



Talking about relationships

The SL&RR program respects the right for people with disabilities to have meaningful connections. This includes an understanding that relationships are a fundamental part of life and people with disabilities have the right to respect in their relationships. For people with an intellectual disability relationships are not always acknowledged by others as being such an important part of their lives. This ableism and oppression restricts many people with disabilities to have fulfilling relationships.

“Sometimes people with disabilities don’t have the chance to be in a relationship, or they might not understand relationships because they haven’t had the right information before, like when they were at school. This is not good. You can’t not tell someone something because you think they don’t understand. They might actually want to have a relationship and a family.” Linda Stokoe, SL&RR Peer Educator



Some theories suggest that people with disability do not have capacity to intellectually comprehend intimate relationships, let alone consent to sexual experiences. Research that has been informed by the lived experiences of people with an intellectual disability has found that people with an intellectual disability aspire to, have and enjoy sexual experiences 'like anyone else.'ⁱ

Despite this, sexuality education for people with an intellectual disability, when it does occur is oversimplified, biologically focused and rules based.ⁱⁱ

Although not solely a program designed for sexual education, SL&RR understands that relationships are important, and bridges this gap to include people with disability in the development of a sexuality and relationships program which meets their needs.

This information is linked to a resource called The Relationship Cards, downloadable on the SL&RR website

It is common for people with disability to speak about a lack of privacy, respect, access to information and services, and protectionist views from the supporters in their lives. SL&RR acknowledges that disability does not limit relationships. SL&RR acknowledges that people with an intellectual disability should be able to express their sexuality their way, as straight or LGBTIQ and should be supported in their choices.

“Having a relationship means that you have another person to talk to, you can go and do things together, or play games, or cuddle, or make love, or help out around the house together. It’s hard being on your own, so it is nice to have someone to spend time with.” Linda Stokoe, SL&RR Peer Educator



Key messages:

- Relationships are a fundamental part of life.
- People with disabilities have the right to respect in their relationships and for their relationships to be respected.
- Much against protectionist views, people with intellectual disability are sexually active and desire meaningful connections.
- It is common for people with intellectual disability to be segregated from sexual education in schooling.
- Information about relationships needs to be useful and meaningful. This extends to sex education and accessing services for information about relationships.
- As needed, this information should be presented in Easy English.

It is common for conversations about relationships with people with intellectual disability to intertwine with conversations about violence and abuse. To know more about violence and abuse, please refer to the violence and abuse topic of the ‘Talking about’ series.

ⁱ Johnson, K., Hillier, L., Harrison, L., & Frawley, P. (2001). Living safer sexual lives: Final report. Melbourne, Australian research Centre in Sex, health & Society, La Trobe University.

ⁱⁱ Frawley, P., and N. J. Wilson. 2016. “Young People with Intellectual Disability Talking about Sexuality Education and Information.” *Sexuality and Disability* 34 (4): 469–484.

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This resource is linked to the Sexual Lives & Respectful Relationships 'Talking about relationships' series. Please review this handout before using this resource in practice. SL&RR Peer Educators and Program Partners think it is important to have background information from the 'talking about...' series before you use these activities.

The Relationship Cards

This is an activity that can be used to talk about intimacy and what kinds of things people can do to show their feelings and be intimate. It has been adapted from a resource developed by Headspace Barwon for their Youth Sexual Health Project Peer Education Program.

Sometimes people might feel uncomfortable during this activity. This is OK. If you need to support someone, make sure you sit and listen to them, try not to interrupt them. If you need help to support someone, there are some suggestions at the end of these instructions.

Why you might use the relationship cards?

- You might use them in a group
- You might use them in a counselling or one to one session
- This activity can help people to:
 - Talk about different relationships
 - Talk about intimacy
 - Talk about what activities they like or don't like, when and where different activities are OK or not OK
 - Talk about sexual diversity and different kinds of sexual or intimate relationships people can have

On the back of the cards are descriptions of what is being shown in the picture. The cards explain what you might do with someone you are in a relationship with, such as going to the cinema, hugging, and oral sex. There are no right or wrong responses in this activity, people should be encouraged to ask questions and talk with each other about what they see and understand from the activity.

