

# Training Guide

I/DD VERSION



## Friendships & Dating Program



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Human Development  
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## Section 1 Introduction

The lives of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) have undergone many changes since the early 20th century. The cultural mindset and policies regarding individuals with disabilities living within the United States have shifted from those that encourage institutionalization to the recognition that all people have the right to live and work in the community of their choice. Consequently, individuals with disabilities are living, shopping, and recreating in the same spaces as those without disabilities, and very few people question their right to this freedom (Morin, Rivard, Crocker, Boursier, & Caron, 2013; Scior, Addai-Davis, Kenyon, & Sheridan, 2013).

However, one aspect of personal freedom remains controversial – interpersonal intimacy. Although the age of onset and duration varies, individuals with I/DD experience the same physiological maturation process as their peers during adolescence, which includes the emergence of sexual needs and desires (Murphy & Elias, 2006; Zacharin, 2008). Despite these similarities, it is widely believed by individuals without disabilities, including those in support roles and in the community, that they are incapable of responsibly fulfilling these needs. During the past several decades, beliefs regarding appropriate levels of intimacy have become more positive, especially among young persons. Yet many still report believing people with disabilities will not or should not engage in sexual activity, marry, or have children (Cuskelly & Bryde, 2009; Hosseinkhanzadeh, Taher, & Esapoor, 2012; Parchomiuk, 2012). These negative attitudes reflect a culture and policies that encourage the repression of basic desires for intimacy and interpersonal closeness among individuals with I/DD.

Meaningful interpersonal relationships are important in the lives of all individuals. Research has documented a strong connection between the quality of an individual's social network and their physical and mental health (Cohen, 2004). Youth and adults with I/DD have repeatedly expressed the desire for opportunities to make friends and spend time in partnered relationships (Knox & Hickson, 2001; Ward et al., 2010). However, they tend to have small social networks, limited opportunities for social participation, and remain socially isolated from their peers (Emerson & McVilly, 2004; Ward, Bosek, & Trimble, 2010). A lack of interpersonal connection and social support places individuals at risk for harmful physiological, emotional, and behavioral consequences, including low self-esteem and socially unacceptable behaviors (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Recently, a growing movement of individuals with disabilities advocating for their right to choose to engage in responsible sexual behavior has emerged in the United States. This push for self-determination combined with an increased realization of rights has led to the choice to marry and/or become sexually involved becoming more common. This trend brings into focus the necessity of providing access to information about the subtleties of friendship, dating, love, and