Responsive Relationships

RESPONSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

MARIE POSS; LORRAINE PURGRET; AND DEANNA DAVIDSON

Fanshawe College Pressbooks
London, Ontario



Responsive Relationships Copyright © 2026 by Marie Poss; Lorraine Purgret; and Deanna Davidson is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License, except where otherwise noted.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements vi
About This Book vii
Book Navigation ix

Chapters

Chapter 1: Why This Book Matters 2
Chapter 2: Understanding Abuse 11
Chapter 3: Introduction to David Hingsburger and His Contributions 18
Chapter 4: Vulnerability 26
Chapter 5: Sexuality - Rights & Autonomy 34
Chapter 6: The Role of Caregivers, Educators and Direct Support Professionals 39
Chapter 7: Building a Foundation of Self-Advocacy 43
Chapter 8: Consent, Boundaries and Communication 50
Chapter 9: Practical Safety Strategies, Real Life Scenarios & Role Playing 57
Chapter 10: When Abuse Happens- Responding and Supporting. 62
Chapter 11: Conclusion 66

References 74
Version History 77
Transcript 78

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This open textbook was developed by Marie Poss, Lorraine Purgret and Deanna Davidson in partnership with the OER Design Studio at Fanshawe College in London, Ontario. This work is part of the FanshaweOpen learning initiative and is made available through a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License unless otherwise noted.

FANSHAWE | OPEN

Cover image Photo by Jr Korpa, Unsplash License

Graphics used in the book from Undraw, Undraw License.

Collaborators

- William Osbourne-Sorrell (they/he), *Instructional Design*
- Shauna Roch, *Project Lead & Quality Assurance*
- Wilson Poulter, *Copyright Officer*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Responsive Relationships is an open educational resource that focuses on skill-building for direct support professionals to aid in fostering and nurturing respectful, person-centred relationships and roles in relation to persons with developmental disabilities. Theory, reflective practices and examples using lived experiences provide space to develop responsive supports while acknowledging individuality and authenticity. This book challenges readers to think about the ways they provide support by developing the knowledge and mindset needed to truly see the person first.

Accessibility Statement

We are actively committed to increasing the accessibility and usability of the textbooks we produce. Every attempt has been made to make this OER accessible to all learners and is compatible with assistive and adaptive technologies. We have attempted to provide closed captions, alternative text, or multiple formats for on-screen and offline access.

The web version of this resource has been designed to meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0, level AA. In addition, it follows all guidelines in Appendix A: Checklist for Accessibility of the *Accessibility Toolkit – 2nd Edition*.

In addition to the web version, additional files are available in a number of file formats, including PDF, EPUB (for eReaders), and MOBI (for Kindles).

If you are having problems accessing this resource, please contact us at oer@fanshawec.ca.

Please include the following information:

- The location of the problem by providing a web address or page description
- A description of the problem
- The computer, software, browser, and any assistive technology you are using that can help us diagnose and solve your issue (e.g., Windows 10, Google Chrome (Version 65.0.3325.181), NVDA screen reader)

Feedback

Please share your adoption and any feedback you have about the book with us at oer@fanshawec.ca

BOOK NAVIGATION

Recommended Format: Online Webbook

You can access this resource online using a desktop computer or mobile device or download it for free on the main landing page of this resource. Look for the "Download this book" drop-down menu directly below the webbook cover. This resource is available for download in the following formats:

- **PDF.** You can download this book as a PDF to read on a computer (Digital PDF) or print it out (Print PDF). The digital PDF preserves hyperlinks and provides default navigation within the document. In addition, the PDF allows the user to highlight, annotate, and zoom the text.
- **Mobile.** If you want to read this textbook on your phone or tablet, use the EPUB (eReader) or MOBI (Kindle) files. Please refer to your device's features for additional support when navigating this resource.

Navigating this Webbook

To move to the next page, click on the "Next" button at the bottom right of your screen.



To move to the previous page, click on the "Previous" button at the bottom left of your screen.

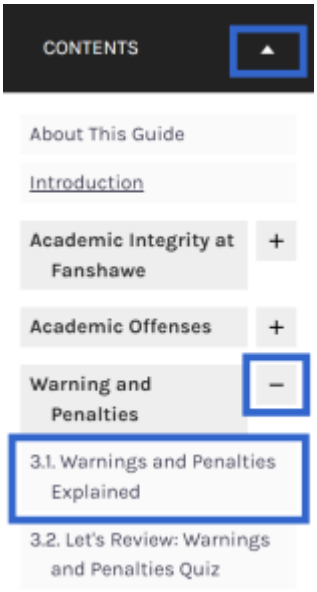


Keyboard arrows can also be used to navigate. *(Note: On smaller screens, the "Previous" and "Next" buttons are stacked at the bottom of the page.)*

To scroll back up to the top of the page, click on the bottom middle of your screen *(Note: this will only appear if the page is long).*



To jump to a specific section or sub-section, click on “Contents” in the top left section of the page. Use the plus sign (+) to expand and the minus sign (-) to collapse the content sections. *(Note: On smaller screens, the “Contents” button is at the top of the page.)*



CHAPTERS

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Why This Book Matters

Chapter 2: Understanding Abuse

Chapter 3: Introduction to David Hingsburger and His Contributions

Chapter 4: Vulnerability

Chapter 5: Sexuality – Rights & Autonomy

Chapter 6: The Role of Caregivers, Educators and Direct Support Professionals

Chapter 7: Building a Foundation of Self-Advocacy

Chapter 8: Consent, Boundaries and Communication

Chapter 9: Practical Safety Strategies, Real-Life Scenarios & Role Playing

Chapter 10: When Abuse Happens- Responding and Supporting.

Chapter 11: Conclusion

CHAPTER 1: WHY THIS BOOK MATTERS

Learning Objectives

1. Examine the factors contributing to balancing power in relationships.
2. Examine indicators, characteristics and impact of maltreatment (abuse).



This book aims to provide readers with knowledge, skills, and practical strategies to support the safety, rights, and empowerment of persons with disabilities. By engaging with the textbook, students will develop a conceptual and practical understanding of the prevalence and impact of abuse as well as systemic, cultural, and relational factors that increase vulnerability.

This OER uses the terms "*persons with developmental disabilities*" and "*person with a developmental disability*" based on the language used in the *Services and Supports to Promote the Social Inclusion of Persons with Developmental Disabilities Act*.

The term "*developmental disability*" is used throughout this OER in accordance with the definition in that Act.

Some common systemic and cultural barriers that may make a person more vulnerable include:

- Power imbalances where one person or a group of persons controls care, communication, housing, transportation, or access to services
- Lack of accessible communication makes it difficult to report harm or be understood
- Overprotection framed as safety, which can reduce autonomy while hiding risk
- Underreporting
- Disbelief or the idea that the person "lies" or is a "storyteller".
- Fear of consequences, such as losing housing, services, relationships, or independence

In order to understand the importance of this book to the developmental services sector, we must first understand what abuse is, and how prevalent it is in the sector.

Activity 1.1: Definition of Abuse

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *Abuse* as:

Activity Description

1. Abuse

Solution:

1. a corrupt practice or custom, the buying of votes and other election abuses
2. improper or excessive use or treatment: misuse, drug abuse
3. language that attacks, condemns or vilifies, usually unjustly, intemperately, and angrily
4. physical maltreatment so as to injure or damage
5. to put to a wrong or improper use: abuse a privilege

Example 1.1: The Prevalence of Abuse Statistics

Activity Description

1. Proportion who experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) in their lifetime since age 15, by disability status and gender, persons aged 15 years and over, 2018

Gender	Persons with disabilities	Persons without disabilities
Men	44%	32%*
Women	55%	37%*

Note * significantly different from the estimate for persons with disabilities of the same gender ($p<0.05$)

2. Proportion who reported symptoms consistent with PTSD as a result of IPV, by disability status and gender, persons aged 15 years and over who had experienced IPV in the preceding 12 months, 2018

Gender	Persons with disabilities	Persons without disabilities
Men	10%	2%*
Women	18%	8%*

Note * significantly different from the estimate for persons with disabilities of the same gender ($p<0.05$)

3. Proportion who were physically abused by an intimate partner in the past 12 months, by disability status and gender, persons aged 15 years and over, 2018

Gender	Persons with disabilities	Persons without disabilities
Men	4%	2%*
Women	4%	8%*

Note * significantly different from estimate for persons with disabilities of the same gender ($p<0.05$)

4. Proportion who experienced emotional or financial abuse by an intimate partner in the last 5 years, by disability status and gender, persons aged 15 years and over, 2019

Gender	Persons with disabilities	Persons without disabilities
Men+	21%	15%*
Women+	25%	13%*

Note * significantly different from estimate for persons with disabilities of the same gender ($p<0.05$)

5. Proportion who experienced sexual assault before the age of 15, by disability status and gender, persons aged 15 years and over, 2019

Gender	Persons with disabilities	Persons without disabilities
Men+	5%	2%*
Women+	14%	7%*

6. Proportion who experienced physical assault before the age of 15, by disability status and gender, persons aged 15 years and over, 2019

Gender	Persons with disabilities	Persons without disabilities
Men+	33%	20%*
Women+	30%	16%*

7. Proportion who experienced physical assault before the age of 15, by disability status and gender, persons aged 15 years and over, 2019

Type of offence	Persons with disabilities	Persons without disabilities
Physical assault	6.6%	3.6%*
Sexual assault	6.0%	1.4%*
Sexual assault	1.5%	0.3%*

Note * significantly different from the estimate for persons with disabilities for a given type of offence ($p<0.05$)

Activity 1.2: Test Your Knowledge

Activity Description

Flash Card 1:

Front of Flashcard:

Canadian children with disabilities are more likely to experience sexual assault before age 15.

Back of Flashcard:

Before age 15, 5% of men+ and 14% of women+ with disabilities reported experiencing sexual assault by an adult, compared with 2% of men+ and 7% of women+ without disabilities.

Flash Card 2:

Front of Flashcard:

Women with disabilities report unwanted sexual behaviour in public spaces more than women without disabilities.

Back of Flashcard:

In the 12 months preceding the Census survey, women living with a disability were significantly more likely than women without a disability to have experienced unwanted sexual behaviours in a public place that made them feel unsafe or uncomfortable, both in the provinces (39% versus 27%, respectively) and in the territories (45% versus 28%).

Many professionals enter helping roles with good intentions. However, intention alone does not protect people.

Bias may show up as:

- Assuming someone is "too vulnerable" to understand consent.
- Believing abuse is less likely in supervised or family settings.
- Interpreting behaviour as "challenging" rather than as a possible communication of harm.
- Expecting compliance instead of autonomy.

