



Sexuality Education Resources for Caregivers Project

The Caregiver's Role in Providing Sexuality Education Toolkit

Developed by Autism Nova Scotia
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Introduction

The Sexuality Education Resources for Caregivers consists of four toolkits and two webinars. The project aims to develop accessible, comprehensive sexuality education resources that support the needs of caregivers of autistic people, autistic individuals, and other stakeholders. We hope that these resources will build their capacity to provide comprehensive sexuality education information to the autistic person(s) in their lives.

These resources will explore how there is a gap in access to comprehensive sexuality education for people on the autism spectrum and for their caregivers to support them with sexuality education. Each toolkit and webinar will focus on separate but related topics that will help give caregivers of autistic people a broad understanding of how to learn about and provide sex-positive comprehensive sexuality education to their family members.





Toolkits & Webinars

Toolkit 1: Foundations and Guidelines of Comprehensive Sexuality Education and Sex-positivity

Toolkit 2: The Caregivers' Role in Providing Sexuality Education to Their Child / Family Member

Webinar 1: The Caregivers' Role in Providing Sexuality Education to their Child / Family Member

Toolkit 3: Supporting Knowledge Acquisition in Areas Reflective in Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Toolkit 4: Supporting the Development of Personal Skills in Your Child / Family Member

Webinar 2: Caregivers' Role in Supporting the Development of Autonomy in their Child / Family Member's own Sexuality





Toolkit 2: The Caregivers' Role in Providing Sexuality Education to their Child / Family Member

This toolkit outlines the caregivers' role in providing sexuality education to their child or family member.

Throughout this toolkit, we explore what role a caregiver should take, what topics caregivers should cover when providing sexuality education information, and what a caregiver's goal should be when providing comprehensive sexuality education for their family members.

Additionally, building off the previous toolkit, Toolkit 1: Foundations and Guidelines of Comprehensive Sexuality Education and Sex-positivity, we revisit the concept of sex-positivity and outline tips on how to be a sex-positive caregiver.





Why Should Caregivers be Involved?

As a caregiver, you are your family member's first teacher. Many lessons surrounding health, sexuality, gender norms, values and much more occur before your child begins school in the formal education sector. For this reason, it is important to advocate for and support them in their learning of sexuality in your home (Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights [ACSHR], n.d. a).



Being a part of your family members' sexuality education has been found to reduce risk-taking behaviours. For example, children that talk to their parents about sex and sexuality are more likely to use condoms or birth control when they become sexually active and have better communication with their romantic partner(s) (Widman et al., 2013; 2016 in SIECCAN, 2020 pg. 71)



Also, your family member likely wants you to play a role in their sexual education. Most youths in Canada believe sexuality education is a shared responsibility between their schools and the adults in their home lives (Foster et al., 2011 in SIECCAN, 2020 pg. 71). When asked, youth across Canada in grades 6 to 8 rated the sexuality education they received from a caregiver better than what they received from their school (Foster et al., 2011 in SIECCAN, 2020 pg. 71).



What Barriers May Caregivers Face?

It is important to acknowledge that speaking to your family member about sexuality may be difficult for you and them. Caregivers often say they face barriers to talking about sexuality. This may be due to "being worried that they do not know enough about sexuality themselves," "thinking that their children are not ready to talk about sexual health," and/ or "feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable talking with their children about sexuality" (Jerman & Constantine (2010); Malacane & Beckmeyer (2016); and Wilson et al. (2010) in SIECCAN 2020 pg. 71).



People with disabilities often report missing out on the sexuality education regularly delivered in schools. This is believed to be because of disability-related stigma, which drives the assumption that autistic people are not sexual people or do not want to be in romantic or sexual relationships (Esmail et al., 2010; Frawley & Wilson, 2016; and Secor-Turner et al., 2017 in SIECCAN 2020 pg. 58). Due to this, a more in-depth explanation of sexuality and sexual wellbeing may be required. Also, the education you deliver may need to be tailored to the specific learning style of your family member (Sala et al., SIECCAN, 2020 pg 58). This can make teaching sexuality to your family member even more difficult, especially if you're already uncomfortable with the topic.



What Topics Should a Caregiver Cover?

As a caregiver, you should do your best to ensure your family member receives information on all aspects of comprehensive sexuality education.

