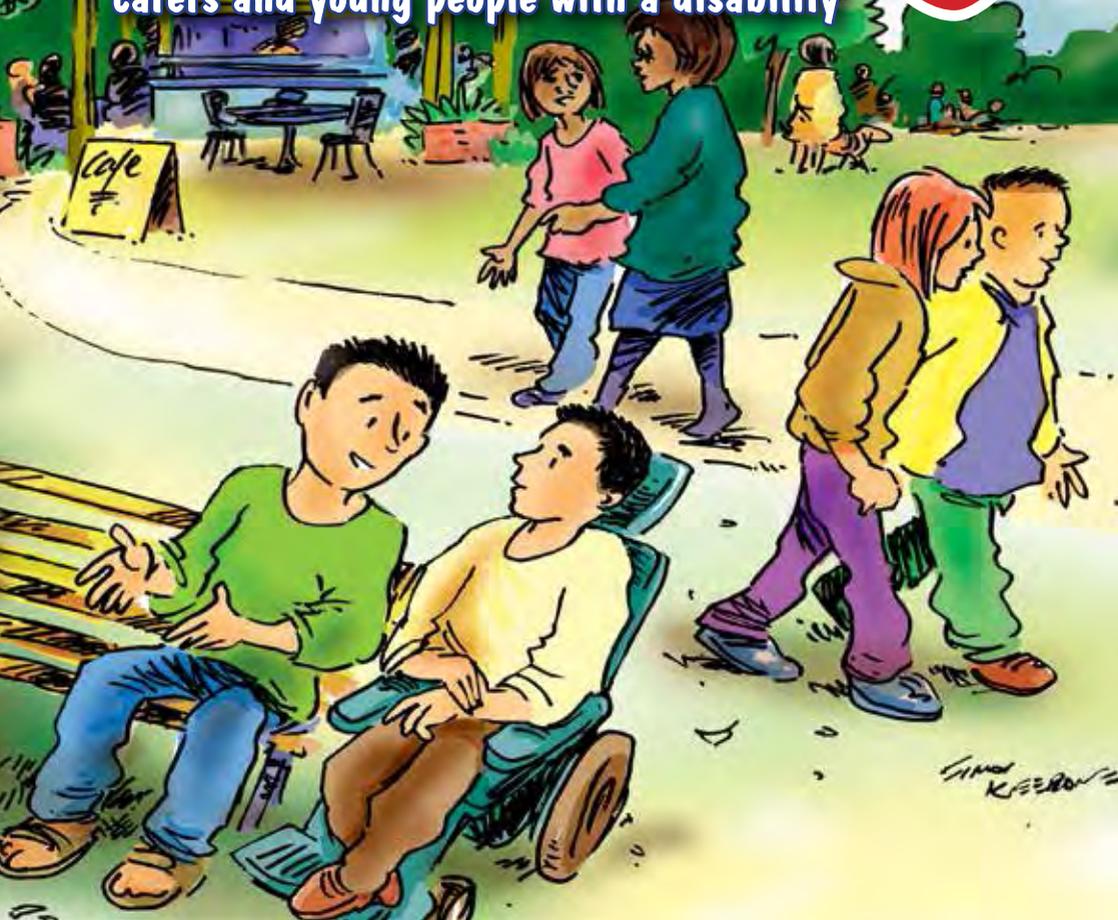


# Friendships and dating

Information about relationships for parents,  
carers and young people with a disability



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# Introduction

Adolescence can be a difficult and confusing time for young people. This can be even more difficult for a young person with a disability who may learn in different ways or at a slower rate than their peers.

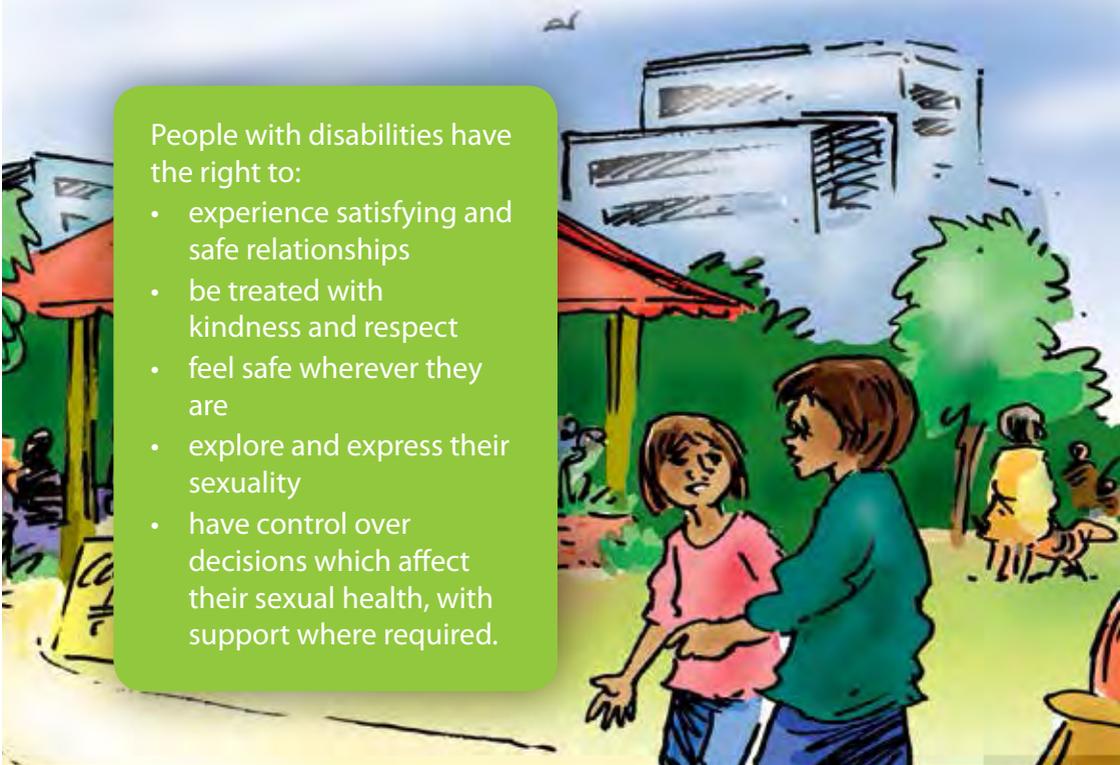
Many parents worry about their child's ability to experience relationships safely without exploitation. However, young people with disabilities will experience the same hormonal changes as other teenagers. It is helpful to encourage your child's developing sexuality so that it is explored in a safe and supportive environment.