Recognizing bias is about responsibility. When professionals do not reflect on their own assumptions, systems stay the same, and risk remains.

Activity 1.3: Quick Bias Check

Activity Description

Statements:

1. I would feel confident recognizing signs of sexual victimization in someone with limited verbal communication.
2. Abuse is less likely in settings where adults are always present.
3. People with disabilities are more likely to misinterpret situations involving touch or relationships.
4. Caregivers are usually the safest people for individuals with disabilities.

For each Statement, decide:

1. Agree
2. Unsure
3. Disagree

Our first instincts often reveal bias. Awareness begins when we pause and notice them. Awareness begins with reflection.

Why Self-Reflection Is Essential to Safety

Awareness and accountability are the first steps. By examining systemic barriers and our own biases, we move closer to environments where persons with disabilities are not just included, but believed, respected, and protected. This work matters because safety is built intentionally, collectively, and continuously.

The Importance of the QAM

In January 2010, the Quality Assurance Measures (QAM) came into effect to establish mandatory high stan-

dards for all agencies and to ensure safe, respectful and community-based support. The need for the QAM arose as part of the changes taking place in the developmental services sector, as well as public concerns about abuse. The QAM was created under the Services and Supports to Promote the Social Inclusion of Persons with Developmental Disabilities Act (SIPDDA).

The QAM provides legislative oversight for behaviour interventions, quality, support and protection for persons with developmental disabilities. The intention of the SIPDDA and the accompanying QAM is to promote individual rights, inclusion, and quality of life. Agencies ensure continuous quality improvement by setting rules for service delivery, staff training and protecting vulnerable individuals from harm.

QAM Training (n.d.) states that research conducted in the 1980s indicated that "90 percent of abuse is done by those providing care. 80% of women and 60% males experience some form of abuse or sexual victimization. Persons with developmental disabilities will be physically abused 4 to 10 times more frequently than non-disabled persons. They will be more severely abused and for longer periods of time".

Fast forward 30 years.

Canadian Indicators for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) – Article 16: freedom from exploitation, violence, and abuse provides some statistics that highlight similar findings to the research from 30 years ago. *Some of these findings are presented in Example 1.1.*

Importance Today

Community Living Ontario and OASIS recently launched a public awareness campaign to bring government attention to the crisis that exists in the developmental services sector. The campaign cites data that underscores the urgent need to prevent exploration and victimization.

Link: Community Living Ontario

> "In Canada, the rate of violent victimization (i.e., sexual assault, robbery, physical assault) against women with intellectual disabilities is four times higher than for women without a disability. Women and girls who have an intellectual disability are at high risk of abuse and trafficking due to various factors, including a lack of access to services; social marginalization, stereotyping, and discrimination; social isolation; fear of losing supports and resources; and low educational attainment and unemployment" (Community Living Ontario, 2025).

As individuals working in the developmental services sector, we have a responsibility to help dismantle the barriers that allow abuse to persist, and we must start with a call to action, for ourselves, and our society.

CHAPTER 2: UNDERSTANDING ABUSE

Learning Objectives

1. Examine the factors contributing to balancing power in relationships.
2. Examine indicators, characteristics and impact of maltreatment (abuse).
3. Utilize knowledge of appropriate legislation in preparing written documents.
4. Recognize the impact of the diagnosis of disability on the family unit and the changing roles of families in the 21st century.



Abuse can take many forms, some more obvious than others. To help people stay safe, it's essential to educate and take action to prevent abuse before it occurs. This starts with understanding the different types of abuse and learning how to recognize them. When we can identify abuse early, we are better equipped to stop it and protect those at risk.

Activity 2.1: Definitions of Abuse

An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/responsiverelationships/?p=139#h5p-6

Activity Description

Matching Answers

Solution:

1. **Physical Abuse:** Assault or the threat of an assault (e.g., hitting, slapping, or burning) that causes or could cause physical injury or fear of physical injury.
2. **Sexual Abuse:** Unwanted touching of a person's sexual body parts. Lack of consent is the defining feature. The power imbalance between a person with a disability and their care provider makes it impossible for consent to be given. Sexual Abuse is also the denial of a person's right to engage in consenting sexual behaviour.
3. **Financial Abuse:** The misuse, misappropriation or restriction of an individual's financial assets for personal gain.
4. **Verbal Abuse:** The use of demeaning language and name-calling directed towards an individual. This includes any negative comments on someone's disability or their appearance.
5. **Emotional or Psychological Abuse:** The attempt to control someone by subjecting them to constant criticism, insults, threats, humiliation or intimidation.
6. **Harassment:** Any comment, conduct, or gesture that is insulting, intimidating, humiliating, malicious, degrading, offensive, or discriminatory directed toward an individual or group of individuals.
7. **Sexual Harassment:** Any comment or conduct of a sexual nature with the intent of causing offence or humiliation.
8. **Neglect:** The failure to provide a person with the support and assistance that is required for their health, safety or well-being. This includes inaction that jeopardizes the health or safety of the person.
9. **Exploitation:** Any attempt to trick or manipulate a person for personal benefit. This includes persuasion to do things that are illegal or not in the individual's best interest.

We must first understand the QAM definitions of abuse, then understand our professional responsibility to recognize, respond to, and report concerns appropriately within our scope of practice.

Equally important is understanding an agency's mission statements, as this articulates the fundamental purpose, values, and commitment to social inclusion and human rights. When we understand an agency's mission, we are better equipped to identify practices that contradict those values and may constitute abuse. A clear understanding of both QAM definitions and mission statements ensures that we uphold the rights of persons receiving support and align our actions.

Mission Statements, Developmental Services Agencies, and Promoting Rights

The mission statement should describe the agency's fundamental purpose and promote social inclusion. Mission statements are shared with the person who is supported and are specific to each agency, and recognize a commitment to the fundamental rights of persons receiving services.

O. Reg. 299/10: Quality Assurance Measures, Part 5 (29)

Promoting social inclusion, individual choice, independence and rights

29. (1) In addressing quality assurance measures respecting the promotion of social inclusion, individual choice, independence and rights, each application entity shall include in its policies and procedures:

1. A mission statement that promotes social inclusion.
2. Service principles that promote individualized approaches to supporting persons with developmental disabilities.
3. A statement that outlines the rights of persons with developmental disabilities who have applied for services and supports or funding and is based on respect for, and the dignity of, the individual. O. Reg. 299/10, s. 29 (1).

(2) In addressing quality assurance measures respecting the promotion of social inclusion, individual choice, independence and rights, each application entity shall,

(a) conduct a mandatory orientation to its mission statement, service principles and statement of rights with its new staff members, new volunteers and new members of its board of directors and an annual refresher for staff and volunteers of the mission statement, service principles and statement of rights thereafter;
(b) ensure that its board of directors conduct an annual review of its mission statement, service principles and statement of rights, which shall include updating as necessary; and
(c) record the dates of all orientations, refreshers and reviews conducted under clauses (a) and (b). O. Reg. 299/10, s. 29 (2).

(3) In addressing quality assurance measures respecting the promotion of social inclusion, individual choice, independence and rights, each application entity shall provide information and supports to persons with developmental disabilities regarding activities in their individual support plan, including the consideration of risks so they can make informed decisions.
O. Reg. 299/10, s. 29 (3).

Contains information licensed under the Open Government Licence – Ontario.

Reflection: Think About It

As you review **O. Reg. 299/10: Quality Assurance Measures, Part 5 (29)**, notice the following:

- With whom is the mission statement shared, and when is it shared?
- Who is responsible for reviewing the mission statement and updating it as necessary?
- How does an agency ensure the above requirements are completed?

Activity 2.2: Mission, Vision, Values

Look up some local developmental services agencies in your area and review the mission statements.

1. Visit each agency's website.
2. Find and carefully read their:
    a. Mission Statement
    b. Vision (if available)
    c. Values (if available)

Tip: Use keywords like "Developmental Services Agency + your city" or search through local community resource directories.

Notice the similarities/differences in their commitments to the fundamental rights of persons supported.



Reflection: Think About It

Reflect on the agencies you visited in activity 2.2

- What did you discover as you reviewed the mission statements of the different agencies?
- You likely discovered commitments to the fundamental rights of persons supported. What did you discover in terms of protection from abuse?
- Is this mentioned as part of the mission statements you examined?

One of the essential Family-Work skills outlined by Dale Monro is

"Becoming Aware of Unspoken Family Questions. Do you really care about my relative/me? Is my child/relative really safe? Is my child/relative happy? Am I a good parent?" (Munroe, 2020, pg 471).

Families need reassurances that address these often-unspoken questions. Did the mission statements you explored clearly address the unspoken family question, "Is my family member safe"?



Choose Your Own Adventure Reflection

Choose to submit your reflection mission statements in a written or audio format.

Written Reflection

Audio Reflection

Activity Description

If the objective of a mission statement is to describe the fundamental purpose of a support agency, should the mission statement include a commitment to keeping persons supported safe?

CHAPTER 3: INTRODUCTION TO DAVID HINGSBURGER AND HIS CONTRIBUTIONS

Learning Objectives

1. Examine the factors contributing to balancing power in relationships.
2. Examine indicators, characteristics and impact of maltreatment (abuse).

David Hingsburger (1952 – 2021) was an icon in the field of Developmental Services. He was a Canadian disability rights advocate, author, and educator whose work has profoundly shaped the field of disability. Hingsburger challenged the myth that people with disabilities must be screened from information "for their own protection." Instead, his work advocates that knowledge and choice are fundamental human rights of all.

He wrote two influential books, among several publications, ***Just Say Know*** and ***Power Tools***, that emphasize how people can make safe, empowered choices when they are supported to understand consent and relationships.

This open education resource book adopts David Hingsburger's ideas, including his idea that abuse is never caused by the individual, but by the actions of the person who abuses power. Throughout this text, readers are encouraged to move away from fear-based protection and toward education, rights-based support, and meaningful inclusion. Our aim is to advocate for Hingsburger's vision of a world where people with disabilities are trusted, informed, and supported to live full, self-directed lives.

David Hinsburger told it like it was. He spoke of topics that would make some people visibly uncomfortable. Topics that are often avoided. The real stuff.

"Dave's greatest passion was empowerment of people with IDD. He knew that without true self-determination, people with disabilities became more likely to be victims of exploitation, abuse, and discrimination. He would often say to audiences that our role, as direct support professionals, "is to be a person's microphone...NOT their voice!" Among the hundreds of other insights and quotes, this one is a lasting message to all of us" (Institute on Community Integration, 2021, para. 4).

David Hinsburger was never afraid to tell the truth. The testimonial below is a perfect example.

