



# Sexual Health and Education for Young Adults with Intellectual Disabilities

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## Introduction

Sexual health awareness is frequently neglected in the care of individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) (Brown et al., 2020). Sexual education, encompassing topics such as sexuality, reproduction, hygiene, relationships, intimacy, and consent, is a fundamental right that should be accessible to all individuals, regardless of disability. People with ID experience significant health disparities, including in sexual health, and are often inadequately supported in addressing their sexual and reproductive health needs (Svae et al., 2022). Research indicates that individuals with ID are three times more likely to be sexually abused than their peers (Chou et al., 2019) and typically possess limited knowledge about sexuality (Schmidt et al., 2021). Providing comprehensive sexual health education is crucial to promoting their well-being and ensuring they can lead healthy, fulfilling lives (Svae et al., 2022).

The Horizons School is a post-secondary transition school for young adults with learning disabilities, encouraging independence, life skills training and preparedness for adult life. The school's curriculum additionally covers wellness however no educational materials or programs regarding sexual health have been previously developed or implemented at the school.

**Purpose:** Increase sexual health awareness knowledge in young adults with intellectual disabilities (ID).

## Methods

An evidence-based sexual health and education program was developed and piloted in the Horizons School over 6 weeks in 1-hour weekly sessions.

### Inclusion Criteria:

- Enrolled student at Horizons School
- Ages 18-26
- Diagnosed with an ID
- English speaking

### Data Collection:

- Pre/Post Test Survey
  - Investigator-created student self-report comfort with sexual health topics survey.
  - Investigator-created student self-report perceived sexual health knowledge survey.
  - Responses remained anonymous.
- Guided Focus Groups
  - Held before and after program delivery.



Figure 1. Program Development Process

### Participants:

13 Horizons school students with varying levels of ID's participated in program

## Results

Session Topic	Week	Content
Consent	1	Communication, How to say "No", Understanding Boundaries
Healthy Relationships	2	Relationship Types, Healthy relationship dynamics, Identifying Red Flags, Abusive vs. Unhealthy relationships
Sexual Health and Anatomy	3	Female and Male Reproductive Anatomy, Pregnancy, Menstrual Cycles
Safe Sex Practices	4	Sexually transmitted infections, Viral vs. Bacterial, Barrier Methods
Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation	5	Gender identity, Pronouns, Sexual orientation
Sexual Misconduct	6	Types of Sexual Misconduct, Prevalence, Prevention, Support and Resources
Question Box	Weekly	Anonymous question box

Table 1: Educational Modules

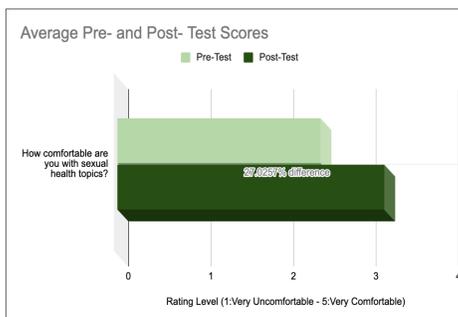


Figure 2. Average Comfort Level of Students

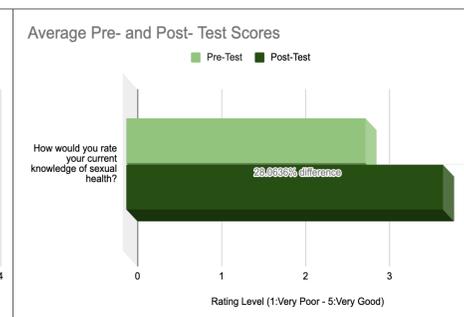


Figure 3. Average Knowledge Level of Students

<b>Strengths of Program</b>	<p>Students expressed high satisfaction with the program, highlighting the following strengths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging delivery methods, including interactive games, real-life scenarios, and discussion-based learning.</li> <li>• Appreciation for "Bob" (anonymous question box), which allowed for open and anonymous communication.</li> <li>• Respectful and objective, with no judgement.</li> <li>• Addressed stigma and debunked myths.</li> </ul>
<b>Areas for Improvement</b>	<p>Some students suggested areas for enhancement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Felt the program was too short.</li> <li>• Felt content was too simple at times.</li> <li>• Recommendations for more focused content, including dedicating more time to topics such as relationships, while reducing emphasis on others, such as gender identity.</li> </ul>
<b>Contextual Barriers</b>	<p>Certain personal and external factors impacted student's participation and engagement with the program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of prior knowledge on the topic.</li> <li>• Cultural expectations and beliefs.</li> <li>• Discomfort among peers.</li> <li>• Setting of program delivery.</li> </ul>

Table 2: Student Perceptions of Program Delivery

## Discussion

### Findings:

- Feedback throughout focus groups collectively reported that they were satisfied with the program delivery.
- Students reported that they would take the program again.
- The results highlight the significance of tailored training programs in addressing knowledge gaps among individuals with an ID.
- The project findings align with previous studies emphasizing the importance of addressing sexuality and intimacy in the target population and the effectiveness of tailored education programs in empowering these individuals.

### Limitations and Areas of Improvement:

- Small sample size.
- Broaden study to more sites.
- Inconsistencies among participation due to absences or tardiness.
- Investigator-created surveys.
- Social desirability response bias as Principal Investigator led group and distributed surveys.

### Implications for Practice:

Occupational therapists typically consider client factors like body functions and structures but often overlook the role of sexuality and intimacy in therapy. To reduce stigma and promote sexual health, therapists should integrate these topics into practice and advocate for education among families, caregivers, educators, and the community.

### Future Programming:

Future research should focus on evaluating the long-term impact of educational interventions on individuals with IDs, particularly how these programs affect their confidence and ability to apply knowledge about sexuality and sexual health in everyday life.

## Conclusion

The program effectively identified and addressed gaps in knowledge and comfort among Horizons students, fostering a deeper awareness of the significance of sexuality in the lives of individuals with ID. By exploring these issues, the program contributed to enhancing understanding of how sexuality and sexual health are critical aspects of overall well-being for this population.

## References



## Acknowledgement & Contact information

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