You would hope that everyone would learn these topics within a school setting, but this is often not the case, especially for people with disabilities.

It can be helpful to review a copy of their sexuality education curriculum and see if it covers all the topics mentioned below or in the first toolkit in this series. If it does not, you should focus on filling in the gaps.

If your family member has already had a thorough introduction to all these topics, it can be helpful to switch away from additional broader discussions and focus on their physical and emotional experiences (Rayne, 2015, pg.8)





What Topics Should a Caregiver Cover?

Most caregivers in Canada (more than 85%) agree that their family members should be provided comprehensive sexuality education in schools (SIECCAN, 2020, pg. 51).



Specifically surrounding the topics of:

- Puberty
- Self-esteem and body image
- Personal safety and sex-trafficking prevention
- Proper terms for genitalia and other anatomy
- Communication and decision-making skills
- Non-violent conflict resolution in relationships
- Bodily autonomy, sexual consent, and pressure to have sex
- Emotional components of relationships
- Gender-based violence/harassment/coercion
- Safer sex methods and birth control
- Reproduction
- STIs
- Attraction, love and intimacy
- Sexuality and disability
- Sexual problems or concerns
- Sexual behaviours (including abstinence) both within and outside of relationships
- Sexual readiness
- Sexuality and communication technology (i.e. sexting)
- Media literacy and sexuality
- Gender roles and stereotypes
- Sexual orientation and gender identity
- Masturbation
- Sexual pleasure

(SIECCAN, 2019, pg. 51)



How to Know When Your Family Member is Ready to Discuss Sexuality?

There is no way to know exactly what stage of learning your family member is in when it comes to sexuality education. You don't want to be behind, but you also don't want to be ahead. While it is not perfect, there are a few ways to know what parts of sexuality to address with them and at what times.



Dr. Karen Rayne (2015), a celebrated sexuality educator and advocate, recommends a few ways to figure out **what is "age-appropriate" for your youth:**

- Pay attention to the types of questions they ask you (if any)
- Quietly observe the conversations they are having with their friends
- Be cognizant of the social culture your child is growing up in
- Ask other parents and teachers that are around your child about the average age children start discussing certain sexuality topics

(Rayne, 2015)



What is Your Goal as a Caregiver?

As a caregiver, your goal is to provide your child/family member with the information and skills they need to **develop a physically and emotionally healthy adult sexuality** (Rayne, 2015). The education you provide throughout childhood and adolescence will likely not be used immediately but will support the development of decision-making skills to ensure a healthy future (Rayne, 2015).



This education should be provided in a comprehensive, sex-positive, manner so that it is inclusive, accessible, and focuses on both the pleasurable aspects of sexuality and the risks involved. Taking a balanced approach can give you increased credibility with your family member, which can help foster a trusting and supportive relationship with them (Rayne, 2015, pg. 98).



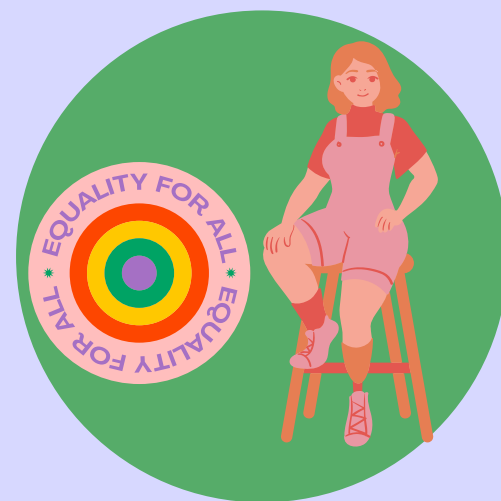
Sex-positive or **sex-positivity** is a framework or perspective that acknowledges and affirms each person's right to experience and define their sexuality throughout their lifetime in whatever way they choose (SERC, 2022).

Sex positivity is inclusive and respectful of a wide range of sexual experiences, expressions, consensual activities (including non-activity), and identities (including asexuality). A sex-positive approach realizes the potential life-enhancing aspects of sexuality and presents sexuality as something to be valued and celebrated (SERC, 2022).



What Does it Mean to be a Sex-Positive Caregiver?

