



# Healthy Relationships and Sexuality:

Information for people with Down syndrome and their families



Down Syndrome  
Australia

This guide provides information about relationships. It can be used to start a conversation between people with Down syndrome and their families about relationships, sexuality, staying healthy, rights and consent.

If you want advice or more information you may want to talk with your family, support worker or health professional. Counselling in this area can also be part of a person's NDIS plan under improved daily living skills.

We would like to acknowledge and thank Family Planning Victoria for providing expert advice and content for this resource.

# Introduction

---

Relationships are important for everyone. There are a lot of different kinds of relationships. Some relationships are based on friendship, others on being in a family and some relationships are romantic and could involve having sex.

We treat people differently depending on the kind of relationship we have with them. For example, we might give a friend a hug when we see them, but when we see our boss we might shake their hand.

It is important for you to understand how to have a good relationship with other people. As part of this you need to respect others and make sure they respect you. It is helpful to know what a good relationship is and what to do if your relationship is not working well. Consent is also important for people to understand.

This guide includes information on all these topics. Family members and support workers can help you with this information. This guide can help you start conversations with your friends or family about relationships.

Knowing about relationships is important. It can help you stay safe. It can help you know what is right and wrong. It can also help you to know where to look for help if you think someone is not respecting you or your choices.

# Important concepts for everyone

## Consent, communication, respect and equality in all relationships

It is important to have consent, communication, respect and equality in all relationships. This helps the people involved to feel safe, valued and important.

- **Consent** is a type of permission or agreement for something to happen. You should never feel pressured or forced to do something you don't want to do. You have the right to **not give consent** if you don't want something to happen.
- **Communication** is the way we get our message across to someone. You can communicate by talking and also by the way you talk, like your tone of voice. Body language is also an important part of communication. For example, someone says "I am fine", but you can tell they are upset because they are crying or turning away from you.
- **Respect** is a way of treating or thinking about something or someone. You show respect by being polite and kind.
- **Equality** means people are the same in relationships. Inequality in a relationship means that one person is more in control than the other person.

## Rights

Everyone has the right to make decisions for themselves about their body. Sometimes people use the word "consent". Consent means to agree to do something or give permission.

Everybody has the right to have different kinds of relationships. This might include friendships and romantic relationships.

Everyone has the right to be respected in their relationships. You have the right to make decisions about your body. You should never feel like you have to do things just because someone else tells you to. If you say "No" or "I am not comfortable" then the other person must respect that.

It is important to respect everyone's rights. Just as you have rights, other people also have rights. Being respectful, understanding and listening when another person says "No" and does not give consent is the right thing to do.

You might need some extra support when you start a relationship. This might include:

- Education about sexuality including how to stay safe
- Information about what is appropriate in public and private
- Talking with a trusted person about what you want in a relationship and what you don't want.



## Questions for discussion:

---

*What does consent mean?*

*What can you do if you feel pressured by a friend to do something you don't want to do? For example, if a friend asks to borrow money and you don't want to lend them money?*

*If you were in a romantic relationship and wanted to kiss someone how would you know that you had the other person's consent before kissing them?*

*What would you do if you were in a relationship and someone tried to kiss you but you didn't want them to?*

# Relationships

---

A relationship is a connection between two or more people.

A healthy relationship is when people respect each other. This means they talk about how they feel and listen to each other. If they are doing something to upset the other person, they try to make changes. When someone says they do not want to do something the other person listens.

An unhealthy relationship can be when someone is hurting the other person. People can be hurt in different ways. Someone could hurt another person's body by hitting them or making them do things they don't want to do. Someone could hurt another person's feelings by saying mean things. Someone could take advantage of another person by taking their money. Unhealthy relationships can be with friends, boyfriends or girlfriends and other family members. Hurting or taking advantage of someone in a relationship is called 'abuse'. Abuse in any relationship is against the law. It is important for people to understand their rights and how to report any abuse. If you think you are in an unhealthy relationship it is important to tell someone you trust right away.

More information about this is in the information below.

## Why are relationships important?

Relationships are important for our wellbeing and happiness. They can help us work out who we are, how we view ourselves and how we feel about ourselves. They can also give a sense of belonging. Often the values and beliefs we learn from our family help us to develop relationships with other people.

When starting or keeping relationships, there will be qualities that you may look for in others. For example, you might be looking for friends who are trustworthy, funny, honest, and kind.

The qualities that people may look for in friends can often be like those qualities that people look for in romantic relationships.