Testimonial

"I worked for an organization that was fortunate to receive a grant, allowing us to host David Hinsburger for two days and present to groups of individuals in schools and services that really needed to hear the message he gave on dealing with bullies. His message: '*I'm fine, you're mean*'. I would read his blog daily. I didn't get to see him when he arrived at his hotel late the evening before the sessions, and while waiting to see him the next morning, I decided to check out his blog, eager to see how his first night had been" (D. Davidson, personal communication, February 17, 2026).

Read his experience on his blog: My New Friend



Choose Your Own Adventure Reflection

Choose to submit your reflection in a written or audio format.

Written Reflection

Audio Reflection

Activity Description

What would you have done if you woke up in the morning and read his blog about his first night, if you were the organizer of the event who had secured his hotel room?

David Hinsburger taught us to understand POWER and to carefully contemplate the misuse of POWER by direct support professionals.



Image by OpenAI

Hingsburger emphasizes that *we who say we serve, have tremendous power over those we say we serve* (Hingsburger, 1993).

It is important that we acknowledge the position of power held by a direct support professionals. Direct support professionals are placed in the lives of persons who have developmental disabilities to support, guide and serve as a role model.

Supporting people with life skills, guiding people in making choices and decisions, and role-modelling best practices, including how we speak to persons supported, are the job of a direct support professional. Self-reflection is important to ensure this often marginalized group is not being treated as lesser, as our relationship is based on power rather than on supporting, guiding and role-modelling.

Activity 3.1 Power Words

Activity Description

When you hear the word power, what comes to mind first?

- Authority or status
- Control over decisions
- Electricity/energy
- Influence over others
- Honesty and voice
- The way we speak to people

Power isn't only about control or authority; sometimes it shows up in everyday interactions, language, and tone. What other words come to mind?

Activity 3.2 Would you say?

Activity Description

A friend arrives wearing an "inappropriate outfit" for the place you are going to

- Definitely would
- Probably would
- Unsure
- Probably would not
- Definitely would not

A person you support arrives wearing an "inappropriate outfit" for the place you are going.

- Definitely would
- Probably would
- Unsure
- Probably would not
- Definitely would not

Reflection: Think About It

- Does your response change in the above activity with a friend vs a person you support?
- Would you tell your friend that their outfit is 'inappropriate' for the place you are going?
- Would you tell a friend that their shirt has a stain on it?
- Would you tell them that they need to go get changed or to have a shower before they could enter your car?
- Ask yourself if you would say this to a person that you were providing support to? Would your approach be different?

Professionalism vs Friendships

It is often forgotten that people receiving services are connected to us through our role, not through personal relationships. Being paid is a reminder that support work is a profession and one that requires boundaries, self-awareness, and an ethical use of power in service to others. The nature of the work of the direct support professionals lies with the imbalance of power between the person with an intellectual disability needing the worker's help, and the worker being paid to give it.

> @open_future_learning
>
> A story about power and control by Dave Hingsburger.
>
> ♫ original sound – OpenFutureLearning

Link to Video Transcript

The core of professionals' relationships with people who are accessing developmental services is to support, promote, and empower a person to be their truest version of themselves, as they see and want it.

> "Being in human services is cool because, in essence, you are paid to be human. Paid to explore the commonalities of the human condition. Paid to discover the incredible diversity of the human spirit. Paid to spend the day doing something that matters; something that makes a difference. Something that you are proud of. Done right, you have chosen both a job and a passion. Both a passion and a mission. Both a mission and a purpose. There are those who spend their lives looking for a purpose. You will rise to it each morning. And that's a hell of a way to start the day" (David Hingsburger, 2019, para. 1).

David Hingsburger approached working in the field of Developmental Services as the privilege that it is. It is about guiding, providing feedback, and empowering. It is an opportunity each day to provide assistance as a person builds something that they could not have imagined on their own. It is the ability to provide a new perspective, a new framework, and a forever-welcoming place for growing.

AI Prompts

Badge Image

(OpenAI. (2026). ChatGPT. [Large language model]. https://chat.openai.com/chat)
Prompt: Create a graphic of a name badge, a lock and key, and the word 'no' in a bubble style

CHAPTER 4: VULNERABILITY

Learning Objectives

1. Examine the factors contributing to balancing power in relationships.
2. Examine indicators, characteristics and impact of maltreatment (abuse).

Have you ever thought about the words people use to describe persons with disabilities? Think about someone you support or someone you know who has a disability.

Reflection: Think about it

List 3-4 words or phrases you instinctively use to describe this person.

Tip: Write the words that come to mind naturally.

Now, look at the words you listed. Would you consider any of these words to be labels? When we label people, we see and treat them as their label. This is called Labelling Theory, and is sometimes referred to as a 'Self-Fulfilling Prophecy'. Interestingly, people who are labelled may begin to act in ways that confirm that label. Labels, or the words used to describe someone, can be especially limiting to persons with developmental disabilities, particularly when labels make them seem vulnerable and in need of protection *(Fitzsimons, 2020).*

In chapter 1, abuse statistics for persons with disabilities were shared. Reading these statistics reinforces the

notion of vulnerability and a need for protection. What we see is a single story of vulnerability. But what if we flip the narrative and change the story?

> "How is it possible that among the most closely monitored people in our society, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), are victims of sexual assault? Perhaps the problem is rooted in the single story of vulnerability of people with disabilities, with this thinking resulting in a single solution of protection" (Fitzsimons, 2020, para. 2).

> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues that "the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story... How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability to not just to tell the story, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (as cited in Fitzsimons, 2020, para. 2).

What influences the development of a single story that persons with developmental disabilities are vulnerable and in need of protection?

Think about the personal attributes that might make someone with a developmental disability more vulnerable and thus perpetuate the single story of vulnerability and need for protection.

Click on the thought bubbles below to see the responses.

Limited ability to assess risk or anticipate consequences

Limited vocabulary to describe uncomfortable or unsafe experiences

Need for support with daily living activities

Differences in brain development and cognitive functioning

When we assume persons with developmental disabilities are inherently vulnerable, then we may unintentionally place responsibility for their own victimization onto them.

> "Vulnerable is a dangerous word. It is now used to describe a state of being and as such one hears of "Vulnerable Populations." This is making "vulnerability" a character trait of a particular group of persons. It is laying the blame for the victimization inside the person. If we believe that someone is assaulted because of who they are, then there is no option but to protect them because nothing can be done to alter their state of being. For example, Annette is and will remain a person with a disability. If the disability caused the assault, then the source of the assault is somewhere inside of her" (Hingsburger, 1995, p. 16).
>
> He continues:
>
> "Victim is a dangerous word. To say that someone is a victim is to say their state of being has been altered by the act that was perpetrated on them. To say for example, that Annette is a victim, is to say that she is now, and she will ever be seen differently by those who regard her. As a victim she can never again be seen as separate from an act which was done to her" (Hingsburger, 1995, p. 16).

Prison of Protection

The term prison of protection developed by David Hingsburger, describes how overprotection can unintentionally restrict a person's life.

Activity 4.1: What does Prison of Protection mean to you?

Activity Description

What does prison of protection mean to you? Write down your initial understanding.

The prison of protection has four walls, created when we attempt to protect a person from relationships, sexual information, decision-making, and society.



Reflection: Think about it

Take a few minutes to consider why families may possibly build each of the four walls to safeguard a family member they believe to be vulnerable.
For example, why might a family try to protect a person from receiving sex education?

- Protection from Relationships
- Protection from Sexual Information
- Protection from Decision-making
- Protection from Society

Activity 4.2: Prison of Protection

Activity Description

1. Left of box: Protect from Relationships
    - Limiting friendships or romantic connections "for safety"
    - Closely monitoring social interactions

    How might this wall affect belonging and identity?
2. Top of box: Protect from Sexual Information
    - Withholding age-appropriate sexual education
    - Avoiding conversations about consent, bodies, or boundaries
    - Assuming "they don't need to know"

    How can lack of information increase vulnerability rather than safety?
3. Right of box: Protect from Decision-Making
    - Making choices for the person instead of with them
    - Avoiding risk at all costs
    - Limiting opportunities to make mistakes

    What skills are lost when choice is removed?
4. Bottom of box: Protect from Society
    - Segregated programming
    - Low expectations for participation in everyday life
    - They are special people

    What message does this send about a person's place in the world?

Activity 4.3: Quiz

Activity Description

Quiz Activity

Scenario:

A direct support professional decides not to discuss dating with an adult they support because they believe it will keep them safe.

Question:

Which wall(s) of the Prison of Protection are present here? Check all that apply.

- Protect from Relationships
- Protect from Sexual Information
- Protect from Decision-Making
- Protect from Society

Solution:

- Protect from Relationships is correct because avoiding discussion about dating limits access to relationships.
- Protect from Sexual Information is correct because withholding conversation about dating also restricts sexual information (consent, boundaries, safety).
- Protect from Decision-Making is correct because deciding for the person removes their right to make choices about their own life.
- Protect from Society is incorrect because society is not directly present in this specific scenario.

The above scenario reflects overprotection that creates a Prison of Protection, even though the intent is safety.



Choose Your Own Adventure Reflection

Choose to submit your reflection in a written or audio format.

Written Reflection

Audio Reflection

Activity Description

If we reflect back on the single story often associated with persons with developmental disabilities, how does the prison of protection actually increase their vulnerability?

Learned Personal Characteristics and Vulnerability:

Learned personal characteristics of persons with developmental disabilities may also increase vulnerability. These characteristics develop through limited opportunities, restricted experiences or lack of knowledge that is often by the power and control of others (Fitzsimons, 2017).

Think about some of the following before revealing the answers:
What are some characteristics of Learned Helplessness?

- Person believes they *can't* change the situation
- Wanting to be includes, likes, accepted by others
- To avoid exclusion

What are some characteristics of Learned Compliance?

- People are trained to be compliant
- Taught to comply, directly or indirectly
- Expected to comply
- Punished for not complying
- People "do" even when they don't want to

What are some characteristics of a Desire to Please Others?

- More compliant due to wanting approval
- To be included, accepted and liked by others (because exclusion is common)
- To be invited
- To be liked like everyone else

What are some characteristics of Underdeveloped Personal Boundaries?

- May lack a clear sense of personal boundaries
- Boundaries may be repeatedly crossed or ignored by others
- Hugging strangers
- Giving personal information

Some learned personal characteristics of persons with developmental disabilities may increase vulnerability in unsafe environments; however, these characteristics do not cause abuse and never justify it. Abuse occurs because of the actions and decisions of the perpetrator

CHAPTER 5: SEXUALITY - RIGHTS & AUTONOMY

Learning Objectives

1. Examine the factors contributing to balancing power in relationships.
2. Examine indicators, characteristics and impact of maltreatment (abuse).
3. Utilize knowledge of appropriate legislation in preparing written documents.
4. Recognize the impact of the diagnosis of disability on the family unit and the changing roles of families in the 21st century.