Being a **sex-positive caregiver** means teaching in age and developmentally appropriate ways that our bodies, relationships, and sexuality are a natural and healthy part of growing up (ACSHR, n.d.b). It also means understanding that the person you're caring for is or will become an autonomous adult with their own sexuality, gender identity, and gender expression. The goal is to support them throughout childhood and adolescence in ways that will help them develop into an adult with a healthy sexuality (ACSHR, n.d.b).



Why is Being a Sex-Positive Caregiver Important?



Being a sex-positive caregiver is important because it helps teach those we care for about their bodies, relationships and sexual lives (ACSHR, n.d.b). It improves self-esteem and supports young people as they grow into their authentic selves. Sex-positive caregiving also helps to understand and challenge gender norms, sexism, and gender-based discrimination and helps to protect against abuse. Lastly, it helps counter negative sexuality messaging that can have unintended, long-lasting impacts on a person (ACSHR, n.d.b).



When Should Sex-Positive Caregiving Begin?

Sex-positive caregiving should begin at a young age, which means having sex-positive conversations as soon as someone begins to ask questions. Though, one needs to be intentional and provide only the information relevant to the age and developmental stage of the person. Sex-positive caregiving can start as simple as teaching consent, autonomy, and proper terms for body parts. As the person you care for grows and matures, so will the conversations and answers you provide (ACSHR, n.d.c).



How to Become a Sex-Positive Caregiver

- Assess and reflect on your values
- Answer questions honestly in terms your family member will understand
- Cultivate emotional intelligence
- Start discussing sexuality early and create an open line of communication
- Embrace and promote body positivity for yourself and others
- Educate yourself
- Respect your family member's privacy and promote autonomy
- Make resources and information available to your family member
- Be mindful of your reactions and resist harmful stereotypes
- Advocate for, support, and protect the person you're caring for regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity

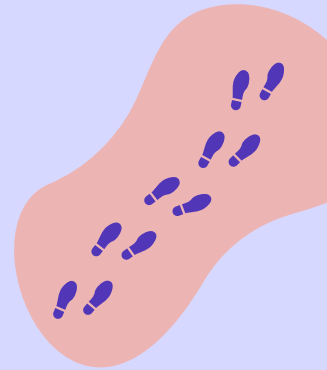
(ACSHR, n.d.b;d)



1

You can become a sex-positive caregiver by assessing your values about sexuality and relationships

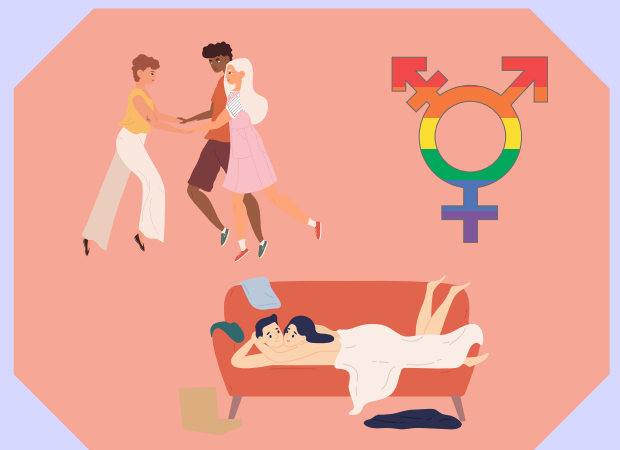
Everyone has their values and beliefs regarding sexuality and relationships. When starting your journey to sex-positive caregiving, it is important to step back and consider your values (ACSHR, n.d.b;d).



You need to have an awareness and understanding of your own beliefs and attitudes about sex, gender, anatomy, relationships, sexual activity, and any stereotypes or assumptions you may have (ACSHR, n.d.b;d). This can help you to know why certain conversations may be uncomfortable for you so you can be critical about your potential judgments or assumptions. Being curious about these assumptions can help you support and inform those you care for with an open, unbiased mind (ACSHR, n.d.b;d).

When assessing your values and assumptions consider your opinions on topics such as:

- Love
- Monogamy
- Virginity
- Gender Norms
- Sex for Pleasure
- Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation
- Body Shapes and Sizes





You can become a sex-positive caregiver by answering questions honestly in terms that will be understood based on their age and stage of development

2



Honesty is the best policy! Give important health information and answer questions in a straightforward way by being truthful and using simple language (ACSHR, n.d.b;d). This can mean using truthful explanations that do not use metaphors or fear. Honesty is essential when building and maintaining healthy relationships (ACSHR, n.d.b;d).