As a parent or carer, how you relate to your child's sexuality and how you respond to their sexual behaviours will have a strong influence on the sexual health and development of your child. You can help your child establish healthy relationships by providing them with information that they understand, supporting them to make their own decisions and talking to them about their feelings.

This resource has been developed as a guide to help parents and carers start talking to their child about relationships, sexual health and personal safety.

People with disabilities have the right to:

- experience satisfying and safe relationships
- be treated with kindness and respect
- feel safe wherever they are
- explore and express their sexuality
- have control over decisions which affect their sexual health, with support where required.



# 4 Information for parents

There are a number of skills that you can help your child develop to prepare them for dating.

## **Encourage positive self-esteem**

If your child values who they are and believes that they are a worthwhile person they are likely to find it easier to make friends and enjoy healthy relationships. You can help encourage positive self-esteem by making sure your child feels loved and that you are glad about who your child is. Think about the verbal and non-verbal messages you send to your child through praise and punishment and how they might affect your child's perception of who they are.

## **Discuss family values**

Families have different religious, cultural and social values that are continuously communicated to children. This can impact on the child's perception of relationships, nudity, masturbation and the use of sexual language. Talk about your beliefs with your child so they understand how you would like them to behave. It's important to be open and clear about what you think and why.

## **Encourage social interaction**

You can help widen your child's social circle in a number of ways. Firstly, lay the foundations of positive social interaction at home from an early age. It's also important to make time for social activities where your child can mix with peers. Through this interaction, your child will have the opportunity to observe and practise appropriate behaviour. It's also important that they spend time with members of the opposite sex, either at school or socially, as this can enhance their self-esteem.

## **Teach independence**

Start by encouraging your child to be responsible for their personal care and hygiene, particularly washing their own private parts. Once your child demonstrates that they can be responsible and trusted you can give them more independence. As they get older, you may want to consider independent living skills training.

## **Teach the difference between public and private**

Explain to your child your family's standards for privacy and what is acceptable behaviour in public. This can be demonstrated and reinforced at home with simple things, like knocking on your child's door before entering, which acknowledge their right to have private space and enjoy time alone. Encouraging your child to undress and dress in their bedroom or bathroom behind a closed door with the blind down is another example.

## **Explain puberty**

Your child's physical development typically occurs at the same time as their non-disabled peers. Always be prepared to answer your child's questions about puberty as they arise. However, it's best for your child if you start talking about the changes they'll experience before they actually occur. Females need to understand about periods before they start so they do not fear menstrual blood. Girls should practise wearing sanitary napkins to prepare them for their first period. Boys need to know about puberty before they start having erections and wet dreams. Depending on the physical development of your child this is from about eight years old.

## **Teach protective behaviours**

People with a disability are at higher risk of sexual abuse and exploitation than the general community. To reduce the risk of abuse, it's important to teach your child about what is good touch and what is bad touch. They also need plenty of opportunities to develop and practise acceptable behaviour and problem-solving skills with family support. Talk to your child about which adults they can trust and go to for help if they need it. In addition, teach them the correct name for their private parts, so they are in a stronger position to speak out, explain and seek help if someone touches them in ways that are wrong.

If you find it difficult to find the words to talk to your child about sex, puberty and body parts, start using the correct terminology when they are young so you won't feel so embarrassed. Children can accept new ideas and factual information easily when it's presented in an honest, matter-of-fact way. It also gives you time to repeat and reinforce this information.

# 6 Meeting and making friends

Friendships can contribute to the quality of your child's life. Friends can help your child's confidence, sense of independence and help them live a more fulfilling life. Friendships offer companionship and a sense of belonging that evolves through the sharing of everyday experiences and common interests. They can help your child feel good about themselves and are critical to help young people to develop the social skills that lead to more intimate relationships.