How to do the activity (one on one):

1. First, decide if you would like to do this activity with the entire deck, or select just a few cards.
2. Start by having a conversation about what intimacy is. Sometimes the word intimacy is hard to say so it would be a good idea to tailor your terminology to what the person you are with uses.
Intimacy could be defined as:
 - Being very close with someone, like a partner, it is somebody you might have sex with
 - It is someone you trust to share personal things with (sexually and emotionally)
 - Someone you connect with and want to share private things with
3. Explain that you are going to do an activity about all kinds of relationships and the things people do in the different kinds of relationships. You could think about this as intimacy or how close you are with someone. The person you are with might like to reflect on relationships in their life
4. Put the cards which say 'very close' and 'not close' on the floor or table with about a metre of space in between.
5. Make sure everyone knows what the activities are and what is meant by close/not close.
6. Talk about each activity, what is happening, how it might feel, when it would be OK or not OK, how close you might need to be to a person to do this together. Work together to put the cards in a list going from the closest to the least close activity.
7. Think about how this activity sits in comparison to the other activities around it. You can work together and negotiate where they think each card should go. Some cards might be equal or overlap.



next card

9. Check that the person you are with is happy with the order of the activities. You might want to swap some cards round. People may have different opinions. This is OK.
10. To finish up explain that everyone has different opinions about how close something is in a relationship. Communication about this is very important in respectful relationships. Ask them if they feel OK.
11. If it is your role, you could refer them to someone for some extra information and help if they want it.

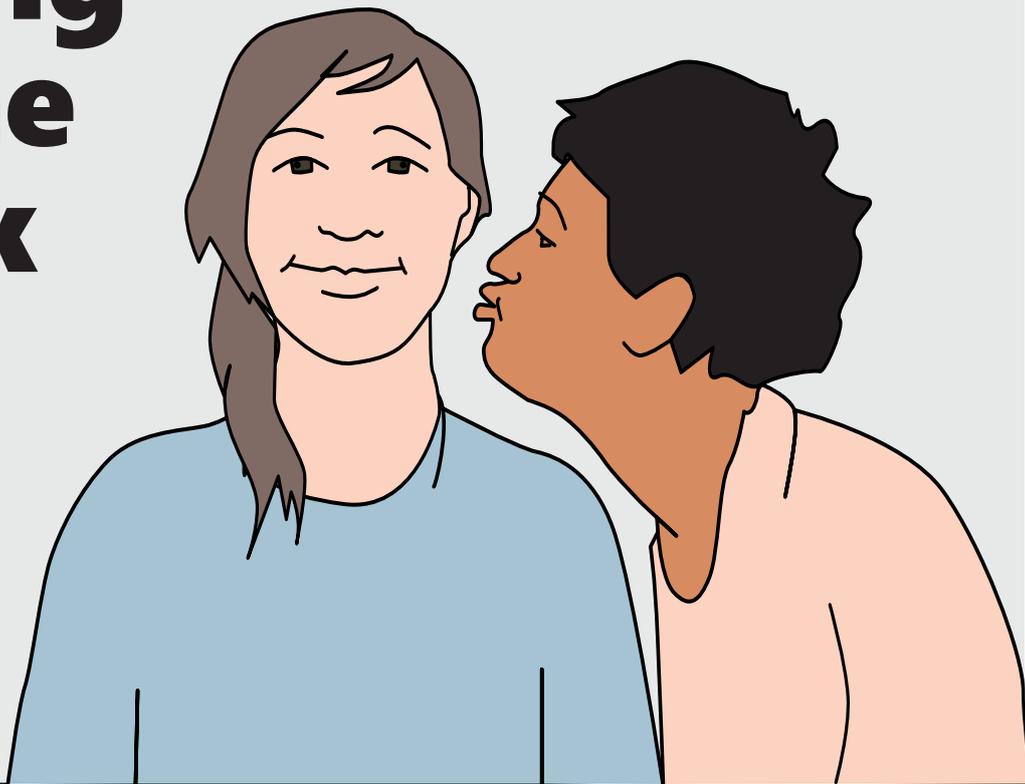
How to do the activity (group setting):

