

Book Review

Title: *Teaching Children with Down Syndrome about Their Bodies, Boundaries, and Sexuality: A Guide for Parents and Professionals*

Author: Terri Couwenhoven

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Reviewer: Martha M. Guinan, MPH

Talking to your son or daughter about sexuality and their bodies is difficult for many parents. What do you say? For parents of children with intellectual disabilities it can be even harder. Talking about the birds and the bees just leads to greater confusion for concrete learners. How can you be sure your son or daughter understood what you said? Can they apply what they've learned to their lives? Protecting your children means preparing them for the unknown—a scary prospect at best.

Today's parents are more accepting of their children's sexuality and the role they play in educating and helping their children than they used to be. However, they need ideas and strategies to teach their children about these issues in ways that are respectful and understandable. They pay close attention to their child's physical and emotional growth but they are never sure how much to explain about sexuality to their child. Terri Couwenhoven has written a wonderful resource that answers many of these questions. Having worked as a sexuality educator and taught people with disabilities even before she had a daughter with Down syndrome, she has practical experience and a depth of knowledge. The writing is approachable, understandable, and well referenced. Body parts and sexuality are talked about candidly without excessive medical jargon. The author is respectful of differing beliefs and perspectives. She introduces thinking points that allow you to reflect on your own feelings, values, and attitudes about specific topics so you present a clear message to your child. The reader is informed about concepts they may have overlooked and key messages that affect goal behaviors.

Reading through sections about pelvic exams and periods made me appreciate having had a son. I don't recall if my mother ever tried to talk to me about these things. If she did I am sure I cut her off with my embarrassed teenage know-it-all attitude. As a parent I can appreciate how necessary it is to move past embarrassment, as people with intellectual disabilities might not be able to learn about these topics on their own. They live in a more sheltered world than the rest of us.

My son had a well-meaning teacher when he was in elementary school teach him about "shame" when he was really trying to teach about "modesty." I spent a lot of time having to differentiate between the two concepts with my son. I wish this book had been published then, as it would have helped in explaining to my son as well as to the teacher what my objections were!

This is a book that should be read by all parents of individuals with intellectual disabilities as well as the professionals that assist them with their daily lives. It would be helpful for anyone with young children but addresses adult and disability-specific issues that may not be relevant. It is organized by issues rather than age and includes illustrations that help open dialogue between you and your child. This book really is the starting point for discussions about freedom, responsibility, maturity, and becoming an independent adult.

Martha Guinan is a PhD. student in Exceptionalities and works for the Center on Disability Studies at the University of Hawai'i. She is also the mother of an exceptional young man named Ryan.