

Sexualized violence and people with disabilities

Adapted from: Seattle Rape Relief Project Action: Sexual Assault and People with Disabilities.

Sexual assault of physically or mentally disabled people is extremely widespread and very under-reported. Some statistics suggest that mentally and physically disabled children are 3 to 10 times more likely to be physically or sexually abused than non-disabled children. One of the primary reasons for under-reporting is the fact that 99% of the perpetrators are family, friends and/or caretakers (such as residential staff, bus drivers, recreational workers, etc.)

Disabled women and men are taught from a very early age that they are dependent upon the people around them, which makes them even more vulnerable to abusive situations. Perpetrators often use threats, such as deprivation of food, social activity or personal care in order to force the person with a disability to submit to the abuse. Even when a disabled person would like to report abuse, s/he often lacks the resources or information to do so.

People in the disabled community might also suffer from a higher degree of faulty information about sexuality and relationships. Parents of disabled children may view their children as asexual and not approach the topic of healthy sexual behaviors with them. Many incidents have been noted of physically disabled women arriving at the hospital with venereal diseases or bruises all over her body, only to have the doctors completely overlook the possibility that she is being abused.

All of these factors can lead to negative or confused feelings about sexuality, leading to low self-esteem and feelings of unattractiveness. In addition, because of the importance our society places on sex and dating, disabled people may be more vulnerable to situations where they are pressured into sexual activities that they are not comfortable with.

Dynamics of sexual assault and people with disabilities

- People with disabilities are not taught to assert themselves— they are taught to depend on and trust others.
- People with disabilities are infantilized and patronized and therefore not taken seriously.
- People with disabilities are not taught to “own their bodies”— their personal space is frequently accessed by many people.
- People with disabilities often depend upon the offender for personal care services.
- Due to a lack of education, people with disabilities may have a more difficult time distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate behavior.
- People with disabilities are usually taught and expected to comply with authority figures, thus setting up interactions in which they are eager to please.
- People with disabilities choices are often not respected— thus “no” is not respected as “no.”
- People with disabilities may fear punishment if they do not comply with the abuse.
- People with disabilities fear that they may not be seen as credible— thus reporting abuse may not be believed.
- People with disabilities often encounter offenders who think that it is easy to sexually abuse someone with communication difficulties.

- People with disabilities may be physically incapable of resisting or escaping from an offender.
- People with disabilities are often isolated, creating a heightened desire to meet people and spend time with them. This isolation also often includes a lack of a support network and friends.
- People with disabilities face negative social values of being inferior or disposable which can lead offenders to think that the abuse is permissible.
- People with disabilities experience care-givers and offenders who believe that they will not be able to understand or feel the impact of sexual abuse.
- People with disabilities may have many care-givers, which increases the possibility of one being an offender. This can happen in a living situation where there are multiple staff and a high staff turnover rate.

From the Anti Violence Project at the University of Victoria

<http://antiviolenceproject.org/resources/sexualized-violence-and-people-with-disabilities>