Did You Know?

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is a part of Canada's Constitution that protects people's basic rights and freedoms by limiting what governments can do. The Charter guarantees that everyone is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination, including discrimination based on race or colour (Government of Canada, 2026).

The Ontario Human Rights Code is a provincial law that protects people in Ontario from discrimination and harassment and ensures equal treatment in areas such as employment, housing, services, and contracts.

In summary, the Charter applies when the government is involved, and the Ontario Human Rights Code applies in everyday life (when dealing with businesses, organizations and individuals).

Activity 5.1: Human Rights

Activity Description

Here is a list of possible human rights:

- Being treated fairly, no matter your skin colour
- Being allowed to share your ideas respectfully
- Being forced to join a group you don't want to join
- Being safe from bullying or harassment
- Getting special treatment over others

Determine whether they are a human right or not a human right.

Solution:

Human Rights:

- Being treated fairly no matter your skin colour
- Being allowed to share your ideas respectfully
- Being safe from bullying or harassment

Not Human Rights:

- Being forced to join a group you don't want to join
- Getting special treatment over others

All of our rights are important, yet some are particularly challenging for persons with developmental disabilities to access.

The Ontario Human Rights Code makes it illegal to treat someone unfairly, exclude them, or harass them because of their sexual orientation.* Yet, despite this, many people with a developmental disability are treated as if they are asexual. As if they are not attracted to, nor have any desire to be in an intimate partnership.

To effectively support people in Developmental Services, we must begin with a genuinely positive and respectful view of persons who have developmental disabilities. While this may seem self-evident, it is all too often

absent or forgotten for those who hold the power to focus on setting limitations rather than creating or fostering possibilities and opportunities.

David Hingsburger taught us that:

"Society is uncomfortable with the sexuality of people with intellectual disabilities. Support Staff are members of society. Attitudes of the larger society may be present within those who assist the people we support. Prejudices are not easy to see when we have them" (Open Future Learning, 2012).

Further...

"People with developmental disabilities can develop healthy sexual relationships if they live in healthy systems surrounded by people with appropriate attitudes"

(Hingsburger & Tough, 2002, p.8.).

WE Are The system.

As direct support professionals in the Developmental Services field, we hold significant power to influence a person's life. How that power is used depends on the choices, attitudes, and actions of the people who provide the support.

Direct support professionals can provide education. They can build a relationship of trust and honesty as they consider the person to be the adult that they want to be. Persons with developmental disabilities want or deserve opportunities for sex education.

When it comes to sexuality, persons with developmental disabilities have been overlooked in classrooms and in their own homes. Families have signed omission slips excusing individuals with disabilities from partaking in the Sex Education that is provided to their peers. They have been left out of conversations in the parent-child chats and in the discussions of the birds and the bees.

Here are some examples of **misconceptions** that families might have, that fuels their need to protect persons with developmental disabilities from sex education:

Society tells me do not confuse them

Society tells me do not make them grow up to fast

Society tells me do not speak of things they won't understand

Society tells me that they are eternal children

Society tells me they have no desire for intimacy or interest in sex

The reality is, failing to provide education to persons with developmental disabilities actually makes them more vulnerable.

When a conscious decision to withhold sex education is made, it fails to provide a person with a developmental disability with any defence, with the power to say no, and with the opportunity to protect themselves.

> **The answer we need to support persons with disabilities is empowerment.**

People deserve their power. The ability to govern oneself and to be armed with the education to make informed decisions should never be questioned.

Knowledge is power, and one of the simplest ways to support empowerment is through education and access for people to exercise their rights and the power to make informed decisions.

CHAPTER 6: THE ROLE OF CAREGIVERS, EDUCATORS AND DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

Learning Objectives

1. Examine the factors contributing to balancing power in relationships.
2. Examine indicators, characteristics and impact of maltreatment (abuse).
3. Utilize knowledge of appropriate legislation in preparing written documents.
4. Recognize the impact of the diagnosis of disability on the family unit and the changing roles of families in the 21st century.

"A good teacher is one who makes himself progressively unnecessary."
— Thomas Carruthers

Supporting individuals with developmental disabilities involves more than providing instruction or care. It requires helping people build the skills, confidence, and autonomy needed to live meaningful and self-directed lives.

Reflection: Think About It

1. Can you think of a time when you needed support in your own life?
    a. What did it look like?
    b. What did it feel like?
2. How would you define the word SUPPORT?

To truly understand how to do this, it is important to first examine the meaning of the words themselves. The definition of **support** is to promote the interests or cause of, especially by action or aid (Merriam Webster, n.d). The definition of **Living** is the condition of being alive (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

The direct support professional encourages the idea of Living Supported.

Living Supported

Living puts the person first in their character. It defines what the person sees as fulfillment, progress, and a valuable way to live their own life. It allows the space for personhood and lets the person be number one. It puts them in the driver's seat, allowing for autonomy and decision-making. The concept of living extends beyond simply existing or meeting basic needs. It refers to having opportunities to make choices, participate in life, and experience purpose and belonging.

Support comes second to that. It is of utmost importance, yet it is second to the person and their needs and wants. Support for an individual needs to be entirely shaped around the individual.

Educators as Supporters

As individuals grow from childhood into adulthood, learning increasingly occurs through real-world experiences, relationships, and community participation. However, in elementary and secondary school systems the focus is often on getting through the day. Many educational and service systems struggle with limited funding and resources, making it difficult to provide individualized supports that meet each person's unique needs. This means many persons with developmental disabilities are left without the essential lessons that build on safety, autonomy and empowerment.

Without appropriate support, a person with a developmental disability may miss critical opportunities to develop the skills necessary for safety, self-advocacy, and independence. This highlights the essential role of caregivers, educators, and support professionals in fostering environments that promote autonomy, empowerment, and lifelong learning.

The space between protection and independence is often blurred, requiring supporters and educators to carefully navigate this delicate space as children (sometimes without clearly recognized markers of cognitive progression) grow into adulthood. In the province of Ontario, one is recognized to be an adult at 18 years old; as discussed in the Human Rights Code, regardless of disability.

The role of the direct support professional spans a wide territory. It requires an open mind and a willingness to move into the uncomfortable. Further, it allows the worker to expand their own life-long learning alongside a person in need of support.

Caregivers vs. Care providers

The Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence (2025) defines **caregivers** as those individuals who provide unpaid care to family members, friends, and the community.

Care Providers, in contrast, are those individuals who provide paid work in a variety of settings: personal homes, group homes, supported apartments, independent-living housing, long-term care, and others. These individuals are as unique and varied as the individuals that each serve. The Developmental Services Worker (DSW) is in a paid position and, therefore, a care provider (CCCE, 2025).

Activity 6.1: Unpaid Care

Activity Description

Question: Canadians provide **5.7 billion hours** of unpaid care per year. This is equivalent to **32.2%** of national healthcare spending (Canadian Centre of Caregiving Excellence)

Answer: True

The direct support professional role builds around the person. It takes shape in a person-directed way and can include any number of the following:

- **Supports for Living in the Community** – assisting with the arrangement of transportation, medical appointments, shopping for groceries, etc.
- **Supports for Personal Care-** bathing, medication administration, personal hygiene-related acts such as grooming and physiotherapy, etc.
- **Supports for Living in the Home** – assistance with laundry, meal preparation, budgeting and planning, caring for the home itself, with arrangement of equipment inspections, maintenance and upkeep, amongst others.
- **Supports for Involvement in the Community** – involvement in events and activities that include the life of the community, such as festivals and concerts, community theatre, book clubs or service clubs.
- **Supports for a Meaningful Contribution to the Vocational Fabric of the Community** – supports for a career, for volunteering, for entrepreneurship, or for educational studies.
- **Supports to Cultivate and Nurture Relationships**– assistance to contribute to the lives of those who matter to the person with a developmental disability. This could look like assisting to purchase birthday cards or presents for loved ones, coordinating how the person can contribute a dish to a neighbourhood potluck or planning to attend social situations to meet new people.

Persons with developmental disabilities require the support of care givers, educators and direct support professionals who are kind, empowering, and emotionally regulated.

CHAPTER 7: BUILDING A FOUNDATION OF SELF-ADVOCACY

Learning Objectives

1. Examine the factors contributing to balancing power in relationships.
2. Examine indicators, characteristics and impact of maltreatment (abuse).



When children are small, they rely on the adults in their lives for absolutely everything. This includes food and shelter, personal care and comfort, but also for the teaching and modelling of social roles, etiquette and civil expectations. Adults teach children how to interact and about courtesy and disrespect. As children grow and change, they begin to make choices independent of their parents and caregivers, and they develop skills to govern their own interactions.

Activity 7.1: How Do You Feel?

Activity Description

How do you feel when...

Prompt: When someone stands in your personal bubble (within 1-2 feet around your body).
Answers: Uncomfortable, neutral, comfortable

Prompt: When someone hugs you without asking if they can.
Answers: Uncomfortable, neutral, comfortable

Prompt: When someone enters your home without knocking.
Answers: Uncomfortable, neutral, comfortable

