

OASIS · AT A GLANCE

Sexuality, Relationships, and Sex Education for Autistic Adults with High Support Needs

Adults with high support needs are sexual beings with the same developmental drives as anyone else. Silence on this topic doesn't protect anyone. It creates the exact vulnerability caregivers are most afraid of.

BY JIM PALASTY · 11 MIN READ · THE SILENCE THAT CREATES THE VULNERABILITY IT'S MEANT TO PREVENT

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CORE TOPICS COMPREHENSIVE
SEX EDUCATION SHOULD COVER

Bodies, boundaries, consent, and relationships. Four subjects that apply to every adult, delivered in a way that actually reaches adults with high support needs.

How it works

THREE STEPS

STEP 1

The topic gets avoided

Discomfort, fear, and a lack of adapted curricula lead many families and providers to skip this entirely.



STEP 2

Silence has a real cost

Adults never taught about bodies, boundaries, and consent are measurably more vulnerable to sexual abuse.



STEP 3

Adapted education exists

Curricula built specifically for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities can teach this material effectively.

What adapted sex education should include

Body literacy	Concrete, direct language about bodies and privacy
Consent as a practical skill	Recognizing and communicating yes and no clearly
Relationship support	Building and maintaining connections, not just risk prevention
Guardianship boundaries	Where a guardian's authority legitimately applies, and where it doesn't
Response to inappropriate behavior	Direct teaching rather than punishment as the default response

THE CONVERSATION THAT FINALLY HAPPENED

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Priscilla avoided the topic with her adult son for years, uncertain how to even begin and worried that raising it would somehow cause more harm than staying silent. A provider recommended an adapted curriculum built specifically for adults with IDD. Six months in, her son could clearly say no to unwanted touch for the first time in his life, a skill nobody had ever explicitly taught him before.

YEARS OF CAREFUL SILENCE HADN'T PROTECTED HIM. SIX MONTHS OF DIRECT TEACHING GAVE HIM A SKILL THAT ACTUALLY COULD.

What matters, at a glance

Bodies and privacy

Basic body literacy and the concept of private versus public spaces and actions, taught concretely and directly.

Boundaries and consent

What consent means, how to recognize it, and how to say no or yes clearly, taught as a practical skill, not an abstraction.

Silence increases vulnerability

Adults who were never taught about consent and boundaries are less equipped to recognize or report abuse when it happens.

Relationships are part of this too

Support for building and maintaining relationships, romantic and otherwise, belongs in this conversation, not just risk prevention.

The guardianship question is real

Whether a guardian has authority over intimate relationships is a genuine legal and ethical question, not a settled one.

Education, not punishment

Inappropriate sexual behavior is addressed most effectively through direct teaching, not through punishment or avoidance.

BRING THESE · CHECK AS YOU GO

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| ☐ Contact information for a provider offering adapted sex education curricula | ☐ A clear understanding of your family member's guardianship status and its limits |
| ☐ A plan for teaching consent as a concrete, repeatable skill | ☐ A non-punitive plan for addressing any inappropriate behavior directly |
| ☐ Patience; this is an ongoing conversation, not a single lesson | |

YOUR MOVE

When you're ready to start this conversation, here is where to begin

- 1 Ask your provider or day program about adapted sex education curricula.
- 2 Start with body literacy and privacy concepts, concretely taught.
- 3 Move to consent as a practical, teachable skill.
- 4 Clarify where guardianship authority legitimately applies, in writing if needed.
- 5 Address any inappropriate behavior through direct teaching, not punishment.
- 6 Revisit and reinforce the material regularly, not as a one-time lesson.

Silence doesn't prevent harm. Direct, adapted education is one of the strongest protections a caregiver can actually offer.

SEXUALITY AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION RESOURCES

Elevatus Training (elevatustraining.com) develops adapted sexuality education curricula specifically for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

The Arc (thearc.org) offers guidance on the intersection of guardianship, consent capacity, and relationship autonomy for adults with IDD.

Informational only. Not legal or medical advice. Verify current program rules before acting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Jim Palasty is the founder of OASIS for Autism and a single father of an adult autistic daughter in Michigan.