Some children with disabilities have trouble making and keeping friends. Although you may want to protect your child from rejection or hurt feelings, it's important for them to be given the opportunity to grow and develop socially. Talk to your child about how to meet friends, what makes a good friendship, as well as why friendships end. As a parent you can encourage their friendships and be there to pick up the pieces if it goes wrong.

Recreation, social, hobby or craft groups provide a good opportunity to meet new people, as well as being fun. There may be a cost involved, but information services can provide the contact details of groups that are disability-friendly.

Safe transport makes the difference between social isolation at home and getting out and meeting friends. Consider what skills and knowledge your child already has in using public transport to go places and return safely. Build on these.

## When you meet new people introduce yourself and ask questions.



Hello, my name is Kylie.

What is your name?

I live with my parents.

Who do you live with?

I like to sing and dance.

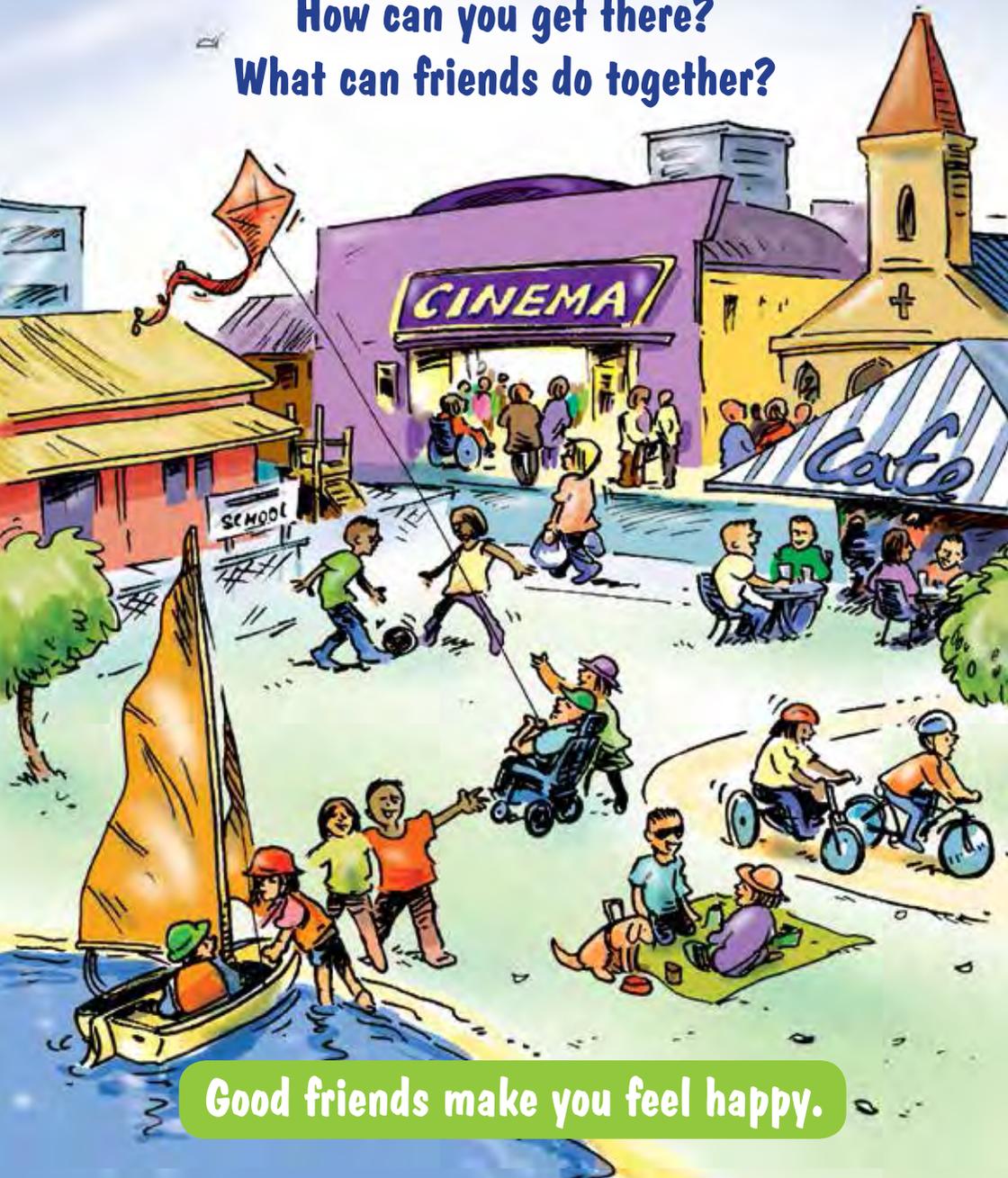
What do you like to do?

What did you do on the weekend?

What are your hobbies?

7

**Where can you meet new friends?  
How can you get there?  
What can friends do together?**



**Good friends make you feel happy.**

# 8 Dating

Sometimes friendships evolve into romantic relationships. Dating is a normal part of adolescent social development. You may have particular ideas about dating based on your beliefs and values. Discuss these with your child so that they know what you find acceptable.