Everyone likes, looks for and appreciates different qualities in different people. Overall, the most important things to look for in relationships are people who:

- treat each other with respect
- make each other feel important, valued and loved.

## Questions for discussion:

---

*What qualities do you look for in a friend? (For example, funny, honest, kind.)*

*What qualities would you look for in a boyfriend/girlfriend?*

# Types of relationships

---

There are different types of relationships. Some of these are:

- family relationships
- friendships
- online relationships
- romantic relationships
- professional relationships.

Keeping relationships healthy takes time and effort. Relationships can change over time. Some relationships will be close. Some will not. Sometimes you might have a disagreement with a friend. Some relationships will last a long time. Others will be shorter.

## Family

Family are the people you are related to. This can be your mum, dad, brother, sister, aunty, uncle, cousins, etc. They have known you for a very long time, maybe longer than any other people. Families provide information, help and support for people in all areas of their lives, like school, friends, having a job and relationships. Your family should help and support you to make important life decisions and understand your rights.

## Friends

It is important for everyone to have friends. Friends can make you feel happier and connected. It can be enjoyable to spend time with them. Often your friends can help you when are feeling sad or need someone to talk to.

You might meet friends at school or at work. Some of your friends might be people you know from church or doing sport.

Good friends are people you like spending time with. Friends help each other in good times and bad times. People with Down syndrome and people with disabilities can have friends from all parts of life.

## Professional relationships

You also have relationships with people that you work with. These are sometimes called professional relationships. It is important to be polite to people at work. You might not want to tell them personal things. You also will usually not be affectionate or hug people at work (unless they give you permission to). You might tell them what you did on the weekend but you don't have to.

Having friends at work can help make work more fun and enjoyable. However, it is important to not let friendships get in the way of doing your job while you are at work. It is best to keep work time for work and socialise with friends at lunch time or outside of work.

## Online relationships

Sometimes you might have relationships with someone online rather than in person. You might meet them through social media or a website. Sometimes someone you were friends with moves away and then you keep in touch with them online. Sometimes this can just be a friendship or other times it can be a romantic relationship.

Online relationships can be a great way to meet people but you also have to be careful. Sometimes people pretend to be someone else to try to get your money or take advantage of you. Some ways you can keep safe include:

- Always talk to someone you can trust if you are thinking about online dating.
- Never give anyone on a website your personal information, such as your address or bank details, and never send people money.
- People can make up a fake profile. You can't know if people are who they say they are even if they have a photo of the person they say they are.
- Never meet a stranger for a date by yourself.
- Never meet someone you haven't met before in your own home. Choose a busy public place such as a café and tell someone you trust where you are going
- Make sure to talk to someone you trust about how to stay safe.

More information about staying safe online is available in our [📄 Social Media and Online Safety guide](#).

## Romantic relationships

As you mature, you may be attracted to other people in new ways. This could mean you spend time thinking about a person or imagining spending time with them. We can be attracted to and be in romantic relationships with people from different countries, who may be older or younger than we are, who may be either male or female.

Romantic or sexual thoughts about the person may start to happen. This can be exciting and sometimes a little bit confusing.



Starting a romantic relationship is a little like beginning a new friendship. You might spend more time with the person you like, finding out about what they are interested in, what they have in common and their values, beliefs and ideas. Having a romantic relationship with someone might lead you to also think about having a sexual relationship.

For romantic relationships, it's important to remember that:

- not everyone wants, or is in, a romantic relationship
- not everyone you like will like you back
- you can't make someone be your boyfriend/girlfriend
- we cannot have romantic relationships with family members, children, animals
- some relationships break up and this might hurt your feelings
- sometimes romantic relationships might also become sexual relationships but this should only happen if you and the person want this to happen and both give consent
- there are lots of ways to feel close and intimate with someone that don't include sex
- it's possible to love many people over a lifetime.

### Questions for discussion:

---

*Think about the people in your life who are important and talk about what kind of a relationship you have with them – family, friends, work colleagues, boyfriend or girlfriend.*

*Talk about what makes something a romantic relationship rather than a friendship. What are the differences between these types of relationships?*

*Talk about why these relationships are important.*

*What kind of relationships do you hope to have in the future?*



## Maintaining romantic relationships

It is important to have consent, communication, respect and equality in all relationships. This helps the people involved to feel safe, valued and important.