Modelling honesty with your family member is important as it is an essential skill when building and maintaining healthy relationships (ACSHR, n.d. e). Honest conversations about all aspects of sexuality, both positive and negative, increase your family members' trust in you and allow them to see you as more credible (Rayne, 2015).





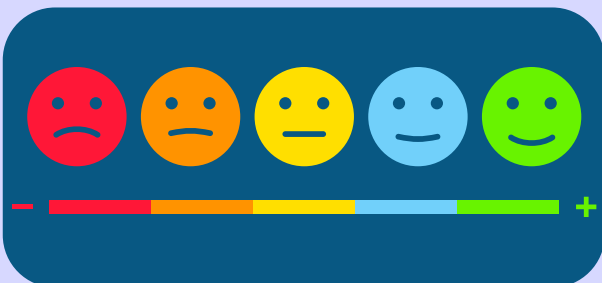
3

You can become a sex-positive caregiver by cultivating their emotional intelligence



As a caregiver, it is important to teach whomever you are caring for how to understand and regulate their emotions. Increasing emotional intelligence can help build self-confidence, improve mental and physical health and lead to healthier relationships overall (ACSHR, n.d.b;d). It is common for Autistic people to experience challenges in building their emotional intelligence. Two concepts that are important to be aware of when cultivating their emotional intelligence are interoception and alexithymia.

Interoception is the 8th sense that allows a person to notice sensations from inside their body. Examples could include racing heartbeat, heavy breathing, growling stomach, full bladder, etc. Interoception then allows a person to connect these body sensations to their emotions (Mahler, 2018).



Alexithymia is a condition in which people have challenges identifying and describing emotions in the self. Essentially, alexithymia is a difference in emotion processing (Yang et al., 2022).



3

You can become a sex-positive caregiver by cultivating their emotional intelligence

Alexithymia and low awareness of interoceptive signals are common among autistic individuals. Alexithymia is a difficulty in identifying feelings, distinguishing between feelings and bodily sensations of emotional arousal, and describing feelings to others (Yang et al., 2022). Interoception is the ability to perceive the internal state of one's body and is associated with emotional regulation (Mahler, 2018). Low interoceptive awareness can impact someone's ability to process their emotions as they may struggle to understand how body sensations relate to emotions (Mahler, 2018). For example, a body sensation such as tensing of the muscles and an increase in breathing and heart rate may signal one is feeling anxious (Yang et al., 2022).



Research has found that having alexithymia and/or low interoceptive awareness can impact a person's understanding of how they feel about their sexual experiences and those of their partner(s) (Berenguer et al., 2019). For example, lower interoceptive awareness could make it hard for them to know when they are aroused or experiencing pleasure. As well, alexithymia and low interoceptive awareness can cause difficulties in understanding non-verbal cues of consent or desire from their partner(s) (Kathol, n.d.).



Build an understanding of interoceptive awareness in yourself and your family member. This will support them to learn more about their emotional intelligence in non-conventional ways that validate their lived experience (Mahler, 2018). The most well-established method to build interoceptive awareness is through body mindfulness (Mahler, 2018).



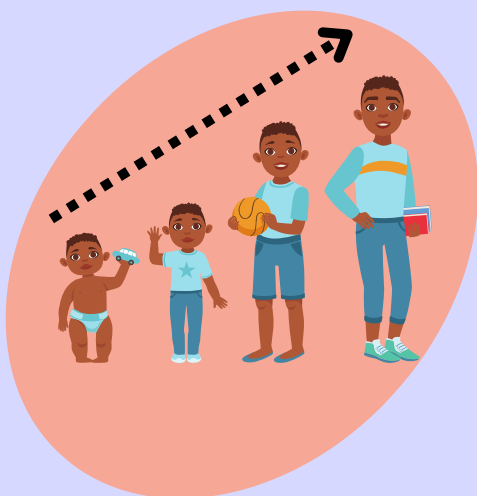
You can become a sex-positive caregiver by starting discussions about sex and sexuality early and creating an open line of communication

4

Sex-positive caregiving is moving away from the idea that sex and sexuality are one-time conversations that need to be checked off a list (ACSHR, n.d.b;d). Sex-positive caregiving is talking to your family members starting from an early age to discuss sexuality, health, gender, identity, relationships, and consent.