Dating is a great way for them to further develop their social skills, but some parents may be concerned about the risks involved. To ensure your child's safety, it's also a good idea to have some ground rules, like when they can go out, what time they must be home and where they can go. You could also arrange to meet the person before the date. If you are really worried, talk to your child about going on the date with a group of friends or with a trusted friend or family member.

You can help to prepare your child for dating by talking to them about different types of relationships people have and the characteristics they should value in a close relationship.

## Talking tips

Use terms that you are comfortable with and explain them to your child so that you have a common understanding when talking about anything to do with relationships and sexual health.

When talking about relationships with your child you could discuss:

- What is the difference between friendship and dating? (You can use the images on the opposite page to discuss the different types of relationships.)
- When are you ready to date?
- How do you feel when you like or love somebody special?
- What's appropriate behaviour if you like someone? What's not appropriate?
- If you've been asked on a date, what should you do?
- What can you do on a date? What can you talk about?

Sexual orientation is not something that a person can change. It's about how they feel inside. Strong, emotional messages against homosexuality or bisexuality will not change sexual orientation, but can contribute to guilt, loneliness, self-loathing, depression and even suicide.

There are many different types of relationships.  
What types of relationships are these?



Dating should be exciting and fun.

# Getting ready for your date

## Things to remember before going on a date



Use deodorant. It will make you smell good.



Have a bath or shower and use soap. It will make you feel good.



Brush your teeth so they feel clean.



Put on some perfume, but not too much.



Have a shave and put on a little bit of aftershave.



Wear clean underwear and clothes that make you feel good.

**Smell good. Look good. Feel good.**

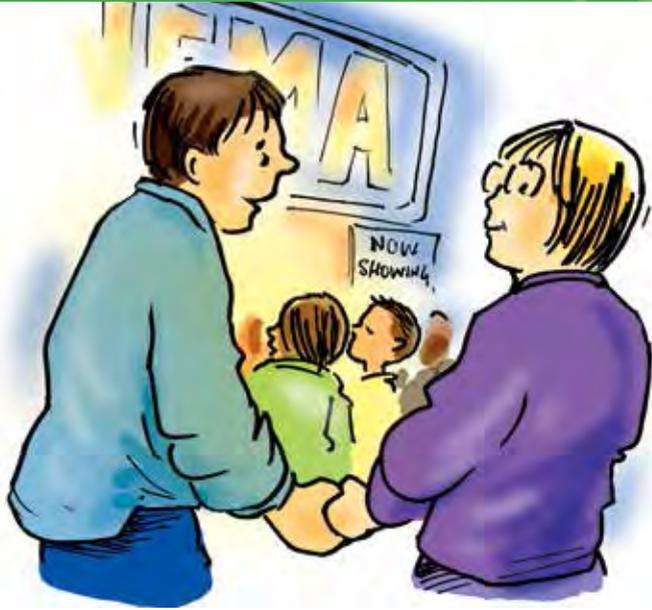
# Staying safe and having fun

Invite your date to meet your parents.

Do not accept a lift from your date.

Spend time together around other people first.

Take a buddy with you. Talk about how to keep each other safe.



Meet your date in a place where there are other people.  
Go to the movies or bowling.

Take your mobile phone. Ring your parents or carer if you feel bullied or pressured into something you don't want to do.

It's ok to say NO if your date tries to touch you and you don't want that.

Do not make sexual advances toward someone unless they consent.

**But most of all have fun!**

**Always tell your parent or carer where you are going, who you are meeting and what time you will be coming home. This helps to keep you safe.**

# 12 Choosing healthy relationships

Children learn a lot about relationships from their parents. If members of the family have healthy relationships, children will learn that being together can provide love, support, acceptance, tolerance and compromise. Role modelling open and honest communication with your child and other members of your family will also assist them to develop the skills they require to contribute to a relationship.

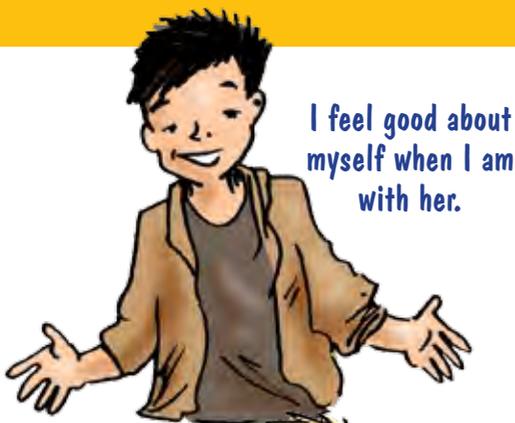
Healthy relationships have been linked to physical and emotional wellbeing. Positive self-esteem is the key. If your child feels good about who they are, they are more likely to choose relationships that are positive and respectful. They are also more likely to feel strong enough to say no to situations that put them at risk or make them feel uncomfortable.

It is also important for your child to know how they should feel in a healthy relationship so they feel empowered to end it if it's not feeling right. Talk to your child about respect, trust, honesty, safety, equality and happiness, as well as their right to say no to anything they don't want to happen.