If people decide that they would like to be in a relationship with each other, that is great news! It is important to check with each other often to see if the relationship is healthy and OK to keep going.

Some guiding questions include:

- Is there **respect** for and by both people in the relationship?
- Is there **consent**, with no pressure, force or guilt?
- Are both people feeling good, having positive experiences and getting **equal** pleasure?
- Is there **positive communication**? Can both people express their beliefs, opinions, questions and concerns?

Checking with each other allows everyone to clearly talk about how they are feeling. It also helps with understanding what is not OK, so people can try to change anything that is not working or is making people uncomfortable.

It's also important to be aware of any **warning signs** in a relationship. Warning signs are things that tell you something might not be going well. If something doesn't feel right in a relationship, it's important to listen to the body's early warning signs (see [📄 Protective Behaviours factsheet](#) from Family Planning Victoria).

Some behaviours in relationships are not OK

Some are:

- someone hurting you physically and being violent eg. hitting you
- treating you badly by saying mean things or yelling
- not helping you get the care you need
- trying to control you
- taking your money
- bullying you through social media or text messages
- contacting you when you don't want them too and have told them not to
- doing sexual things to you when you do not give consent.

People can call or text [📞 1800RESPECT \(1800 737 732\)](tel:1800737732) to talk to someone about the relationship or visit [📄 www.1800respect.org.au](http://www.1800respect.org.au).

## Questions for discussion:

---

*What is important to have in a relationship?*

*What behaviours are not OK in a relationship?*

*Who is a trusted person in your life who you can talk to about these things?*

## Ending relationships

Sometimes feelings about being in a relationship change. You may decide that you don't want to be in a relationship anymore. Someone you are with might decide that they would like to end the relationship and just be friends. This is OK. It is important to try to end relationships in a safe and healthy way. You might be confused when the other person ends a relationship about why they don't want to be together anymore. You can ask them why they don't want to be together anymore but they might not want to tell you and that's OK too.

You may feel sad and upset when a relationship ends. Or you may feel happy and relieved when a relationship ends. It is normal to feel lots of emotions.

Dealing with a breakup is much easier when people have a strong support team and interests and activities to do when a relationship ends. During a relationship, you should keep spending time with your family and friends, and keep up with work, study and hobbies.

## Key messages about relationships

- A healthy relationship is based on respect, consent, positive communication and equality.
- Having relationships is great for our health and happiness.
- Romantic relationships are a natural part of life.
- Some romantic relationships will end. Breaking up can be hard. It is important to always treat the other person with respect and kindness.
- Always keep up with the things you like to do whether in a romantic relationship or not.

# Sexuality and sexual relationships

---

Everyone has the right to explore their sexuality. This can include exploring your own body by yourself. This is called masturbation. Masturbation is a private behaviour that you do in a private space.

Where there is consent, sexual pleasure can also come from another person or partner.

In a sexual relationship, people may want to be physically close to one another and express themselves in an intimate way.

Before having a sexual relationship with another person, you need to think about what you want to do and how comfortable or ready you are. It is up to the people in the relationship to decide what they would or would not like to do in a sexual way together. Good communication is important so everyone feels comfortable. Being able to talk about what you want or like, and listening to the other person about what they want or like is essential. You might want to do something the other person doesn't want to do. They might want to do something you don't want to do. You both have to decide together, and both be happy about the decision before anything happens.

Many people are attracted to people who are the opposite gender to them. For example, when a man likes a woman. Some people feel attracted to someone who is the same gender as themselves. For example, a woman feels attracted to another woman. There are a lot of different sexualities. This is often talked about as LGBTIQ+ – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer.

It can be confusing to understand your sexuality. You can always talk about this with someone you trust, a health professional or someone from one of the family planning organisations that work in each state or territory.

Whenever doing anything sexual, there must be **consent**. Each state and territory has different laws about consent so it is important you understand what the law is wherever you live. There is more information about Consent in the [📄 Consent and The Law factsheet](#). Consent means that you have permission. Sometimes people will agree or disagree to the sexual activity. This is OK It is important that the people in the relationship feel safe. Remember to ask for consent **every** time and wait for the answer.



## Private and public places

It is important to understand the difference between private and public places and appropriate behaviour in each place.

A private place is somewhere where you are alone. No one can see or hear you when you are in a private place. In a house, the door is closed and curtains or blinds are shut. Some private places are the bathroom or the bedroom with the door closed and curtains closed. Sexual activity either alone or with another person should always be in a private space.