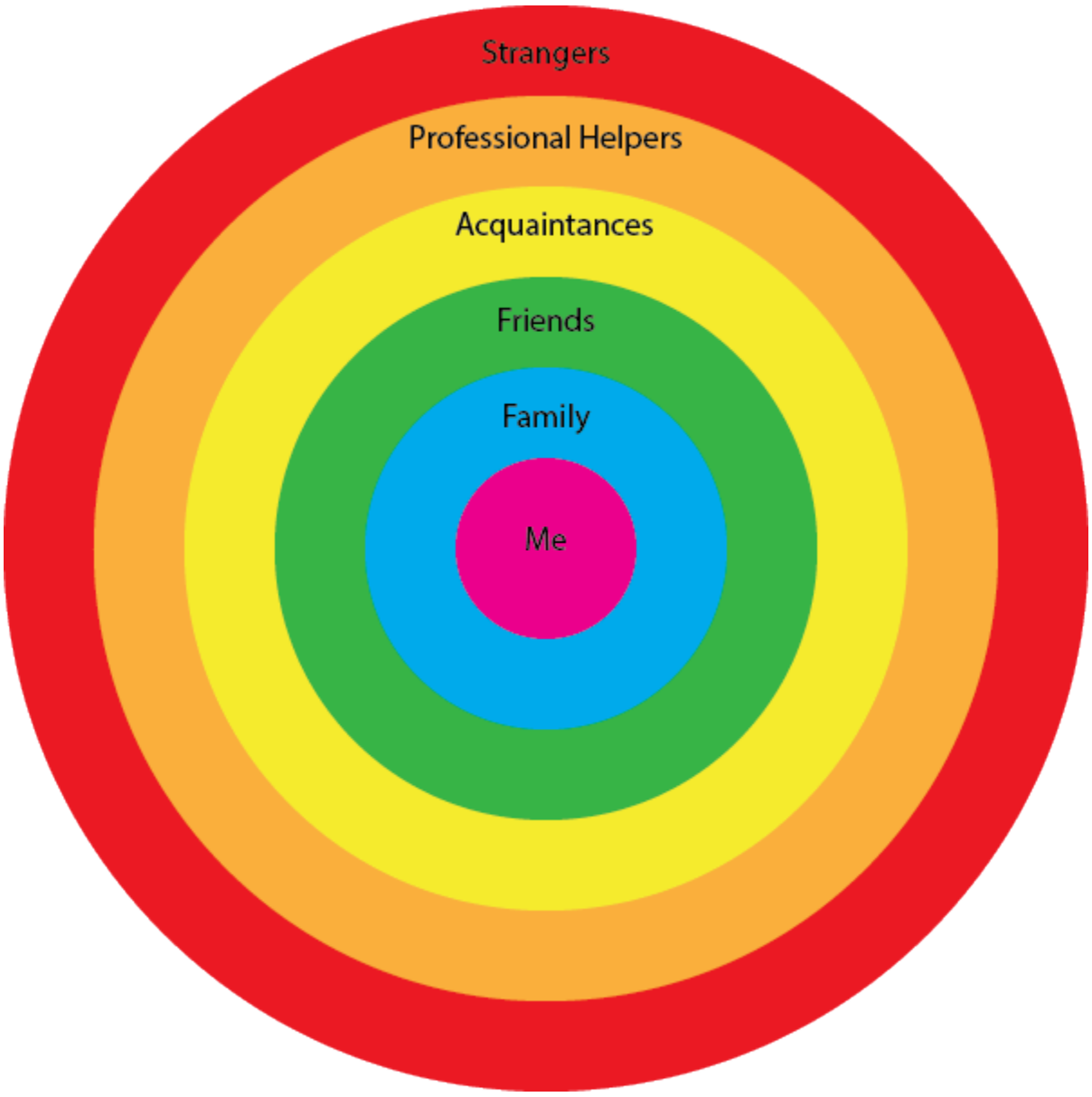
Prompt: When someone speaks about you in an unfavourable way to others while in your presence.
Answers: Uncomfortable, neutral, comfortable

Reflect on your responses. Which situations did you rate as most uncomfortable? Which situations felt least uncomfortable for you? Did any of your responses surprise you? Why or why not?

Learning and respecting boundaries helps us to interact thoughtfully and considerately in our relationships with others.

Relationship Circles

The concept of Relationship Circles is an effective visual in explaining the connections between others and oneself.



"Relationship Circles" by William Osbourne-Sorrell, CC BY NC SA.

Inner circle: This is the circle for your thoughts, ideas, things that you may have thought about but aren't ready to share with others, and how you feel about yourself!

Family circle: This circle includes persons that you feel closest to. They may share a home with you or be people that you love to spend time with. They make you feel comfortable.

Friend circle: Moving further outward, the friend circle is the people that you choose to spend time with.

Acquaintances circle: This circle includes people that you know, but don't have a defined relationship with. They may be a person you always meet when you walk your dog, or go to collect the newspaper, or they

may be a person that you see every morning when you go to a coffee shop. You may or may not know their name.

Professional helpers circle: This circle is for those who are paid to give a service. This is for doctors, the people who work at the bank, the hairdresser, or the person who gives you foot care. This is also the circle of the direct support professional. This is a person who is paid to support, assist with the activities of daily living, but is there because they are paid to help. Professional helpers cannot be the same as friends.

Strangers circle: These individuals are those whom you do not know. They are people in restaurants or on the bus, or individuals you might meet on the internet or social media. They are not known to you, and therefore, you cannot trust them.

Activity 7.2: Relationship Circles Examples

Activity Description

Family: Parent, Grandparent, Aunt/Uncle, Cousin

Friends: Best Friend, Parent's friends

Acquaintances: Next door neighbour, the person who says hello at the mail box

Professional Helpers: Doctor, Dentist, Hairstylist, Teacher

Strangers: Customer where I work, Someone I walk past on the sidewalk/corridor

Using the concept of relationship circles can help a person with a developmental disability understand the relationships in their lives and see where they may want to expand their relationships and meet new people. For example, if a person wants to explore friendships, then the direct support professional can assist them in discovering safe ways to meet new people. This can be at local clubs, events, networking or activities.

When a person understands themselves in relation to others, they can identify areas they want to expand. The inner circle is the most critical for a person with a developmental disability to understand in order to learn to make their own choices.

Empowerment

The direct support professional can empower the people they support by listening to them. Listening is not

always with your ears, though! One of the greatest challenges for direct support professionals is understanding the true wants of a person who has challenges communicating with words.

When a person that you are supporting has access to family members, you can learn many things about the person together, for example:

- memories
- history
- medical and genetic information
- experience
- understanding of where families have settled
- opportunity to know misunderstood choices, such as family members being absent from the person's life
- culture
- religion

When having gathered this information, the direct support professional can present options, choices and opportunities that may more closely align with the person and how they identify themselves. There is value in a longstanding professional relationship with a direct support professional and the person they are supporting. There are pieces of information that direct support professionals know and understand from working with a person that are not always written down in a way that is easy to find. If there is an opportunity to speak with a persons support worker from the past, there can be usefulness in taking that opportunity.

Persons with developmental disabilities have many ways of communicating what they want and need:

- **Body language**: A person's body language can communicate their level of comfort with a person or situation. Pay close attention to how the person may communicate their preferences to you.
- **Eye contact**: A person can communicate anger, fear, happiness, and other emotions through the way they look at a person or a situation.
- **Paraverbal communication**: A person's volume, cadence, and tone of voice can help the DSW gauge their comfort level.
- **Sign language:** Some individuals may use American Sign Language (ASL), Sign Exact English, or their own gestures and movements to express their feelings and thoughts.
- **Facilitated communication/supported typing:** This method of alternative communication involves the use of a facilitator to assist an individual physically in typing or pointing in sequence to communicate their ideas.

Activity 7.3 : Quiz

In this activity, you will review different situations and decide what the person may be communicating. There may be more than one reasonable interpretation, but your answer should show thoughtful observation.

Activity Description

1. You enter a room to support Sam. Who is new to you?
   Sam immediately turns his body away from you and moves closer to the wall.
   His arms are crossed and he avoids interaction.
   What might Sam be communicating?

   1. He is excited to see you
   2. He may feel uncomfortable or unsure
   3. He wants to start an activity immediately
   4. He is trying to be funny

   Correct Answer: He may feel uncomfortable or unsure
   Feedback: Turning away, closing body posture, and avoiding interaction often communicate discomfort or uncertainty. A DSW should slow down, give space, and try to build trust.

2. Ella taps her chest and points to the kitchen repeatedly.
   What might Ella be communicating?

   1. She wants to go outside
   2. She may be hungry or asking for food
   3. She wants to sleep
   4. She is confused

   Correct Answer: She may be hungry or asking for food
   Feedback: Many individuals develop personal gestures to communicate needs such as food, rest, or comfort.

3. During an activity, Maya looks directly at you with wide eyes and a big smile when you bring out art materials.
   What emotion might Maya be communicating?

   1. Fear
   2. Interest/Excitement
   3. Anger
   4. Confusion

   Correct Answer: Interest/Excitement
   Feedback: Eye contact combined with facial expressions can communicate positive emotions and interest in an activity.

As a DSW, it is important to notice body language, eye contact, tone, gestures, and alternative communication methods.

Assuming Competence

As direct support professionals, it is imperative to use some or all of the previously indicated methods to communicate information to the person with a developmental disability. It is the responsibility of the direct support professional to provide the information in every means possible to help the person to gain understanding and make decisions for themselves. Assume that individuals are competent and able to receive the message that is being communicated. The due diligence to provide a means of communicating the information and material to the person is of utmost importance in the relationship of the direct support professional to the person.

The direct support professional may, when needed, support individuals with developmental disabilities in making informed decisions by providing guidance, clarifying options, and encouraging autonomy, self-determination, and confidence in their own choices.

CHAPTER 8: CONSENT, BOUNDARIES AND COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

1. Examine the factors contributing to balancing power in relationships.
2. Examine indicators, characteristics and impact of maltreatment (abuse).
3. Utilize knowledge of appropriate legislation in preparing written documents.

Victimization: Why Don't People Report

Persons with developmental disabilities face unique challenges in reporting abuse compared to the general population. When considering the cultural norms and jargon for interactions, such as physical contact and identification of a person's own body parts, support workers must be closely in tune with the information that a person with a developmental disability is sharing through their words, body language, disposition and/or interactions.

"Victimization rates are ten times as high for persons with disabilities than for persons without disabilities" (Modell & Mak, 2008, as cited in Ontario Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services [MCCSS], n.d.).

"Although about 80% of women and 60% of men with developmental disabilities will be sexually molested by age 18, only 3% of their attackers go to jail" (Government of Ontario, Child and Parent Resource Institute [CPRI], 2021).

Education about sexuality should be seen as an opportunity to build essential life skills and a healthy self-image. These are the foundations of positive self-esteem and empowerment, helping individuals recognize their worth and feel confident advocating for themselves.

The Concept of Public and Private

Sex education for persons with developmental disabilities needs to include a range of concepts related to behaviour and human interaction as part of understanding sexuality.

Sexuality encompasses many aspects, for example:

- different types of relationships
- the difference between public and private relationships
- sexual acts are private and should occur in private places
- kinds of touch that are appropriate and inappropriate
- how to give consent – saying yes or no
- understanding bodies, feelings, relationships
- understanding personal boundaries and respecting the boundaries of others
- learning to communicate feelings, needs and questions safely
- recognizing safe versus unsafe situations of behaviours
- understanding appropriate behaviour in public – how we act around others
- knowing who to talk to if they feel confused, uncomfortable, or unsafe

(OpenAI, 2025).

When a person knows what happens in private, they are armed with the information to know what is acceptable/unacceptable and by whom.

When a person is taught about sexuality and understands the feelings, ideals and parameters that it includes, we are empowering them to make choices with greater dignity and control.

When we ignore the need for sex education altogether, individuals cannot recognize when an act is wrong.