**I can talk about how I feel.  
I can talk about what I think.  
I can talk about the things  
I like.  
I can talk about the  
things I want  
I am being listened to.**

***This is respect.***



I feel good about myself when I am with her.



I am honest and don't lie to her.



We have lots of fun.



We trust each other.



If I don't want to do something I can say no and he listens.



I always feel safe. He never hurts me.



He makes me laugh!

In a healthy relationship you are treated with respect and you feel happy and safe.

# 14 Avoiding unhealthy relationships

Many parents worry about their child being in a relationship that is verbally, emotionally, sexually or physically unhealthy and want to protect them from being hurt. This is completely understandable as people with a disability are more vulnerable to abuse because they can be more compliant or may not understand what is happening to them.

It is important to teach your child skills that can help to keep them safe. Explain what is good touch and bad touch. Talk about how to say 'no' to touch that makes them feel uncomfortable by using assertive body language and voice. To reinforce this message, children should not be required to kiss or be kissed by relatives, friends or acquaintances if they do not want to.

Having an open and honest relationship with your child will make it easier for them to talk to you if things go wrong. It is also important for you to explain what your child may feel in an unhealthy relationship and encourage them to talk to you if they are:

- being pressured to do things they don't want to do
- feeling scared, frightened or being bullied
- being criticised or humiliated
- feeling bad about who they are
- being controlled and have to watch what they do or say
- fighting or arguing
- prevented from seeing friends or family
- feeling upset, confused or angry
- hurt or there are threats to hurt them

Sometimes your child may feel too guilty or ashamed to talk to you about an abusive relationship. Look out for the following signs:

- physical injuries, like bruises, broken bones, sprains or cuts, that have unlikely explanations
- other physical symptoms of any nature including headaches, backaches, sleep disturbances, loss of control of bladder or bowel functions or unexplained weight loss
- a loss of interest in the activities they once enjoyed
- dramatically changed behaviour, including depression, anxiety, phobias, self-injury or neglect
- unusual sexualised behaviours, including compulsive masturbation or trying to involve others in sexual acts

**Always listen to your child and take abuse seriously.**

It's not OK for someone to touch you when you say 'no'.



It's not OK for someone to make you feel bad about yourself.

It's not OK for someone to say things about you that are not very nice.



It's not OK for someone to yell at you.

It's not OK if you feel frightened.



It's not OK for someone to hit you.



If someone hurts you or makes you feel bad tell someone you trust.

# 16 Sexual relationships

Not all parents are going to be comfortable with talking openly about sexual health and relationships with their child, but it's more difficult for your child to make safe decisions if they are not informed.

Your child's physical and emotional maturity may determine when you start talking to them about sexual relationships. It may also depend on your child's level of understanding of their own sexuality, sexual development or their displayed sexual behaviour. However, don't wait for your child to ask questions. There are always opportunities in daily life to share your views and values.

It's important for you to know the facts about sexual health so you can give your child simple, honest explanations. Talking about the physical aspects of sexual intercourse, including explaining vaginal sex, oral sex, anal sex, and penetration using fingers or objects, can help your child identify and keep them safe from sexual abuse.

Information on safer sex and contraception is provided on the following pages. SHine SA can also assist with a range of services, books and resources. It's also a good idea to find out what your child is learning in their sexual health and relationships education classes at school so that you can reinforce their learning.

If you feel that your child may be thinking about having a sexual relationship it may be relevant to revisit what behaviours are appropriate in private and public spaces. It's also essential for your child to know these rules about sex:

- Both people must say yes.
- Both people must be 17 years or older in South Australia.
- Both people must not be from the same family.
- It must be in a private place.

## **Masturbation**

As girls and boys reach adolescence it is natural and normal for them to explore their bodies and to masturbate. It is a safe way for them to discover sexual pleasure. It is important not to make them feel guilty or ashamed, but to talk to them about personal hygiene and where and when it is appropriate. Always respect their privacy. Knock before entering the bedroom or bathroom.