A public place is somewhere you are with other people, where you can see them and they can see you. Some public places are shopping centres, schools, swimming pools and parks. If you are in a romantic relationship then holding hands or hugging is OK in public.

### Questions for discussion:

---

*Can you think about other examples of public and private spaces?*

*If you saw someone in a public park getting undressed, is this OK?*


# Staying safe

---

It is important for all people to keep themselves safe in relationships. This section includes information on consent, contraception and STIs, abuse and reporting a problem.

## Consent

We have talked about consent a few times already in this resource but it is very important. People have the right to say 'yes' or 'no' to things in their lives. Everyone is in charge of their own body. When it comes to sex, or another person's body, a person must have **consent**. Consent means agreement or permission.

More information on consent is available on the  **Consent and the Law Factsheet**.

## Sexting

This is when people take photos or videos of themselves naked and send them to other people. It is sometimes called sexting. You should not share private photos of yourself with other people.

Sexting is a crime when it involves people under 18 or happens without consent of the person in the picture. Sexting can cause problems because once you send a photo you don't have control over what happens with it. Some people might share photos or videos of other people's personal sexual content, or threaten to share them with other people if the relationship breaks up. It is never OK to do this. It is a form of abuse that can get people into serious trouble with the police. If this happens to you, talk to a trusted adult about what to do next. You may need to make a complaint to the police.

If someone sends you sexual pictures and you do not want to receive them you should tell them right away. If the person keeps sending you things you should tell someone you trust and report it to the police. Never send these pictures to anyone else. You need to respect other people's privacy.

ThinkUKnow has some good resources that cover online grooming and personal sexual content, including an Easy Read guide for staying safe online.

 <https://www.thinkuknow.org.au/resources>

## Contraception

Contraception is used to stop a woman from getting pregnant. Some types of contraception can protect against sexually transmissible infections. All women and men, including those with a disability, have the right to make their own choices about their bodies and which method of contraception they use.

Some types of contraception are condoms, the pill, an IUD and Implanon. It is important to find the one that will work best for you to both prevent an unwanted pregnancy and protect yourself against sexually transmissible infections.

Most women with Down syndrome may use any method of contraception without added medical risk. You should always talk to your doctor about what will work best for you. You should be involved in making a decision. Your doctor can tell you about what is available and make a recommendation for you.

More information about contraception and sexually transmissible infections can be found on the [☞ Contraception, STIs and BBV Factsheet](#).

## Can people with Down syndrome get pregnant?

Women with Down syndrome can still get pregnant if they have unprotected sex, even though their chances are lower than women who don't have Down syndrome. Women with Down syndrome are more likely to have a child with Down syndrome than other mums.

In general, men with Down syndrome have a lower overall fertility rate than that of other men.

Even though it might be more difficult for you or your partner to get pregnant it is still important to use contraception if you don't want to have a baby.

Having a child is a big responsibility and changes life forever. If you and your partner are thinking about having a baby it is important to talk to someone you trust. There are many things to talk about, like what support you would need, how you would pay for all the things a child needs, how you would care for the baby and how different life would be. Having a child is a very serious commitment which needs a lot of discussion and planning if it is something you want.

There are lots of different types of families and not all families need to have children. People can enjoy spending time with other people's children, like being an aunty or uncle or having pets or living with a group of friends.





## Sexual health

Men and women with Down syndrome have the same susceptibility to sexually transmissible infections (STIs) as everybody else.

Sexually transmissible infections (STIs) are infections you can get by having sex with someone who has an infection. The person may not know that they have an infection. These infections are usually passed from person to person through unprotected sexual activity. STIs can make people very sick so it is important to always protect yourself.

There are things that you can do to stop from getting an infection. Using condoms during sexual intercourse is the best known form of protection against sexually transmissible infections.

Getting information and education about using condoms is important before you decide to have sex. You should ask someone you trust about this.

More information about contraception and sexually transmissible infections can be found on the [☞ \*\*Contraception, STIs and BBV Factsheet\*\*](#) developed by Family Planning Victoria.

# Abuse and reporting a problem

---

## What is abuse?

Abuse is when someone hurts you physically or with what they say. Abuse can also be trying to control you or taking your money without you knowing. Abuse can happen in person and also online too.

Bodies are great guides at telling people when they are feeling scared, worried or unsafe – it's important to know how to listen to them. If a person feels unsafe, they must tell a trusted adult. Nothing is ever so bad that a person can't tell someone. It is important to tell trusted adults and keep telling them until they listen.

