

Inclusion Ireland Opening Statement on the review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) by the Joint Committee on Education & Skills.

Sexuality and intellectual disability is an area that is often surrounded with taboo and focussed on protection. People with intellectual disabilities are often seen as ‘eternal children’ devoid of sexuality and this damaging preconception can have a serious impact on the quality of sexual education people receive. With inadequate sexual education, there can be serious consequences and I will discuss them later.

Until last year the Criminal Law¹ reinforced prejudicial concepts about people with disabilities and sexuality. That law has now changed but retains many prejudicial aspects. The criminal law is important because it created a ‘chilling effect’ where mere discussion of sexual relationships prompted the fear of criminality.

It is in this context that sexual education for people with intellectual disabilities has suffered and today, we know that the majority of people with intellectual disabilities receive little sex education²

The law has improved and there are signs that culture change³ is happening meaning that this is a very good time to be having this conversation. There are other concerns, beyond the culture change that is required. There is no specific Relationship and Sexuality Education programme for young people with an intellectual disability within the Irish school system.⁴

Many people with an intellectual disability attend ‘special schools’⁵ until they are 18 which is at primary education level meaning, like other areas of the curriculum, they do not receive RSE or SPHE beyond a primary level. The Curriculum guide for primary schools (which include those Special Schools) has a heavy focus on personal care skills and relationships rather than sexuality itself.

Post-school, HSE⁶ research has shown that many staff working with people with intellectual disabilities are reluctant to provide sufficient sex education for fear of reprisal from parents or the organisation and concerns around capacity of the individual.

There is an inadequacy of sexual education and this can have serious consequences.

We know that people with intellectual disabilities have sex, form relationships and start families, as is their right.

¹ Section 5 of the 1993 Criminal Law Sexual Offences Act

² The Irish Sex Education Network (ISEN)

³ A survey by the National Disability Authority into Public Attitudes to Disability showed that 78% of people thought that people with intellectual disabilities had the same right to fulfillment through sexual relationships as everybody else.

⁴ There are Curriculum guides on Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) for intellectual disabilities developed by the National Council on Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

⁵ some 16% of people with intellectual disabilities finished school at primary level (compared to 5% of the general population).

⁶ “Friendships and Taboos”

Information and support for each of these areas is inadequate however and must be improved in light of Ireland's recent ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

We also know that:

- Persons with intellectual disabilities engaging in sexual activity are at high risk of STIs
- Persons with disabilities often have limited access to care should they contract an STI.
- Children and adults with disabilities are more likely to experience violence, including sexual violence than their non-disabled peers and those with intellectual disabilities are most at risk.⁷
- Women and girls with disabilities are also more likely to be adversely affected by the Constitutional ban on abortion care⁸
- 20 % of children taken into care is as a result of mental illness or intellectual disability of the parent, usually the mother. This is higher than the statistics for abuse or neglect.⁹

Each of these issues is exacerbated by the lack of adequate sexual education.

So what can be done?

- All laws and policies impacting on people with disabilities should be reviewed through the lens of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability.
- A review of approaches to sex education for people with intellectual disabilities is needed including learning techniques are required including the need to use easy to read materials and methodologies which engage people.
- Developing specific curriculum for people with intellectual disability that is accessible, age appropriate and deals with sexuality and contraception.
- Funding for specific education programmes for school-leavers and older adults who have missed out on sexual education or who may need reinforced education.
- Many service-providers are voluntary organisations (former religious orders) and the ongoing review of voluntary organisations must consider the impact of ethos on service provision and education.
- Parenting skills education should be developed in response to the high numbers of children being taken into care on the grounds of disability.

To conclude, as I said at the outset, a significant culture change is needed.

There is a responsibility now for legislators, policy makers, the media and advocacy organisations to set the pace of that culture change and to take proactive steps, using the UN Convention to work towards the citizenship of people with disability, rather than these individuals being seen as 'eternal children'. As citizens, people with disabilities require the tools and education to access the rights to privacy, intimacy and sexual relationships in the same way as their peers.

⁷ WHO

⁸ Travel & Poverty

⁹ the Child Care Law Reporting Project by Dr Carol Coulter.