Betrayal From Those in Trust

Abuse, exploitation and neglect are often perpetrated by individuals who are known to the victim (Surrey Place, n.d.). This highlights the importance of providing education across multiple levels and formats, ensuring that persons with developmental disabilities have access to diverse sources of information and trusted peo-

ple whom they can turn to if a concern arises. The absence of meaningful relationships in the lives of persons with developmental disabilities contributes to vulnerability. When a person has rich and full relationships with others who care for them, these connections act as safeguards in the most authentic ways.

Quality Assurance Measures

The Quality Assurance Measures (QAM) obligate organizations to provide abuse prevention and reporting to persons with a developmental disability. At a minimum, annual re-education of individuals accessing services is required. This provides an opportunity for sharing new information, ideas, and building on skills.

An individual cannot identify abuse if they are not aware of what abuse looks like. Open discussion about what interactions are inappropriate will provide a knowledge base to build confidence and self-worth. Plain language should be utilized to avoid overcomplicating definitions and discussions.

(OpenAI, 2026)

Plain Language means using words that are easy to understand, the first time someone hears or reads them. The goal of Plain Language is to make information clear for everyone. In Chapter 2, you were introduced to the definitions and different types of abuse (see Activity 2.1)



Choose Your Own Adventure Reflection

Choose to submit your reflection mission statements in a written or audio format.

Written Reflection

Audio Reflection

Activity Description

Use Plain Language to define each of the types of abuse listed below.

If needed, refer to Chapter 2 (Activity 2.1) for definitions of abuse.

- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Financial Abuse
- Verbal Abuse
- Emotional or Psychological Abuse
- Harassment
- Sexual Harassment
- Neglect
- Exploitation

Activity 8.1: Quiz

In the following activity, read each situation. Think about power, trust, and choice. Decide if the situation is:

- Safe/Kind
- Not sure/Needs more information
- Not safe/Not ok

Activity Description

Read each situation. Think about power, trust, and choice. Decide if the situation is:

- Safe/Kind
- Not sure/Needs more information
- Not safe/Not ok

Scenarios + Answers:

1. A support worker helps you get dressed after asking for your permission.
   Answer: Safe / Kind
   Feedback: This shows consent and respect. The support worker asked first and gave a choice. Even when support is needed, an individual has the right to say yes or no.
2. A staff member tells you not to tell anyone about something that made you uncomfortable.
   Answer: Not Safe / Not Ok
   Feedback: This is not safe. No one should ask someone to keep secrets about something that feels wrong.
3. Someone at your program asks for a hug, and you feel unsure but don't want to be rude.
   Answer: Not sure / Needs More Information
   Feedback: You always have the right to say no to touch, even if someone asks politely. Feeling unsure is a signal to pause. Safe relationships respect your comfort and your choices.
4. A staff member checks the phone of an individual with developmental disability, without

asking them.

Answer: Not Safe / Not OK

Feedback: This is a violation of the person's privacy and autonomy. Individuals have the right to their personal space, communication, and information. Even when support is provided, permission and clear communication are essential. If there are concerns about safety, these should be addressed openly, respectfully, and with the individual involved, not by taking control without consent.

5. A friend listens when you say "no" and respects your space.

   Answer: Safe / Kind

   Feedback: This is what healthy relationships look like. Your boundaries are respected, and your voice is heard.

6. 6. A transportation driver makes comments about the body of a person with a developmental disability.

   Answer: Not Safe / Not OK

   Feedback: This is inappropriate and unsafe. It crosses personal boundaries and involves a power imbalance.

Education, awareness, and connection are not optional supports. They are essential safeguards. When people are provided with clear, respectful, and ongoing education about sexuality, relationships, and personal boundaries, they are better equipped to understand their rights, recognize harm, and advocate for themselves. This knowledge becomes a form of protection, empowering individuals to navigate both public and private aspects of their lives with confidence.

Equally important is the presence of meaningful, trusting relationships. When individuals are surrounded by people who genuinely care, listen, and respond, vulnerability is reduced, and safety is strengthened. Protection does not come from restriction or silence, but from openness, education, and connection.

In moving forward, it is our responsibility to ensure that individuals with developmental disabilities are not left in the dark, but instead are supported through education, trusted relationships, and inclusive practices that honour their autonomy, dignity, and right to live safely and fully.

AI Prompts

The Concept of Public and Private

(OpenAI. (2026). ChatGPT. [Large language model]. https://chat.openai.com/chat)
Prompt: Create a plain language list of concepts to help persons with disabilities to understand the many facets of sexuality because sexuality is a broad term. The list should include a range of concepts of behaviour and human interactions related to sexuality. For example, understanding of sexual acts, and that those acts should be private matters; however, it also defines appropriate interactions that may happen in pubic.

Quality Assurance Measures

(OpenAI. (2026). ChatGPT. [Large language model]. https://chat.openai.com/chat)
*Prompt***:** Provide this information in plain language – directly from https://www.onboardkhub.ca/documents/2025/02/02-common-forms-of-abuse.pdf/

CHAPTER 9: PRACTICAL SAFETY STRATEGIES, REAL LIFE SCENARIOS & ROLE PLAYING

Learning Objectives

1. Examine the factors contributing to balancing power in relationships.
2. Examine indicators, characteristics and impact of maltreatment (abuse).
3. Recognize the impact of the diagnosis of disability on the family unit and the changing roles of families in the 21st century.

Supportive Conversations

Supporting persons with developmental disabilities to make informed decisions goes beyond simply providing information and involves recognizing everyday experiences as powerful teaching opportunities. Real-life situations, including both positive outcomes and natural consequences, can help individuals better understand their choices and build confidence in their decision-making. These real-life moments provide valuable opportunities to support the learning and decision-making of persons with developmental disabilities.

Example: Overnight With a Friend

A person may want to stay out overnight with a friend. There are many responsibilities to consider when making this decision. By exploring the situation together (rather than directing the outcome), the direct support professional can help the individual think through both the opportunities and possible consequences. Discussing the situation and the circumstances to be considered opens communication and creates meaningful teaching moments, providing opportunity for understanding, clarity, and education on social situations where a person may be otherwise inexperienced.

Some items for discussion could include:

- Where will the person be spending the night?
- Is it at a person's home, a campsite, or a hotel?
- What will the accommodations look like?
- Is the person required to bring bedding/pillows?
- Are there any pieces of equipment that the person needs overnight?
- Will they be able to access the bed/sleeping quarters, given any accessibility needs?
- How long will the person stay the next day?
- Will they require toiletries, a change of clothing, or special dietary foods?
- Will food be provided? Will the food meet the needs?

The above are considerations that the person supported may not have come up with on their own, unless a supporting conversation occurs with them.

Additional discussion topics could include:

- Will there be others there?
- What kind of nightwear is appropriate for the situation?
- What happens if the person is uncomfortable? Can they call someone? Do they have a cellular phone to make a call or to contact someone if they choose?

Reflection and discussion assist in the growth and learning of the person supported.

Humans Learn From Observing the Interactions of Others

> "Imitation is the sincerest of flattery," (Colton, 1820, p. 118).

Modelling of healthy relationships, choices and activities supports persons with developmental disabilities in making positive choices for themselves. When individuals observe others interacting in ways that are appropriate, they can see the results of those actions, which contribute in positive ways.



Image by Fotos, Unsplash License

Likewise, when people observe actions and choices that are negative and create vulnerability, they may see people in positions of power whose behaviours do not align with what they say, sending mixed messages that can lead to confusion and undermine trust.

Real Life Situations

Confidence is an essential characteristic for growth in persons with developmental disabilities. This can be achieved through education and promoting self-advocacy. When people understand their rights and feel confident using their voice, they are better equipped to make informed decisions and communicate concerns.

It is important that when having conversations about abuse with persons with developmental disabilities, you work to understand the language that they use. Body parts are often labelled by families and society in ways that are vastly different from the correct anatomical terms. This can create barriers to clear communication, particularly when individuals are trying to express discomfort, confusion, or harm.

A person with a developmental disability may have only one or several words for a part of their body, and there is a risk that direct support professionals may not recognize the word. This highlights the importance of actively learning and clarifying each individual's communication style and vocabulary. Conversations with persons with developmental disabilities will assist direct support professionals to become skillful at recognizing and responding to reports and suspicions of abuse.

Reflection: Think About It

Think about the word: buttocks.

List words you have used, or you have heard used in place of buttocks.

The list will likely be different for each person.

Activity 9.1: Test Yourself

Activity Description

Why is it important for direct support professionals to understand the different words people use for body parts?

- To better understand what a person is trying to communicate
- To recognize possible signs of abuse or discomfort
- To avoid misunderstandings
- It is not important

Correct Answers:

- To better understand what a person is trying to communicate
- To recognize possible signs of abuse or discomfort
- To avoid misunderstandings

Activity 9.2: Reading

Access the Abuse and Neglect Awareness and Prevention Resources at the QAM Website OnBoard. Read and learn more!

Building confidence, understanding communication, and fostering trusting relationships are essential components of safeguarding persons with developmental disabilities.

When education is paired with real-life conversations and meaningful support, people are empowered to understand their bodies, express their experiences, and advocate for themselves. Direct support professionals play a critical role in listening, validating, and responding in ways that promote dignity and safety. Protection is not achieved through control, but through empowerment, awareness, and connection, ensuring that every individual has the tools and support needed to live safely and fully.

CHAPTER 10: WHEN ABUSE HAPPENS- RESPONDING AND SUPPORTING.

Learning Objectives

1. Examine indicators, characteristics and impact of maltreatment (abuse).
2. Utilize knowledge of appropriate legislation in preparing written documents.



Under Quality Assurance Measures (QAM), ON Regulation 299/10, Developmental Services agencies are expected to train employees and volunteers in methods to recognize the earliest signs that abuse or neglect may be occurring in the lives of people with a developmental disability. For instance, research from Community Living Ontario shows that over half of women with a developmental disability report having been abused physically or sexually by the time they turned 15 years old (Community Living Ontario, 2025).

It is essential that direct support professionals intervene early.

The introduction of QAM created a direct and specific obligation for employees and volunteers supporting individuals with a developmental disability in agencies to respond to suspected, witnessed or reported abuse. This response must be detailed in the agency's policies and procedures, and includes a mandatory reporting to police of any abuse that may be classified as a criminal offence; an act that violates the law/punishable by law.

Activity 10.1: Marben's Story

Activity Description

Marben lives in the community with his father and his father's girlfriend. Marben attends a day program, and his family receives respite services from a local service agency. At his most recent respite visit, Marben told staff members that his father's girlfriend slapped him after he spilled soda on the carpet. He assured the staff that he is no longer angry because she promised to take him to the movies. He also asked that the staff member not tell anyone because he doesn't want to get her into trouble.