1. First, decide if you would like to do this activity with the entire deck, or select just a few cards.
2. Start by having a conversation with the group about what intimacy is. Sometimes the word intimacy is hard to say so it would be a good idea to tailor your terminology to what the person you are with uses. Intimacy could be defined as:
 - a. Being very close with someone, like a partner, it is somebody you might have sex with
 - b. It is someone you trust to share personal things with (sexually and emotionally)
 - c. Someone you connect with and want to share private things with
3. Explain that you are going to do an activity about all kinds of relationships and the things people do in the different kinds of relationships. You could think about this as intimacy or how close you are with someone. The group might like to reflect on relationships in their life



- the group members a card
- Put the cards which say 'very close' and 'not close' on the floor or table with about a metre of space in between.
 - Make sure everyone knows what the activity on their card is and what is meant by close/not close.
 - One at a time, invite each person to think about each activity and think about make same changes to those in the one on one above. The person can put down this card where they think it is suitable.
 - Think about how this activity sits in comparison to the other activities around it. The group can work together and negotiate where they think each card should go. Some cards might be equal or overlap.
 - Move on to the next person.
 - Once all the cards are laid out, make sure that the group is happy with the order. You might want to swap some cards round. People may have different opinions. This is OK.
 - To finish up explain that everyone has different opinions about how close something is in a relationship. Communication about this is very important in respectful relationships. Ask them if they feel OK.
 - If it is your role, you could refer them to someone for some extra information and help if they want it.

Kissing on the cheek



Tongue kissing



**When one person's lips touch another
person's face**

An open mouth kiss when tongues touch



**Holding
hands**



**Talking
on the
phone**

When two people put their hands together

**When two people have a phone call to tell each other
about something in their lives**

Cyber sex



Crying in front of



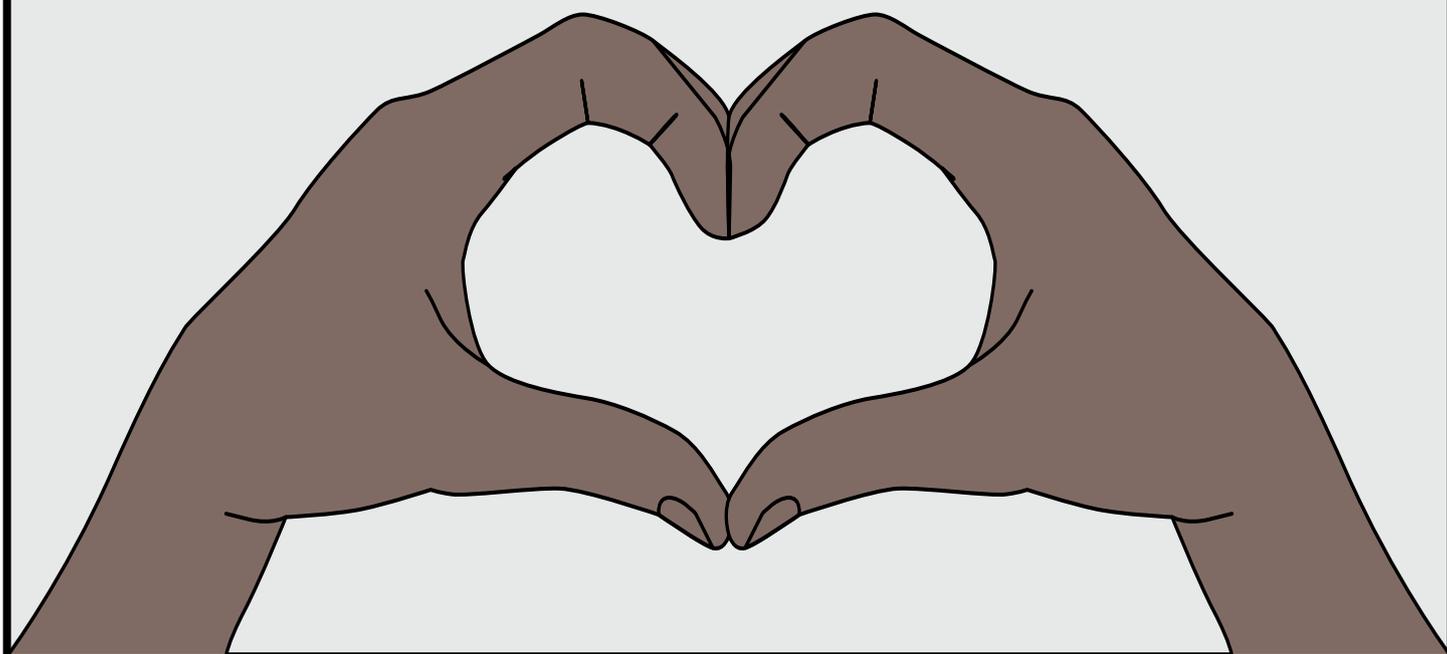
**Any sexual activity or sexual discussion over
the internet**

