

Best Practice for Addressing Sexuality and Intimacy with Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in Occupational Therapy

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Introduction

Sexual and intimate connections are fundamental human needs and essential aspects of overall wellbeing. People with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) experience sexual desires and seek intimate relationships, just like everyone else, despite the challenges they may face (Stoffelen, et al., 2017). As experts in meaningful occupation, occupational therapists are uniquely positioned to support clients' participation, satisfaction, and safety in sexual and intimate activities (Schmidt et al., 2021). While many professions address aspects of sexual health, OT practitioners specifically excel at understanding and reducing the impact of client factors, performance skills and patterns, and contextual demands to promote optimal participation in these valued occupations. The Occupational Therapy Sexual Assessment Framework (OTSAF) provides a structured approach to assess and address clients' sexual wants and needs across various domains. People with IDD benefit from tailored education matched to their learning capabilities and appropriate caregiver support when navigating sexual relationships. Effective intervention requires therapeutic use of self and a comprehensive understanding of clients' sexuality and intimacy needs. Establishing best-practice guidelines for occupational therapists working with individuals with IDD in this area remains an important professional priority. There is a critical need to establish best-practice guidelines for occupational therapists addressing sexuality and intimacy with individuals with IDD. By systematically examining the literature through the lens of the OTSAF would provide a structured framework for translating evidence into actionable clinical approaches.

Objective

The purpose of this study was to analyze implications for practice as it relates to addressing sexuality and intimacy in occupational therapy for clients with IDD.

References

See Handout

MOT Class of 2025

Methodology

A thematic synthesis of implications for practice (Walker, 2016) found across relevant evidence was performed following a multiple database search using EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, and American Journal of Occupational Therapy using the following search terms: sexuality, intimacy, and IDD. Analysis was performed on 25 articles, (19) qualitative, (0) quantitative, and (6) mixed methods that met the inclusion criteria: subjects were individuals with IDD, caregivers of those with IDD, or occupational therapists and other healthcare providers. Articles were excluded if they did not include participants with IDD or if they were systematic reviews. Implications for practice were extracted from each article and coded. The research team used appropriate coding for priorities for international practice (Walker et al., submitted manuscript). Extracted implications were also submitted to Claude.AI along with the following three prompts: 1) analyze the following literature in the document in themes based on the needs listed, 2) analyze the following literature in the document about implications for occupational therapy practice addressing sexuality and intimacy with individuals with intellectual disabilities in themes based on the needs listed, 3) analyze the following literature in the document about implications for occupational therapy practice addressing sexuality and intimacy with individuals with intellectual disabilities in 15 themes based on the needs list. The AI-generated themes were verified by the research team using the original extracts and a constant comparative approach was used to consolidate and reduce themes until final themes emerged. Findings were triangulated across the three different AI prompts, the original excerpts, and apriori coding findings to reduce bias and provide a coding structure to facilitate thoroughness and accuracy.

Findings

OT Education <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Include training on addressing topics of healthy relationships, sexual rights, consent, safe sex practices, sexual orientation, gender identity, and intimacy• Address sexuality routinely in occupational therapy education and practice models• Require on boarding training for supporting sexual health needs in those with IDD• Incorporate different perspectives and cultural contexts	Sexual Self-View & Sexual Expression <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teach strategies to support safety, privacy, boundaries, abuse prevention/reporting, and consent to clients• Provide counseling and resources on topics of body image, sexual identity dealing with limitations, and partner communication• Provide education and resources on how to communicate about sexuality and support healthy relationships	Education Delivery Methods <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide accessible materials through social stories, easy-to-read content, hands-on activities, and technology• Use experiential learning approaches for social relationships and sexual experiences• Deliver developmentally appropriate content across the lifespan• Grade activities and modify environments to ensure accessibility	Occupational Therapy Approach <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Utilize client-centered care focused on self-determination and shared decision making• Use communication, therapeutic use of self, and problem-solving to address sexuality concerns• Utilize OT models and disability-studied principles that frame sexuality as an occupational right and meaningful human experiences
Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Address cultural and personal values that act as barriers to supporting sexuality	Advocating <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Advocate for standards, policies, funding, and inclusion in programs and initiatives that support sexual health for individuals with IDD• Recognize sexuality as a basic human right and promote sexual empowerment, citizenship, and self determination for people with IDD	Collaboration <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Partner with families, educators, and medical professionals to provide comprehensive support• Work with school teams to create safe and supportive environments• Provide outreach and networking between disability professionals and sexual health professionals	Research <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conduct research on outcomes, best practices, and effectiveness of various approaches to sexuality education and intervention

Discussion

Occupational therapists play a vital role in addressing and constructing programs related to sexuality and intimacy in adults with IDD. This includes providing evidence-based, accessible, and inclusive sexual education throughout the lifespan for individuals with IDD. Education should be presented in a way that matches the person's learning capabilities to increase comprehension and application of information. This includes making adaptations and modifications to the media and delivery of sexual education to make it more accessible for individuals with IDD. Delivery methods can include social stories, easy-read materials, and hands-on activities as well as experiential learning approaches and online social platforms (Schmidt et al, 2021). It is important for OT practitioners to include information that is targeted towards developing healthy relationships, communication strategies, and self-advocacy. Additionally, it is important to educate on establishing skills on safety, boundaries, abuse prevention, and consent. Occupational therapists should provide education, training, and resources to parents and caregivers to help facilitate open communication when addressing sexuality and intimacy with their children (Stein et al., 2017; Pownall et al., 2012). To improve overall care and education, OT practitioners need more training on addressing sexuality and intimacy with clients with IDD. This training should be approved upon through continual interprofessional collaboration with disability specialists and other healthcare providers.

Conclusion

The profession of OT stands uniquely positioned to address sexual health and intimacy needs of individuals with IDD through its recognition of these domains as meaningful occupations within professional scope. The OTSAF guides clinical reasoning and intervention planning, while tools like OPISI offer practical assessment options. Effective practice includes client education, caregiver training, barrier reduction, advocacy, collaboration, and evidence-based approaches. By embracing sexuality as both a human right and meaningful occupation, the profession of occupational therapy promotes occupational justice while enhancing client participation, satisfaction, and safety in this essential life domain.