

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Somebody Else's Job: Experiences of Sex Education among Health Professionals, Parents and Adolescents with Physical Disabilities in Southwestern Ontario

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Sex education, adolescence, physical disability, sexuality, narrative inquiry, qualitative study

POPULATION GROUP

Youth with Disabilities or Special Needs

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health and Wellness; Diversity, Social Inclusion and Safety

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Ontario, Canada

SOURCE

Academic

“Sexuality and disability is an aspect of health and development that is often overlooked among young people with physical disabilities in both formal and informal educational settings.”

1. What is the research about?

This research seeks to address a lack of knowledge about how to support the sexual health education for youth with physical disabilities. In order to “improve the overall physical, emotional and social well-being of this often misunderstood and stigmatized population,” this study explores the sexual health education needs of youth with physical disabilities from the perspective of young people themselves, their caregivers, and their health service providers.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in Southwestern Ontario.

3. Who is this research about?

Young people with physical disabilities, their primary caregivers, and health professionals were included in the study:

- Youth participants were 14-21 years old, with a physical disability that required them to use a mobility support device, such as a walker. Youth participants with additional cognitive and developmental disabilities were excluded from the study.
- Four parents, which consisted of three mothers and one father.
- Four health professionals from a children's rehabilitation centre, including social worker, occupational therapist, nurse, and a counselor.

4. How was the research done?

The researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with the participants. The youth participated in two interviews and the parents participated in one interview. The researchers also held a focus group with supporting health professionals.

5. What are the key findings?

Youth were frustrated that sexual health education was either not available to them, or when it was available, lacked information specific to their needs. Parents and health professionals shared this frustration and also felt ill-equipped to provide adequate sexual health education; each felt that a different support person was better suited to provide the needed information.

Youth participants expressed the feeling that they are seen as inferior to their able-bodied peers. They also challenged the social stigma that they are asexual.

The research identifies a need for information, resources and support that address the specific needs of youth with physical disabilities. In order to combat the stigma experienced by these young people, disability and sexuality should be discussed in formal and informal sex education settings.

The study participants also agreed that sexual health education should be holistic in its scope, rather than narrow and technical in nature. The participants state a preference for services that address them and their needs as “whole” people, including the social and emotional dimensions of sexual health.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

Youth workers can intentionally combat the social isolation and stigma that youth with physical disabilities experience by advocating within their organizations for accessible programs and services.

Youth workers can design and engage youth with physical disabilities with both high quality general sexual health education and focused information, resources and supports that reflect their specific needs.

Youth workers can recognize, affirm, and validate the sexual health needs of youth with disabilities. Youth workers can work to coordinate services with other health care and support providers. They can also provide training and educational resources and information for parents and caregivers to improve the way they provide accurate and safe sexual health supports to their children with physical disabilities.



East, L. J., & Orchard, T. R. (2014). Somebody else's job: Experiences of sex education among health professionals, parents and adolescents with physical disabilities in Southwestern Ontario. *Sexuality and Disability*, 32(3), 335-350.