

People with disabilities have sex too—so why do some doctors think otherwise?

May 16 2024, by Sarah Earle



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Disabled people have sex. They even enjoy it.

I've interviewed disabled people about their intimate lives for over two

decades. I've also spoken to countless parents, caregivers and professionals about issues that relate to this. When I heard that [Kat Watkins](#), who is a wheelchair user, said a doctor assumed she didn't have sex because of her disability, I wasn't surprised. This is a story I've heard many times before as part of my research and is something many disabled people have experienced.

I first wrote about sex and disability in 1999. I explored the practice of "[facilitated sex](#)," which refers to supporting a disabled person with all aspects of their sexual expression. It was a subject that had received little attention before this, and it caused a bit of a stir at the university where I worked at the time.

Although we live in an increasingly [sexualized culture](#), talking about sex is still taboo, even for [researchers](#). Sex research is notoriously underfunded even though sex is an important part of most people's lives. When I [interview](#) disabled people, they often tell me it's the first time they've talked about sex. Although I've heard this many times now, it still jars.

Very little has changed since then for disabled people, particularly for those who have visible disabilities or learning disabilities. This is because it makes it harder for them to [pass](#) as non-disabled. Being able to pass means they are less likely to face barriers or discrimination.

Disabled people are routinely infantilized and desexualized. When disabled people are infantilized they are treated as [eternal children](#) who should be protected from harm. They are spoken to in patronizing voices, or not spoken to at all, with comments and questions being directed at [family members](#) or caregivers, rather than to disabled people themselves.

Ableism

Infantilization contributes to the desexualization of disabled people. Many people assume that disabled people can't have sex or don't want to. Assumptions like this might seem unimportant to some, but they speak volumes about society's ableist values and beliefs.

[Ableism](#) describes how disabled people are discriminated against within a society that assumes being non-disabled is the norm. At best, these ableist assumptions are dismissive and upsetting, just another barrier to overcome. At worst, they put people's lives at risk.

Not being able to talk about sex openly and frankly contributes to the barriers that disabled people face. Research studies show that health and social care professionals have [limited training and confidence](#) in discussing sex with disabled people.

The [World Health Organization](#) estimates that HPV ([human papillomavirus](#)) vaccination and cervical screening programs could prevent 62 million deaths globally by 2120. However, UK [research](#) suggests that disabled women—like Kat Watkins—can't always access cervical screening and that 1 in 5 physically disabled women have been assumed not to be sexually active by their doctor.

There is also some [evidence](#) to suggest that the HPV vaccine is less likely to be given to adolescents with learning disabilities. This may be for different reasons. Disabled children are more likely to be [absent from school](#) but ableist attitudes are probably at play here too.

They are more vulnerable to sexual abuse and coercion than their non-disabled peers. They are nearly three times more likely to experience [sexual violence](#) than non-disabled children. Disabled adults are twice as likely to have been [abused as children](#) than other adults. Even these statistics are unlikely to reveal the truth of abuse—many disabled people have disclosed unreported [sexual abuse](#) and violence to me as part of my

research.

Disabled children are often [removed from sex and relationships education](#) in school, typically by parents, who assume it isn't important. Although many parents don't do this—and are formidable advocates for their disabled children—it's widely recognized that parents can be [over-protective](#). This comes from a place of love and concern but can be counterproductive at times.

Disabled [children](#), young people and adults have a [right](#) to age appropriate, accessible information that helps them understand their bodies and recognize healthy relationships. Access to information and support about sex and relationships helps keep people safe, as well as experience pleasure and joy.

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