There are some good adults to tell because some adults, by law, have to help, including teachers, police, ambulance, doctors, residential support staff – they are mandated helpers for abuse, danger and neglect.

## How to report a problem

If you are having a problem you should talk to someone you trust. This might be your parent, a friend or a support worker. These people can help you decide what to do. You might need to talk to the police. If the first person doesn't listen, keep telling people that you trust until someone listens. If you feel confident to make a report by yourself, you can contact the police on 📞 **131 444** Australia-wide. You will need to tell the police officer a bit about what happened so they can find the right person for you to speak with.

Abuse can be reported through:

### The Police

📞 **131 444** Australia wide or through your local police force.

### The National Disability Abuse and Neglect Hotline

To make a report, contact the Hotline on 📞 **1800 880 052**  
or send an email to: ✉️ [hotline@workfocus.com](mailto:hotline@workfocus.com)

If the complaint is about a service provider, it can be reported to the NDIS Quality and Safeguard Commission 🖥️ <https://www.ndiscommission.gov.au/about/complaints>

More information is available on the 🖥️ **Getting help Factsheet** from Family Planning Victoria.

## Questions for discussion:

---

*What ways should a person keep themselves safe?*

*If you had a friend that had told you their girlfriend or boyfriend was checking their phone and telling them who they could and couldn't talk to, what advice would you give?*

# Key points on relationships and sexuality

---

This resource has covered a lot of important information. The key points are:

- Everyone has rights in regards to their sexuality.
- Relationships are important because they can make us happy.
- Consent is very important for any sexual activity.
- You need to protect yourself from Sexually Transmissible Infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancies.
- There are private and public places and you need to be mindful of what is OK in each place.
- Any type of abuse in a relationship is wrong and should be reported.
- Talking to your family or supporters about relationships and sexuality can be really helpful. Counselling in this area can be provided through a person's NDIS plan.

## Factsheets

A number of factsheets developed by Family Planning Victoria have been mentioned through this resource. These factsheets are available at:

 <https://www.fpv.org.au/resources/community-organisations>

Contraception, STIs and BBV Factsheet

Getting Help Factsheet

Protective Behaviours Factsheet

Consent and the Law Factsheet

# Family planning organisations in Australia

---

The family planning organisations in each state and territory provide information, support, education and advocacy on sexual health care and reproduction.

## Family Planning Alliance Australia

 <https://www.familyplanningallianceaustralia.org.au>

## Sexual Health and Family Planning ACT

 <http://www.shfpact.org.au>

## Family Planning Victoria

 <https://www.fpv.org.au>

## Family Planning NSW

 <https://www.fpnsw.org.au>

## True Relationships and Reproductive Health QLD

 <https://www.familyplanningallianceaustralia.org.au/services/>

## Family Planning NT

 <http://www.fpwnt.com.au>

## Shine SA

 <https://www.shinesa.org.au>

## Family Planning Tasmania

 <http://www.fpt.asn.au>

## Sexual Health Quarters

 <https://shq.org.au>

# Other helpful resources

---

## All About Sex Factsheets

 <https://www.fpnsw.org.au/factsheets/individuals/disability/all-about-sex>

## Being a Healthy Woman Factsheets

 <https://www.fpnsw.org.au/health-information/individuals/disability/being-healthy-woman-factsheets>

## Pregnancy Planning Information

 <https://www.fpnsw.org.au/planning-pregnancy-and-pregnancy-choices>

## Sex Safe and Fun Resource

 <https://www.fpnsw.org.au/factsheets/individuals/disability/sex-safe-and-fun>

## Sexual Lives and Respectful relationships

 <https://www.slrr.com.au/research-resources/online-resources/>

## Disability and Sexuality – Shine SA

 <https://www.shinesa.org.au/community-information/disability-sexuality/>

## Sex and Disability

 <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/sex-and-disability>

## SECCA

 <https://www.secca.org.au>

## Consentability

 <https://consentability.com>

## Disclaimer

The information in this resource is general in nature and does not constitute advice. Down Syndrome Australia will not be held responsible for any decisions made as a result of using this information. The contents of the resource do not constitute legal advice and should not be relied on as such.



1300 881 935



18/71 Victoria Crescent, Abbotsford VIC 3067



info@downsyndrome.org.au



[www.downsyndrome.org.au](http://www.downsyndrome.org.au)



Down Syndrome  
Australia