

Abstract

Title "May I?" Sexuality and love in the new generation of intellectual disabled young people.
Author Lotta Löfgren-Mårtenson
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Distribution Göteborg University, Department of Social Work.
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This dissertation is about young people with intellectual disabilities and their possibilities to express sexuality and love. The study aims to identify, describe and understand the opportunities and hindrances in forming relationships and expressing sexuality, and to examine in which way the influence of environment (staff and parents) may effect on the sexuality of young adults. The questions addressed in the study are: How do intellectually disabled young adults interact with each other regarding sexuality and love? What influence does environment have on the sexual expression of intellectually disabled young people? What characterises sexual expression among intellectual disabled youth, and in what way is this influenced by current societal norms and values?

Participant observation at dances specifically geared towards intellectually disabled youth was the primary data selection method. This milieu was chosen to discern and describe typical attitudes, norms and to monitor communication patterns which may shape and potentially control the possibilities for sexual expression among the intellectually disabled. Fieldnotes from 14 dances, (2 of which were not specifically for disabled youth) were collected over a two-year period. To add depth to the topic, the data includes qualitative interviews with 13 youngsters, 13 staff member and 11 parents. The interviews focused on accessibility of the intellectual disabled young person to privacy and personal space, attitudes and norms and the diverse experiences of those interviewed. The objective has been to approach the subject from various angles and to provide an in-depth understanding of the interaction between intellectually disabled young people and the attitudes and the coping skills of those around them.

The results of the study show that the group's heterogeneity, (i.e. degree and type of disability, communication and social skills level), is a major factor in their ability to express love and sexuality. Some intellectually disabled young people do not relate to others at all, but the majority do express their need for love and sexual expression. Many dream of having a partner but in reality few have boy/girlfriends. Most intellectually disabled young adults live in a prescriptive, protected world. The attitudes of caregivers and families towards sexuality and disability are imprinted strongly in this environment. The findings have shown that when trying to act responsibly the caregivers and parents often become unconsciously controlling. This hinders sexual expression and the young adults own personal sexual identity, and/or the possibility to express an alternative sexuality like for example homosexuality. There are large variations in behaviour patterns among the young adults but the most common form of sexual expression is kissing and hugging. Sexual intercourse appears quite uncommon among the youth studied. This may be a consequence of their intellectual disability and/or the restrictive nature of their environment. Most of the young people studied don't see parenthood as a realistic option, although a few mildly disabled participants expressed the desire to have children and a family in the future.

Finally, the results show that the young adults develop different social strategies in order to cope with the disciplinary environment. It also indicates that staff and parents need more supervision and education in questions about sexuality in their social interaction with a new generation of people with intellectual disabilities.