**Both people must say yes to sex.**

**No-one should make you do things that you do not want to do.**

**Don't be pushed into having sex.**

**You do not have to have sex to be close to someone.**

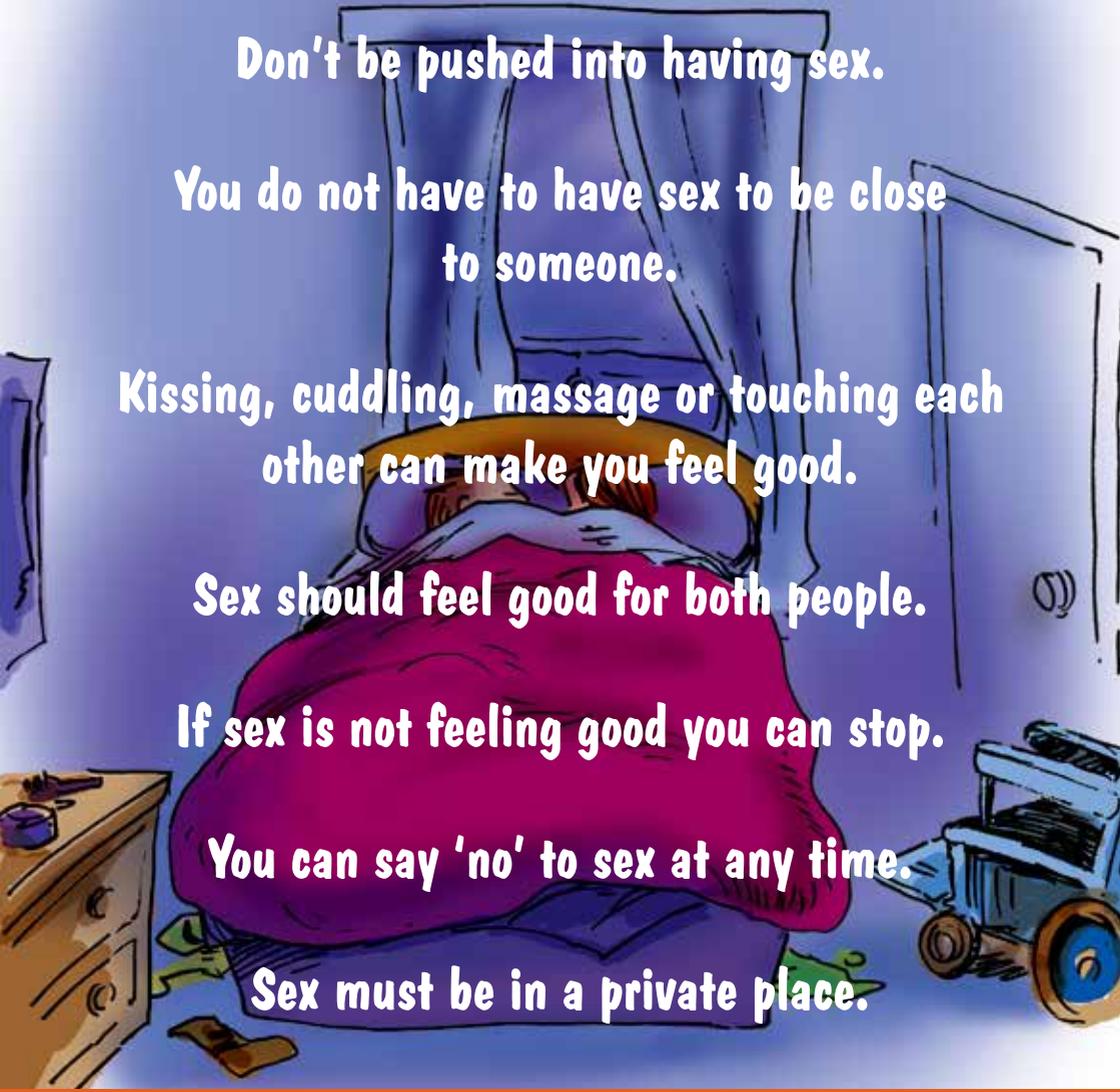
**Kissing, cuddling, massage or touching each other can make you feel good.**

**Sex should feel good for both people.**

**If sex is not feeling good you can stop.**

**You can say 'no' to sex at any time.**

**Sex must be in a private place.**



Safer sex means choosing sexual behaviours that protect both partners from:

- sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- unplanned pregnancy
- violence, harm and exploitation

Of course, this means that young people can experience a range of safer sex practices that involve physical and emotional intimacy, and not necessarily sexual intercourse.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are transmitted from one person to another during vaginal, anal and oral sex and sometimes through direct contact with genitals. The most common STIs are chlamydia, genital herpes and genital warts. STIs can cause serious infections, with pain, infertility and other problems if left untreated.

## **Chlamydia**

Chlamydia can cause a burning sensation when urinating, unusual vaginal discharge or stomach pain in women or pus from the penis in men. Often there are no symptoms at all. It can also cause infertility. It can be easily diagnosed with a urine or swab test and treated with antibiotics.

## **Herpes**

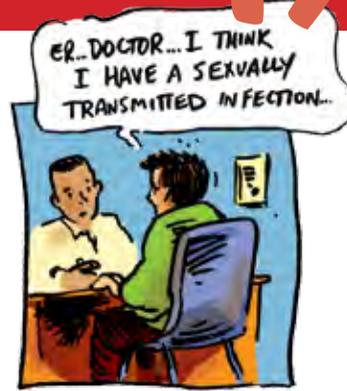
Herpes can cause painful tingling or itching, blisters or ulcers around the genitals or anus. There is no cure for the infection, but it can be controlled by treatment.

## **Genital warts**

Genital warts are passed through skin-to-skin contact and may appear as lumps around the vulva or in the vagina, on the penis or around or inside the anus. Visible warts can be treated. Some types of warts have been linked to cervical cancer. There is a vaccine available, either free through school-based programs, or on private prescription.

Condoms are the only contraception that greatly reduces the risk of STIs and unplanned pregnancy. They are available from pharmacies, supermarkets and sexual health clinics.

**Safer sex means not getting a sexually transmitted infection.**



**Safer sex means if you want to have sex and don't want a baby you should use contraception.**



**Safer sex means not hurting or abusing each other.**



**Safer sex means you can say NO.**

**Safer sex means you stop if someone says no.**



**Safer sex means using a condom when having sex.**



**If you are having sex, practise safer sex and get tested for sexually transmitted infections regularly.**

# 20 Contraception

Young people may need assistance from their parent or carer to help them understand the choices of contraception. There are a variety of contraception options available. Some methods may also be useful in regulating young women's periods and reducing menstrual discomfort. The following are common methods of contraception.