How should the staff members respond? Check all that apply

- Text Marben's father's girlfriend and ask about what Marben told you
  (Incorrect- do not share any information with the accused individual)
- Call Marben's father and let him know what Marben has reported
  (Incorrect – do not share information with anyone other than the police and the supervisor/ agency. The police will contact others as appropriate.)
- Call the police and report the information
  (Correct – always report any suspected, witnessed abuse, or abuse that is reported to you. Police must be contacted first.)
- Inform their supervisor
  (Correct – your supervisor or agency emergency delegate should always be contacted immediately after the report to police)
- Ask Marben if his father's girlfriend has ever hit him before
  (Incorrect – do not ask leading questions. You can ask open ended questions such as 'tell me more', however it is best to leave the investigation of the situation up to the professionals)
- Tell Marben that you won't tell anyone – and you don't
  (Incorrect – you are obligated by law to report the abuse)
- Tell Marben that you won't tell anyone – but you do
  (Incorrect – Marben is entitled to the trust. Deceit can erode a trusting relationship. You are obligated by law to report)

- Let Marben know that you are tired of him telling 'stories' to get others in trouble and to stop it
  (Incorrect – Marben, if a repeat accuser, may be the most vulnerable person that you support. People who repeatedly accuse others, regardless of the validity, are often overlooked and not 'believed', even when they are telling facts)
- Document what Marben has told you
  (Correct – document the information accurately and objectively as soon as practicable)
- Call a co-worker and ask what they think that you should do
  (Incorrect – do not share this information with anyone who is not principally involved in the situation. First and only contact should be to the police and then to the supervisor/agency)

This case has been adapted from "Abuse and Neglect Discussion Guide" by ONboardkhub.ca, © King's Printer for Ontario, 2026.

Agencies are required by law to have a zero tolerance for abuse. This means that all concerns, whether confirmed or suspected, must be taken seriously and acted upon immediately.

You should report:

- anytime someone tells you about, you witness, or your suspect abuses
- even if the victim asks you not to
- even when you have been told that someone else will report it without you.

Reporting is not optional. It is a legal and ethical responsibility.

Delaying or failing to report can place individuals at continued risk and may allow harm to continue. It is important to follow your agency's policies and procedures, document what was observed or disclosed, and ensure that the information is passed on to the appropriate authorities or supervisors.

Direct support professionals are not responsible for investigating the abuse, but they are responsible for recognizing and reporting concerns.

Reporting abuse is a critical component of protecting the safety, dignity, and rights of individuals with developmental disabilities. While it may feel uncomfortable or uncertain at times, taking action is essential. Every report has the potential to prevent further harm and ensure that individuals receive the protection and support they deserve.

A culture of safety is built through accountability and a commitment to doing what is right, even when it is difficult. By understanding your role and acting on concerns, you contribute to an environment where individuals are respected, heard, and protected.

CHAPTER 11: CONCLUSION

Learning Objectives

1. Examine the factors contributing to balancing power in relationships.
2. Examine indicators, characteristics and impact of maltreatment (abuse).
3. Utilize knowledge of appropriate legislation in preparing written documents.
4. Recognize the impact of the diagnosis of disability on the family unit and the changing roles of families in the 21st century.

Turning Knowledge Into Impact

At its heart, *Responsive Relationships* asks us to rethink how we support and show up in the lives of persons with developmental disabilities. Not as protectors who control, but as partners who respect autonomy, dignity, and voice. Preventing abuse is not just about policies or recognizing warning signs. It's about how we show up every day. It is about questioning our own assumptions, sharing power, and creating spaces where people feel safe to express themselves, make choices and be heard.



Reducing abuse means moving beyond simply protecting people to learning to truly empower them.

When we support communication in all its forms, teach and respect boundaries, and respond clearly and responsibly when harm occurs, we help build a culture of trust and safety. In this way, protection and independence work together. Every interaction becomes a chance to balance power, support confidence and uphold each person's right to make decisions about their own life and live their life with greater safety, dignity and control.

Throughout history, persons with developmental disabilities have been hidden in attics and back rooms; they were sheltered and abused in the name of 'doing the right thing' within the walls of institutions, they were taken advantage of and controlled, and they have occupied waitlists in Ontario that are 52,000 individuals long.

Persons with developmental disabilities are tired of waiting.

- Waiting for a chance to get a job.
- Waiting for a chance to join a service club.
- Waiting for a chance to make friends.
- Waiting to assume power over their own lives,

52,000 people with a developmental disability in Ontario are waiting to Belong (Community Living Ontario, 2024).

The realization of equality for people from any given minority group cannot be achieved by the work of those who are not marginalized. Those who have been disregarded must be empowered to become the movement.

"Inclusion means that everyone has a place on the playing field. Priority seating on the sidelines is simply not good enough," – Donald Cashman (waiting for source)

Empowerment is the single most worthy power that we can hope to ignite in a person.

It shows a person's ability to see themselves as they can be; the master of themselves.

In order for services and support for persons with developmental disabilities to change and transform into what is needed for everyone, the person themselves must recognize themselves as being worthy of more. Individuals must see themselves as valuable, as contributing, and as essential to the community when they assign themselves as relevant. The support of the direct support professional is essential in reinforcing how the individuals see their qualities and attributes, and aids them to further develop their own strengths. Consistently reinforcing a person's importance and value through meaningful interactions and affirmations can be powerful in supporting self-awareness and confidence. This approach helps individuals not only recognize these traits within themselves but also develop the confidence to challenge and reject situations where their worth is not acknowledged.

Persons with developmental disabilities *CAN* be intolerant, and they *CAN* determine...

- who they will *not* socialize with,
- who they will *not* receive support from,
- who they will *not* be in the presence of, especially those who do not recognize their value.

That is empowerment.

Self-Advocacy & You

Self-advocacy is not just a skill; it is something you practice every day.It involves knowing your rights, making choices, and speaking up in different situations.



Choose Your Own Adventure Reflection

Choose to submit your reflection mission statements in a written or audio format.

Written Reflection

Audio Reflection

Activity Description

Consider what it is to be a self-advocate. What does self-advocacy mean to you?



Reflection Questions – Ask Yourself:

- When is it easy for you to speak up?
- When is it hard?
- What is one thing you could do to advocate for yourself this week?

Society values advocates as those who speak on behalf of those who are not in a position to be heard. Self-advocacy is the opportunity for a person to speak for themselves while showing and describing the injustices

that they are experiencing. One does not need to be part of a group or committee to become a self-advocate; it begins with a willingness to learn, speak up, and take action in support of one's own rights, needs, and voice.

Advocacy in Action

Below are real-life examples of advocacy in action, demonstrating how individuals/organizations use their voice to create change.

Example 1: People First Canada

People First Canada is a national organization representing individuals with Developmental Disabilities. They are a unique, member-only-led organization that strives for full citizenship for all.

Each member of People First Canada is a self-advocate, and their membership criteria are simple and open to those who have experienced any number of the following:

- being labelled as having an intellectual or developmental disability
- staying in an institution or group home for a period of their life
- attendance at a special education program or sheltered workshop
- received services for persons who have been labelled with an intellectual or developmental disability
- self-identify as having an intellectual or developmental disability

Example 2: The Freedom Tour

In the early 2000's, this self-advocate group created a documentary called the Freedom Tour.

The documentary brought the voices of those who had been housed in institutions to life and told their stories in a way that was accessible and visible to the world. The documentary showed the horrors of institutional living and provided a means to remember the experiences of those who had lost their lives and their years in inhuman living conditions. The film launched in the Fall of 2008, just months ahead of the closure of the last operating institution in Ontario- Huronia Regional Centre in March of 2009 (three years ahead of schedule).

The film's success was unforeseen. Self-advocates continue to share their stories and provide hope and encouragement to others to do the same. The continuation of the journey and the fight for restitution continues in a new film produced by the organization, These Four Walls

Video: "These Four Walls (Trailer)" by PeopleFirstofCanada [1:45] is licensed under the Standard YouTube License. *Transcript and closed captions available on YouTube.*

Opportunities for Self-Advocacy Building

Self-advocacy is built through everyday experiences, such as disagreements with friends.

- Practice respectfully making a different choice, decision or priority than a friend. This can be in simple tasks, such as deciding which movie to see or where to eat, or in more complex tasks, such as explaining an ethical or religious belief that differs from a friend's.
- Practice saying no. Coaching to say 'no' when the situation calls for something that person is not interested in doing. This can be how to say 'no' to a brother who wants to borrow money or to take someone's shift at work when you are feeling overcommitted already.
- Writing letters or speaking up to politicians/store owners/ community groups, and agencies when the person is treated unjustly. This could be when the aisles in a store are too narrow for a walker to pass through, when an elevator is out of use, and there is no signage, or when the company of a support person is denied to you.

The Importance of Families

How does one learn to become a self-advocate? Through empowerment and education. This can occur both formally and informally, through coaching, encouragement and lived experiences. Self-advocacy does not develop in isolation. Self-advocacy is nurtured in relationships and especially within families.

Having a child, a sibling, or another family member with a developmental disability has an incredible impact on the family unit. When the needs of one member must be prioritized, there is the potential for others to feel overlooked. Siblings often take on caregiving roles at home. This responsibility can sometimes lead to feelings of resentment. A lack of understanding of their siblings' needs can also result in frustration, shame, or embarrassment.

At the same time, a sibling can be one of the greatest gifts a child can have, regardless of ability. Growing up in a family unit where varying abilities provide different opportunities for growth, humility and tolerance of difference. It teaches both children and adults that every member of society contributes something essential, forming a rich, beautiful mosaic.

Within this environment, siblings often become some of the earliest and most natural advocates. They learn through practice and everyday life. For example, through play, through inclusion, through introducing friends, through challenging unfairness, and through standing up for one another. They develop advocacy skills not in theory, but in practice. They become students of the world around them, learning about fairness, equity, and even luck. They see injustice and feel compelled to act.

At the same time, they remain simply siblings. They treat each other as equals. They share laughter, disagreements, forgiveness, and joy. They borrow each other's favourite sweaters, they roughhouse, and they grow together. They love each other deeply and without condition.

Wrap Around Supports

Within the family environment, advocacy begins to show itself. This is where wraparound support becomes essential. Wraparound support includes family, direct support professionals, community, and services working together to create conditions where advocacy can truly develop. They provide the stability and encouragement individuals need to find their voice and the opportunities to use it. When families are supported holistically, everyone is better equipped to thrive.



Photo by Brooke Balentine, Unsplash License

Wraparound supports strengthen not only the individual, but the entire family system, creating the conditions where empowerment, advocacy, and belonging can truly take root and become a shared responsibility.

Families are partners in advocacy.

They model how to speak up, how to navigate barriers and how to make space for inclusion. The ripple effect empowers individuals to express their needs and shape their own lives.

