Healthcare providers need to recognize that children and youth with disabilities are sexual beings who require appropriate information from an early age.

“They Assume That You’re Not Having Sex”: A Qualitative Exploration of How Pediatric Healthcare Providers Can Have Positive Sexuality-Related Conversations with Youth with Disabilities

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PURPOSE
• We asked PHCPs and young adults (YAs) with disabilities what would facilitate sexuality-related conversations in healthcare settings.

METHODS
• Qualitative focus groups (60-90 minutes) with each participant group (PHCPs and YAs) separately.
• Descriptive thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and report themes in the data.

SAMPLE

5 PHCPs
• All identified as women
• Currently providing care to youth with disabilities

5 YAs
• 2 identified as woman, 2 identified as non-binary, 1 identified as man
• Average age: 22 years

RESULTS

1 Setting the stage
• PHCPs should recognize that youth with disabilities have sexual needs.
• PHCPs should promote patient autonomy during sexuality-related discussions.
• Both PHCPs and YAs need to feel safe to initiate these discussions.

2 Foundational components
• Consent should be taught and explained to clients at an early age.
• Conversations should be tailored to the client’s disability-specific needs.

3 Timing is critical
• Age-appropriate discussions of sexuality should begin early in life.

4 Capacity building within services
• Services need to improve by providing greater disability-specific information, having age-appropriate discussions from an early age, and increasing interdisciplinary care, so that children and youth with disabilities feel supported to explore sexuality-related topics.

“More training, more spaces, and clinicians throughout the hospital understanding the importance of having these kind of conversations.” (Jasmine, Nurse)

CONCLUSIONS / NEXT STEPS
• PHCPs should: 1) recognize the sexual needs of youth with disabilities, 2) provide age-appropriate sexuality-related conversations that address their disability-specific needs, and 3) improve capacity to explore sexuality-related topics.
• The results of this study helped inform a resource for having positive conversations around sexuality. Scan the QR code for a publication of our findings.

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