## Condom

The condom is the only method that protects against sexually transmitted infections. It's good to use lubricant to help prevent the condom breaking and to make sex more comfortable. Lubricant can be purchased in a tube, sachet or pump and is found next to the condom section in pharmacies and supermarkets. In addition to teaching them how to use this method, young people also need the communication skills to negotiate using a condom. They also need to know about emergency contraception if the condom breaks or slips off.

### How to use a condom correctly

- ▶ Check the packet to make sure it's not past the expiry date.
- ▶ Pre-cum can transmit infection and sperm, so avoid contact between your erect penis and your partner's genitals, anus or mouth before the condom is on.
- ▶ Don't tear the condom when opening the packet.
- ▶ Air trapped inside a condom can cause it to break, so squeeze the tip of the condom between your forefinger and thumb and place it over the fully erect penis.
- ▶ Unroll the rest of the condom down to the base of the penis.
- ▶ Apply water-based lubricant to increase pleasure and stop the condom breaking.
- ▶ If the condom rolls up during sex, roll it back to the base of the penis immediately.
- ▶ If the condom comes off or breaks during sex withdraw the penis and put on a new condom before intercourse continues.
- ▶ After cumming hold on to the base of the condom and withdraw the penis before it goes soft.
- ▶ When removing the condom, don't allow the condom or penis to touch you or your partner's genital area. Dispose of carefully.

## **Contraceptive injection (Depo)**

This is a contraceptive that is injected every three months by a doctor or sexual health nurse. This method stops ovulation and usually stops periods. It is very effective as a contraceptive as long as injections are given on time.

## **Contraceptive implant (Implanon)**

The contraceptive implant protects against pregnancy for three years, but can easily be removed. It is inserted in the upper arm using a local anaesthetic and will require the young woman to keep her arm still during the procedure. In some cases it may stop periods, and improve symptoms such as premenstrual syndrome (PMS) and painful periods.

## **Intra-Uterine Device (IUD)**

This device is placed in the uterus by a doctor, and is effective for many years. With one type of IUD, periods become lighter and may stop altogether.

## **The Pill**

The Pill is used to prevent pregnancy, but can also assist with regulating periods, reducing problems such as PMS, painful and heavy periods, and can even reduce the number of hormonal-induced epileptic fits. It requires a doctor's prescription. It must be taken daily, which may be an issue for some women with a disability.

## **Emergency contraception**

Emergency contraception can be used if there is a risk of unwanted pregnancy, including:

- unprotected sexual intercourse
- sexual assault
- if the condom breaks or more than two consecutive hormonal contraceptive pills are missed

Emergency contraception is most effective if taken within 24 hours, but can be taken up to five days after unprotected sex. It is easy to obtain over the counter at pharmacies and is available free at many public hospital emergency departments, SHine SA, Pregnancy Advisory Centre and Clinic 275.

For more information about contraceptive options, contact SHine SA or your doctor. Make sure full information is provided about any other medications being taken by the young person. Some hormonal contraceptives can seriously impact the effect of other medications or vice-versa.

# 22 Want more information?

If you require further information or want to talk to someone you can contact SHine SA or any of the following services or hotlines.

## **Bfriend**

A support program for same-sex attracted people.

Tel: 8202 5805 or 8202 5192

[www.facebook.com/BfriendUC](http://www.facebook.com/BfriendUC)

## **Clinic 275**

Free confidential testing, diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted infections.

Tel: 8222 5075

Toll free: 1800 806 490

[www.stdservices.on.net/clinic275](http://www.stdservices.on.net/clinic275)

## **Disability Information and Resource Centre Inc (DIRC)**

Information for people with a disability, their parents and carers, including disability-friendly services, recreational and social groups.

Tel: 8236 0555 or 1300 305 558

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

## **Disability Services**

Services for people with a disability.

Tel: 1300 786 117 or 8272 1988

## **National Disability Abuse and Neglect Hotline**

Australia wide telephone hotline for reporting abuse and neglect of people with disabilities.

Tel: 1800 880 052

TTY: 1800 301 130

NRS: 1800 555 677

[www.disabilityhotline.net.au](http://www.disabilityhotline.net.au)

## **Parent Helpline**

Information service for parents that provides information about health, behaviour and relationships.

Tel: 1300 364 100

[www.parenting.sa.gov.au/helpline](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au/helpline)

## **Rape and Sexual Assault Service (Yarrow Place)**

Offers services for victims of rape who are 16 years and over.

Tel: 8226 8777

Toll free: 1800 817 421

After hours: 8226 8787

[www.yarrowplace.sa.gov.au](http://www.yarrowplace.sa.gov.au)

## **Recreation Link-up**

Provides information on recreation options for people with a disability.

Tel: 8200 2508

[www.reclinkup.ymca.org.au](http://www.reclinkup.ymca.org.au)

## **Relationships Australia (SA)**

Information and counselling to support and enhance relationships.

