

Healthy Relationships and Sexuality

Elise Gray is a mother who empowers her daughter to make her own choices about her body, her relationships and her future.

Anna and Jack first met in high school but didn't start dating until she was 21 years old. They were both so happy with their first evening out together and started seeing each other every fortnight through social events, movies, family dinners and community activities.

After six months their relationship progressed when Jack arrived at our place for a date and Anna took him by the hand into her bedroom and shut the door. Anna was modelling what she had seen her brother do, so I thought this was a reasonable response after dating for six months. It certainly was a catalyst to move forward with sexual health support and I very quickly picked up the phone to talk to Jack's mum about this new development.

I had been looking at contraception options for a couple of months, trying to pre-empt the next stages. I sat down with Anna and talked about relationships and what she wanted, which resulted in an appointment with a gynaecologist and relationship counselling. I explained to Anna that if she wanted to have the door closed when Jack was over, contraception was necessary. I wanted her to be empowered during this new experience – one she desperately wanted to explore. Anna and I talked at length after the appointment with the gynaecologist and I let her know that progressing with contraception was completely her decision.

As parents, we firmly believe that Anna should be given the respect to have the same opportunities in life as our other children, including having a relationship and living with her partner if that is what she wants. Jack's mum and I discussed the progression of their relationship, and we agreed that it would be necessary for them both to go to counselling to learn about sexual health to ensure it was a positive and respectful experience. Anna too was very keen to learn more and attend counselling.

She grew up using the correct terminology when referring to body parts, and we talked often about private and public concepts, particularly protective behaviours. Anna knew about menstruation, puberty and how babies are made,

but had a modest concept of what she understood sex to be about. This she outlined to me in a conversation prior to her first session with her new counsellor.

Anna and Jack attended some joint sessions and also have had some individual sessions over the past few years. Anna's counselling sessions continue to be important to ensure she is informed and has a non-parent mentor. Anna doesn't wish to share with me what happens in the sessions or with Jack, which I respect as it is a reasonable response from a young adult.

The right to have relationships

Patsie Frawley is an Associate Professor of Disability And Inclusion at Deakin University, where she manages a sexuality research team and coordinates the national Sexual Lives & Respectful Relationships program. She says that while not every person with intellectual disability needs to see a sexual therapist or counsellor before beginning a relationship, it gives them an opportunity to talk privately to someone who is not a family member. "People with intellectual disability should have the same opportunities as anyone else to ask questions and develop their relationships. Many people seek out counselling or education programs when trying to work their way through their own understanding of their relationships."

Assoc. Prof. Frawley says that we're all sexual beings, and intimacy and sexuality – however they're achieved – are part of being human: "It's instinctual, there's no stopping it. Hopefully for all of us there is a way to engage with the sexual part of ourselves in a positive way. It should be no different for people with an intellectual disability than for anyone else."

"What we need to do is work out ways for people with intellectual disability to explore sexuality and relationships which will enable them to make their own decisions while being supported."

You can see more on the Sexual Lives & Respectful Relationships program at www.slrr.com.au