As they age and grow, these ongoing conversations help them make sense of their experiences and frame their thoughts and ideas. It is an important opportunity to help them build skills to be healthy, as well as create and nurture healthy relationships as they age (ACSHR, n.d.b;d).



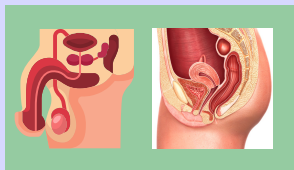
Be an askable caregiver. As an askable caregiver, take every opportunity to show them love, understanding, and support (Rayne, 2015). Make sure the person you care for feels seen, heard, engaged, and supported. An askable caregiver is able to stop talking and start listening. When you do talk, be intentional. Make sure your conversations balance the pleasurable aspects of sexuality along with the risks involved. By doing this, they will likely feel more comfortable coming to you with any issues in the future (Rayne, 2015).



You can become a sex-positive caregiver by starting discussions about sex and sexuality early and creating an open line of communication

4

Types of discussions you could consider:

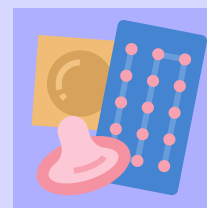


Children:

- Teach proper terms for your child's body parts (i.e. penis and vulva), so they know their anatomy is part of science and is not shameful (SERC, 2018).
- Discuss consent and that adults should only touch their genitals for medical and hygiene reasons.
- Talk about how all relationships and families look different, but this is healthy and okay (SERC, 2018).

Pre-teens/teenagers:

- Discuss STIs, pregnancy and sexual activity. Don't forget safer sex practices (SERC, 2018).
- Talk about and model healthy relationships and how you are not required to stay in one if your needs are not being fulfilled.
- Model body positivity
- Talk about bullying and how to use digital media safely (SERC, 2018).





5

You can become a sex-positive caregiver by embracing and promoting body positivity for yourself and others

Body Positivity is appreciating and promoting all body types (Kinross, 2021). Children listen and begin to understand what they see and hear around them from a young age. This means that speaking poorly about your body or the bodies of those around you will quickly begin to influence how your family member sees themselves. With body negativity being so present in the media, it is important to nurture a positive body image in your child (Kinross, 2021). There are many ways this can be done, for example:

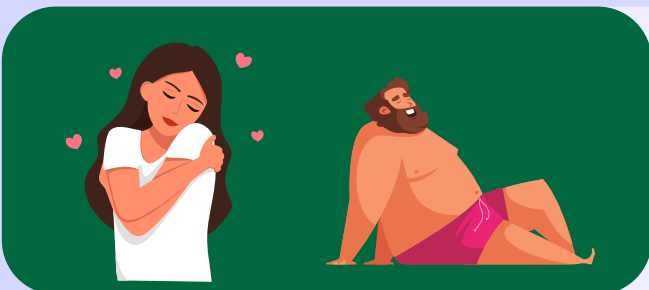


Model a healthy lifestyle by eating well and being physically active

Think critically about beauty standards and teach others to do the same



Don't speak poorly about your body or others





You can become a sex-positive caregiver by educating yourself on sexuality and sex-positive caregiving

6



Many great resources are available to improve or expand your knowledge about sexuality and sex-positive caregiving.

- SEICCAN
- Planned Parenthood
- Action Canada

7

You can become a sex-positive caregiver by making resources and information available

Sometimes your family member may want the opportunity to seek information on their own. Respect their independence and give them the opportunity to grow and learn. There are many helpful, factual, sex-positive websites where they can educate themselves.

- www.scarleteen.com
- www.sexandu.ca/
- www.actioncanadashr.org/resources/sexual-health-hub





You can become a sex-positive caregiver by respecting their privacy and promote autonomy

8

Respect is a huge part of sex-positive caregiving, including respecting people's rights to information, privacy, meaningful choice, agency, and autonomy (ACSHR, n.d.b;d). Instilling respect through sexuality education can help your family member learn to respect themselves and others and gain the knowledge needed to make respectful sexual decisions (UNESCO, 2021).



Respect is a fundamental part of a healthy relationship (ACSHR, n.d. e), so by cultivating it in your home, you are helping your family member learn the skills they need for their future.