Tel: 1300 364 277

Toll free: 1800 182 325

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

## SHine SA provides a range of services for people with a disability

SHine SA provides clinical sexual health services for people with a disability. A number of clinics have adjustable examination beds so that clients with a physical disability can be easily transferred from a wheelchair.

SHine SA also offers support, training, education and information to people with a disability and their families/carers for any concerns related to relationships and sexual health.

For assistance please contact one of SHine SA's teams:

### **East/West Team**

Tel: 8300 5300

### **Northern Team**

Tel: 8256 0700

### **Southern Team**

Tel: 8186 8600

## **Sexual Healthline**

Call between 9 am and 1 pm, Monday to Friday.

Tel: 1300 883 793

Toll free: 1800 188 171

Email: [SexualHealthHotline@health.sa.gov.au](mailto:SexualHealthHotline@health.sa.gov.au)

## **Library & Resource Centre**

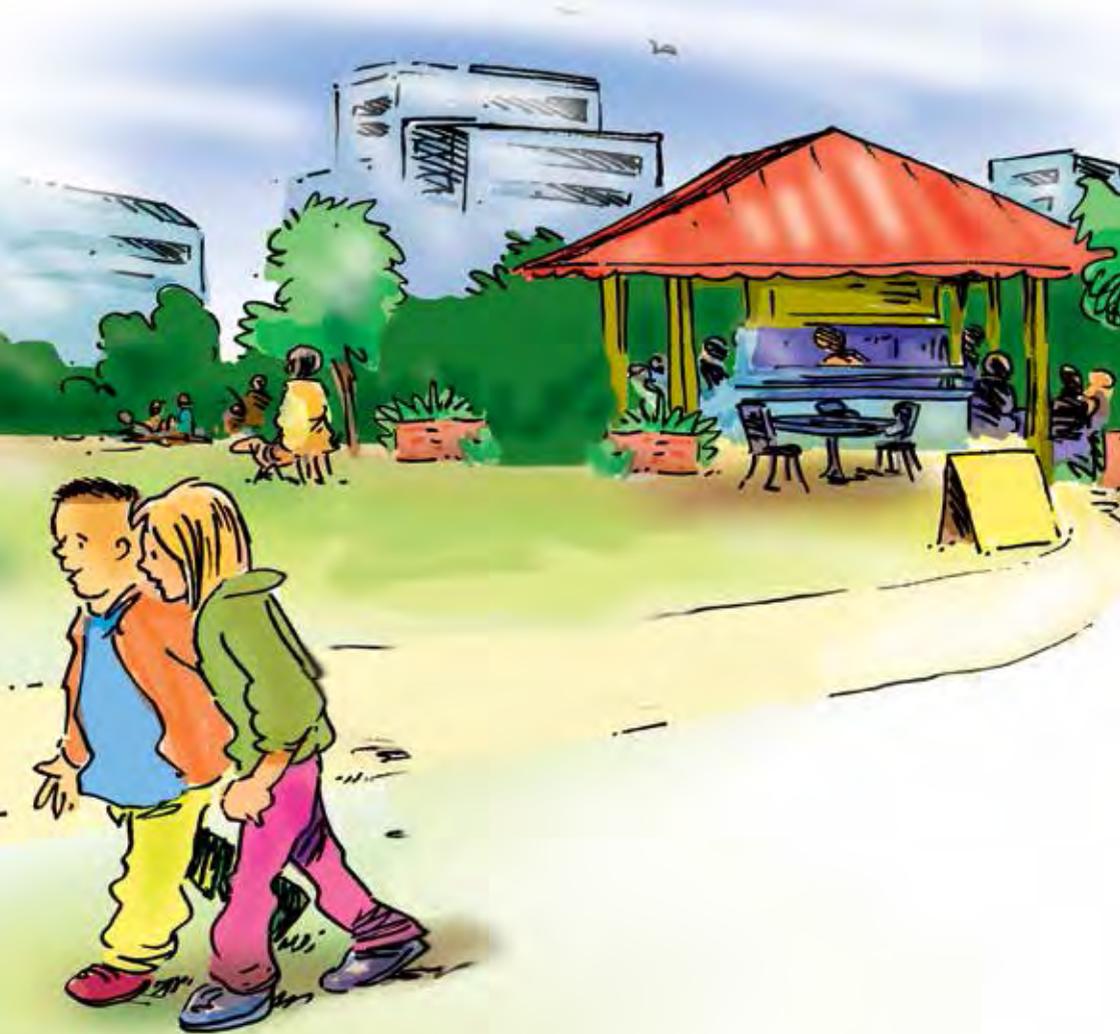
For further books and resources contact the Library on 8300 5312. A DVD based on this publication is also available for loan or purchase.

## **[www.shinesa.org.au](http://www.shinesa.org.au)**

Go to SHine SA's website to find out more on any of the sexual health issues discussed in this resource.

SHine SA would like to thank the people who participated in the Disability Advisory Group.

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Disability project worker, Sharon Pawelski  
Illustrations by Simon Kneebone  
Editing and design by Kylie Browne



This booklet is available at [www.shinesa.org.au](http://www.shinesa.org.au)

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