in young adults with ID/DD through completion of a survey. It is hypothesized that the higher a parent/guardian's romantic expectations are for an individual with ID/DD, the more likely an individual is to have had exposure to content and information regarding sexual health and safety.

Results/Conclusions:

This experiment is currently undergoing review by the University of Iowa Institutional Review Board. The findings of the literature review suggest the following guidelines for conducting research on sexual health and education for individuals with disabilities: 1.) Include people with ID/DD within the research method through Nominal Group Technique to gather their interests and perspectives (Friedman et al., 2014 and Stoffelen et al., 2019); 2.) Implement supportive interventions for parents of children with ID/DDs (Holmes et al., 2016 and Fung et al., 2018); 3.) Analyze different populations of young people with ID/DD within the criminal legal system and labeled with "sexual offending behavior" (Blamingame, 2018); 4.) Develop sexual self-advocacy programs to collaboratively incorporate both young people with ID/DD and their parents/caretakers; 5.) Create inclusive policies that protect the sexual self-advocacy of people with ID/DD to prevent institutionalization and promote safe interdependence (Friedman et al., 2017).