The diagnosis of a developmental disability can be challenging for a family. Yet, often, the very things that challenge us are the things that change us. A child with a developmental disability can foster growth, resilience, strength, and a deeper connection within a family. Within that family, advocacy begins naturally, powerfully, and collectively.

Support grows confidence.

Confidence grows advocacy.

Advocacy grows belonging.

And belonging creates a life where individuals are not only included, but valued, heard, and empowered to lead their own story

REFERENCES

Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence. (2025, August 22). *Caregiver's compass: The need for a national caregiving strategy in Canada—Government-level advocacy and policy change and the hope on the horizon*. https://canadiancaregiving.org/caregivers-compass-the-need-for-a-national-caregiving-strategy-in-canada-government-level-advocacy-and-policy-change-and-the-hope-on-the-horizon/

Colton, C. C. (1820). *Lacon: Or, many things in few words; addressed to those who think*. Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, & Brown. https://archive.org/details/laconormanythin11coltgoog

Community Living Ontario. (2025, December 12). *Abuse and intellectual disability*. https://communitylivingontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Abuse-and-intellectual-disability_Dec2025.pdf

Community Living Ontario. (2025, November 12). *Living in poverty, homeless and being lured into crime and human trafficking: People with intellectual disabilities falling through the cracks* [Press release]. https://communitylivingontario.ca/press-release-living-in-poverty-homeless-and-being-lured-into-crime-and-human-trafficking-people-with-intellectual-disabilities-falling-through-the-cracks/

Employment and Social Development Canada. (2025, December 10). *Canadian indicators for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) – Article 16: Freedom from exploitation, violence, and abuse*. Government of Canada. https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/corporate/reports/research/indicators-united-nations-convention/article-16.html

Fitzsimons, N. (2017, August 29). *Understanding vulnerability of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities* [Webinar]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W07uTnZ2LUo

Fitzsimons, N. (2020, June 4). Reframing the problem of sexual victimization of people with disabilities. *JSM Sexual Medicine, 4*(4). https://www.jscimedcentral.com/jounal-article-pdf/JSM-Sexual-Medicine/sexualmedicine-4-1039.pdf

Government of Canada**.** (2026). *Guide to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/how-rights-protected/guide-canadian-charter-rights-freedoms.html

Government of Ontario, Child and Parent Resource Institute. (2021). *Sexuality and developmental disability:*

A guide for parents. https://www.ontario.ca/document/child-and-parent-resource-institute-cpri-sexual-behaviours-team-recommended-resources/sexuality-and-developmental-disability-guide-parents

Hingsburger, D. (1993). *Power tools: Thoughts about power & control in service to people with developmental disabilities*. Diverse City Press.

Hingsburger, D. (1995). *Just say know!: Understanding and reducing the risk of sexual victimization*. Diverse City Press.

Hingsburger, D. (2008, April 16). *My new friend*. Of Battered Aspect. https://davehingsburger.blogspot.com/2008/04/my-new-friend.html

Hingsburger, D. (2019, January 5). *Being human... it's what we do*. Howry Residential Services. https://howryinc.com/being-human-its-what-we-do/

Hingsburger, D., & Tough, S. (2002, March). Healthy sexuality: Attitudes, systems, and policies. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities, 27*(1), 8–17. https://doi.org/10.2511/rpsd.27.1.8

Institute on Community Integration. (2021). Remembering our friend, Dave Hingsburger (1952–2021). *Frontline Initiative: The Diverse Voices of Direct Support Professionals, 18*(1). https://publications.ici.umn.edu/frontline-initiative/18-1/tribute-to-dave-hingsburger

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Abuse*. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved February 20, 2026, from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abuse

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Living*. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/living

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Support*. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/support

Modell, S. J., & Mak, S. (2008). A preliminary assessment of police officers' knowledge and perceptions of persons with disabilities. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 46*(3), 183–189.

Monro, J. D. (2020). Frustrating service systems: A positive intervention and support model. In I. Brown & M. Percy (Eds.), *Developmental disabilities in Ontario* (4th ed., pp. 471–490). DDO Publishing.

Open Future Learning. (2012). *Sexuality and relationships written by Dave Hingsburger* [Video]. https://www.openfuturelearning.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=login.home

QAM Training. (n.d.). *QAM handout segment 7*. https://qamtraining.net/handouts/

Surrey Place. (n.d.). *Abuse, exploitation, and neglect*. Retrieved March 6, 2026, from https://ddprimarycare.surreyplace.ca/guidelines/general-health/abuse-and-neglect/

VERSION HISTORY

This page provides a record of changes made to the open textbook since its initial publication. If the change is minor, the version number increases by 0.1. If the change involves substantial updates, the version number increases to the next full number.

Version	Date	Change	Affected Web Rage
1.0	April 2026	Publication	N/A

TRANSCRIPT

Chapter 3 Video: A Story About Power and Control by Dave Hingsburger

When I first started working in the field of disability, I had a lot of jobs at the frontline level. And then I was working in a prevocational centre they called it back in those days, not a really realizing premit never but nonetheless prevocational centre and there was a woman there named Jean Ann. And Jean Ann, she was the behaviours called her "over-social." Okay. And over social meant that she liked to talk as much as the staff did.

But nonetheless, we were going to put her on a program to reduce over social behaviour. Now, I had graduated from university, and I'd taken courses on problem behaviour and stuff, so I was going to get to write my first behavioural program.

So I decided that I wanted to do a timeout program. I was going to do time out for over social behaviour. Now me putting somebody on a program for talking too much is what you call kind of odd. But nonetheless I wanted to do a timeout program so we didn't have a timeout room so we went to the broom closet, we cleaned out the broom closet, and we put in a peep hole because the government said that you had to have a peep hole and the program was very simple: whenever Jean Ann was "over-social," what we would do is we would take her to the broom closet, sorry timeout room and we put her in there and she had to be in there for five minutes of silence.

Now the very first time we put her into the broom closet she was outraged. I mean she was outraged and she let us know and we would stand right outside the door in a flat voice with no emotion "Five minutes of silence, please. Five minutes of silence, please."

And eventually she'd just stop and she'd be quiet and then when five minutes was up, we'd let her out. And over the course of the next several weeks you should have seen the data her, the baseline data which showed that it was way up here over social behaviour was way up here as soon as we implemented the punishment program you just saw it begin to decrease. Okay.

Well, we all noticed that Jean Ann wasn't as happy as she used to be but you know some of life's lessons are difficult to learn. I got my first promotion in the field of disability for silencing a woman with a disability but nonetheless.

Years later, years later I'm living in downtown Toronto not far from where I live now and I was going off to

pick up some beer at the Beer Store and right in that area of town is 519 Church Street community centre and they had, and I don't know if they still do, but they had the Friday night club which is a club by and for people with intellectual disabilities.

So I'm walking and down from the subway on Wellesley is Jean Ann and she's with another person with a disability. And she's talking a mile a minute just like she used to, and the first thing I thought was that my program didn't maintain or generalize.

So she's coming up towards me, and I'm just waiting for it because I hadn't seen her for like years and I wanted to say hello. So she walked up to me and I sad hi Jean Ann uh and she said hi and I said, "How [are you]?" She said "I'm fine" and she just kept on walking. She walked away from me. I spoke to her and she walked away from me.

By this point in my life, I was travelling around giving lectures on respectful approaches to people with disabilities. But it was like I was thrown back ten, fifteen years in time and right out on the street in public.

I yelled "Jean Ann! Get back here!" just like I would've, and she just silenced. You know, she just silenced. And she walked up to me, and I said, "Jean Ann, I asked you how you were." She said, "I said I'm fine."

I said, "Jean Ann, you know you haven't changed a bit", and I tell myself she didn't understand what she said when she said: "You haven't changed either."

And then she turned, and she left. I thought, oh my god. I mean, what, I mean in that instant, I just became who I hated in human services you know, because once again, I'm handed a role which is supposed to be a supportive role but never is almost.

It's a role of incredible power, and it changes me and it makes me believe that people at this place have to behave in particular ways in relationship to me and have to always by their behaviour acknowledge that I'm the authority, I'm the person in the room, I'm the person whose voice they follow. Not their own voice, not their inner voice, not any of that. But my voice in that situation.

And what I find is difficult about human services to people with intellectual disabilities they may be, at this point, and I think it's changing, but at this point they may be the only population of people that you can provide service to, that you can provide poor and disrespectful service to, without challenge. That they won't challenge you on it. They're so used to that kind of thing. And I believe that if we don't learn to challenge ourselves and challenge our own behaviour I think the most important tool that people bring to work, to work for people with people with disabilities is honest introspection. Looking at oneself and how one behaved during that day. Looking at who I was in relationship to people.

And if I'm, I think so many of us that when we come into work with people disabilities we bought the myth

you know. You tell people what you do for a living. You know I work with people with intellectual disabilities. They never know what that means. I work with and we whatever and then you have to say *wispers* and use language that people understand.

And they always go "gasp noise" and they look at you like you're a nun. And they say oh you must be so special. You must be so patient, You must be so. And I think a lot of us have really bought that myth. You know. That there is something incredibly special about me because I choose to be with these poor disenfranchised soul who desperately need from my goodness. You know?

One of the things I do in my first trainings with people is I get them to look over both shoulders. You do that. Look over your shoulders. And down to the floor. Over the shoulders, down to the floor. Okay, no this way over and down to the floor. Over and down to the floor, alright?

Uh, you notice something? No wings. There are no wings. The only thing you can see if you look closely enough is an asshole. and that's closer to the truth most of the time.

So we have to get away from this idea and this constant message we get from people that we're exceptional and we're extraordinary and we're this and that and I think that people just stop looking at themselves because they believe just because I'm here with these folks, that means I'm marvelous and I'm giving, and I'm angelic, and I'm all that.

No no no. We're human beings in relationship to human beings.

I mean, that's all we are here. And human beings when they are in relationship with human beings do stupid stuff particularly when there's power at hand. So I if I don't have the ability to at the end of an interaction look at that and say, "Oh my God, I really miss handled that," or "Oh my God, I can't believe I used that tone of voice." There is a tone of voice that is reserved only for children, dogs, and people with intellectual disabilities.

And that's the only groups that they are used for okay. Is that tone of voice, that disrespectful tone of voice that people use that just drives me crazy and I think that part of what I had to realize because I kind of thought by the time I met Jean Ann that I'd beaten it. That I got it that I understood the hierarchy that I was training on the hierarchy. That I was talking to other people about the hierarchy that happens and what happens to us when we we're given power in the life of another person. And then I met Jean Ann and from that day forward I realized I will never beat it. It will be a daily constant struggle with me. And it'll be in every interaction I will have with a person with an intellectual disability for the rest of my career.