Ways to promote privacy and autonomy



- Knocking before entering their room if the door is closed
- Letting them know they do not need to share all aspects of their private lives with you or anyone they are not comfortable with (i.e. information about their sexuality/sexual experiences)
- Setting boundaries about where it is safe to share personal information
- Allowing them to go to the doctor privately
- Giving them space to be on their own



9

You can become a sex-positive caregiver by being mindful of and resisting the use of harmful stereotypes and gender norms

Gender norms and stereotypes are everywhere, and children start to pick these up from a young age. Part of sex-positive caregiving is being aware of these messages and encouraging critical thinking so that we can challenge these ideas and do our best not to reinforce them (ACSHR, n.d.b;d).



Gender norms are a set of "expectations, rules, and scripts that are culturally specific and inform what is considered normal within a culture. Often in the Western world, femininity/feminine norms are applied to people perceived as women/girls and masculinity/masculine norms to people perceived as men/boys" (ACSHR, 2017, p. 123).

A **gender stereotype** is a "belief about how men/boys and women/girls, or entire groups of people, typically behave or should behave" (ACSHR, 2017, p. 123)



Gender stereotypes are influenced by gender norms and assume that an entire gender grouping is or will behave in a certain way (i.e. girls can't play sports and only like to shop; boys can't play dolls and only like sports) (ACSHR, 2017, p. 124). Being a sex-positive caregiver means developing a critical awareness of gender norms and stereotypes. By resisting such stereotypes you can create mutual respect between you, your family member, and their peers, partners, etc.



9

You can become a sex-positive caregiver by being mindful of and resisting the use of harmful stereotypes and gender norms

A good example of how to do this is by using "books and media as conversation starters on gender norms, encouraging friendships across genders, expanding activities made available for all kids, vocally challenge generalizations and helping [those we care for] to learn the skills to challenge stereotypes" (ACSHR, n.d.b;d).

Generalization:

"Pink is for girls!"

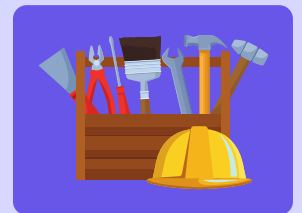
Ways to Respond:

"Colors don't have a gender, they belong to everyone"



"Men fix things"

"Mommy needs to fix the sink, would you like to hand me the tools as I work?"



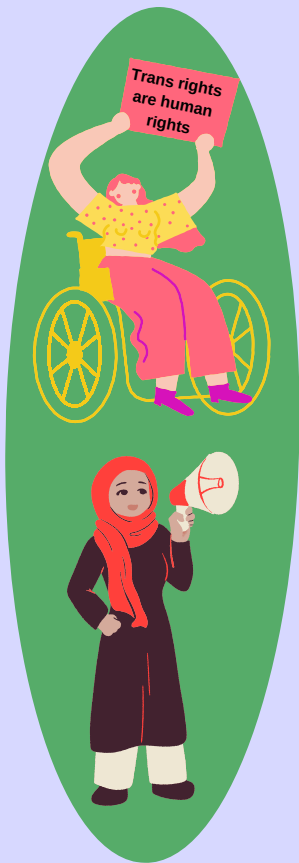
(ACSHR, n.d.b;d)

Challenging gender stereotypes and gender norms in sexuality education is important as it helps push back against discrimination and unequal treatment based on someone's assumed sex or gender (Planned Parenthood, n.d.). It can help to prevent gender-based and sexual violence, address homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of discrimination and intolerance of people with diverse gender identities, and build space to accept and nurture positive expressions of masculinity (Save the Children, n.d.)



You can become a sex-positive caregiver by advocating for, supporting, and protecting the person you're caring for regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity

10



Advocating for, supporting, and protecting the person you're caring for largely goes back to respect (ACSHR, n.d.b;d). Respecting their agency, autonomy, and being who they are.

People may feel that "toning down" or limiting their gender expression in public situations will protect them from adversity or judgment, but it has actually been found to be quite damaging to a person's wellbeing. If the person you are caring for is of a diverse gender expression or sexual orientation, advocate for them and find ways to create a space where they can be celebrated for who they are (ACSHR, n.d.b;d).

Consent is an important lesson to learn from a young age that you can support them with. It is important to stand up for your child if they will not or cannot, putting your lessons regarding consent into practice. For example, reminding a family member or friend that they do not need to give them a hug goodbye if they do not want to (ACSHR, n.d.b;d).





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