**When one person is feeling sad and crying in
front of a friend**

**Sleeping together -
no sex**



Saying "I love you"



When two people share a bed to sleep in

**When one person says to another person "I love
you"**

**Oral
sex**



**Public
affection**



**When one person's mouth touches another
person's genitals**

**When two people hug or show their love for each
other in public- this sometimes called PDA**

**Kissing
on the
lips**



**Sharing
secrets**



When two people's mouths touch

When one people share something personal about themselves to a friend and says not to tell anyone

Having sex



Flirting



**When people have sex involving their
genitals**

**When someone gives attention to someone
they like**

Hugging

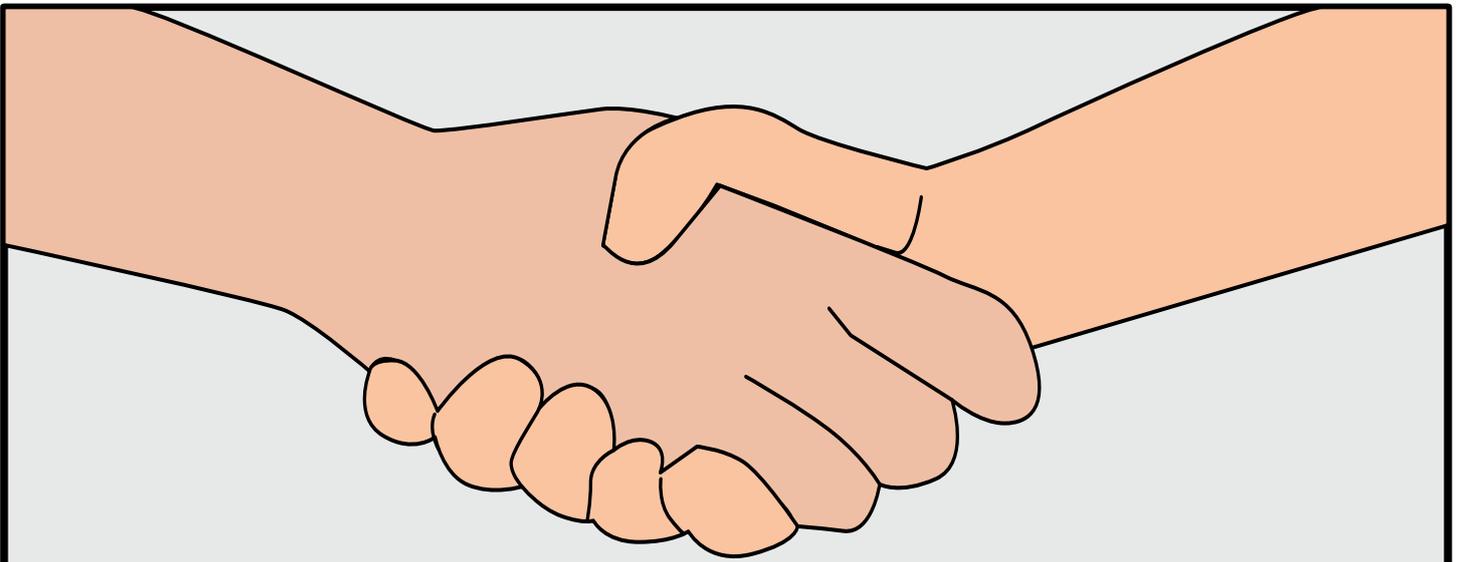


Going to the movies



When two people wrap their arms around each other to show affection

Going to the movies with someone



**Meeting someone
you only know online**

**Sharing
sexy
photos**



**Meeting someone in person who you have been
talking to over the Internet**

**Sending a nude or semi-nude photo of yourself to
someone else**

VERY CLOSE

NOT CLOSE

This is intimate

This not intimate