

Towards Empowerment



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Disabled People and Abuse

- Abuse and violence are common in the lives of people with disabilities.
- Rates of abuse are high. For example, two to three times the rate of sexual assault as compared to women without disabilities.
- Many new resources address abuse and violence prevention for this population.
- The domestic violence prevention and disability communities are beginning to work together to provide resources for women with disabilities.
- Crucial factors must be understood to make our work most effective.

Interdependence and Vulnerability

- Independent living, also "inter-dependent living" or "self-determined living," emphasizes the connection between individuals, families, and communities and elevates the *contributions* of people with disabilities in interactions.
- Disabled people depend on help for survival, employment, well-being, and enjoyment of life.
- Power imbalances in helping relationships can distort help and lead to abuse.
- Abuse threatens disabled people's health, safety, daily life activities, and self-determination.

Personal Assistance Services (PAS)

PAS help can include

- dressing, bathing, catheter care, transferring to bed or wheelchair;
- cooking, cleaning, childcare;
- money handling and budget planning;
- sign-language interpretation;
- support services for decision-making, managing time, planning, assistance during personal crisis;
- reading mail, shopping, transportation.

"Vulnerability to Abuse"

- Vulnerability due to impairments does not *cause* mistreatment.
- Traditionally, explanations for abuse focused on the body or impairments as the causes.
- Mistreatment is *caused* by abusing individuals and by society. Abuse is *not caused* by disability or by need for assistance.

Social Factors Contributing to Abuse

Disabled people suffer a form of violence which is unrecognized. Social factors...

have the effect of breaking natural relationships between disabled people and everyone else.

Micheline Mason,
Disability Educator



Typical Milestones and Factors in the Lives of People with Disabilities

Disclosure of Disability at Birth

- Parents need information about a child's impairment, but when that information is communicated with a negative judgment, the parent-child bonding process can be impeded or weakened.



Prenatal Testing

- Women are pressured to use prenatal diagnostic testing as the "responsible thing to do."
- This may leave parents feeling defensive about deciding rather than proud.



When “Options” Mean Abortion

As I was examined and interviewed by several different professionals, I was left with the impression that continuing a pregnancy [of a baby with spina bifida] was an unusual thing to do. It seemed as though every time I turned around, another physician was asking me whether or not anyone had discussed my “options” with me. “Options” has clearly become a euphemism for abortion.”

Mother of a child with spina bifida

Alone in the Family



- Disabled children are usually the only child in the family with “special needs.”
- They do not experience comradery with others in a marginalized subculture or group.

“Special” Education

- Intended to provide specialized, individualized instruction.
- Limits opportunities to learn and develop social skills through playing, laughing, and hanging out with peers.
- Segregation leads to isolation and feelings of “differentness.”

Objectification

Children objectified by medical providers and caregivers

- may be told "this is for your own good," without explanation, and treated without requesting permission.
- may not trust their own instincts that something painful isn't okay.
- may experience disconnection from their own sensations and reactions.

Sent Away

- Being sent to institutions devastates self-esteem, inclusion, and the process of learning to live and function



Adolescent Milestones

- May not be able to or didn't participate in milestones of adolescence, such as
 - ▢ summer camp,
 - ▢ overnights with friends, and
 - ▢ dating.
- Left feeling on the outside.



Continued Exclusion

Disabled adults experience exclusion in public and social institutions due to

- architectural, attitudinal, programmatic barriers.
- stares or aversion by passersby.
- clerks and waiters ignoring people with disabilities and only speaking to non-disabled companions.
- discrimination in employment and education.

Inadequate Community Services to Meet Needs

- Underfunded disability services with complex, time-consuming bureaucratic requirements.
- Inaccessible restaurants, shops, schools, libraries, and other public services, isolating disabled people from community activities.



Enforced Poverty and Unemployment



- "Dis-incentives to work" keep disabled people trapped in unemployment.
- Unemployment means disconnection from mainstream community life.

Elders with Disabilities

- Older people acquire physical limitations and disabled people get older.
- Stereotypes of aging, of seniors being helpless and passive, or as burdens to their families, are also disability stereotypes.
- Seniors may internalize these notions.



How Do These Factors Affect Disabled People in Relation to Abuse?

- They cause disconnection and confusion at subtle but critical levels.
- They confuse social and sexual boundaries due to low expectations for quality interaction.
- They lead to limited opportunities to improve communication skills or learn about sexuality.
- They can create an expectation or acceptance of abuse.
- They may make people settle for less than thoughtful, caring attention.

- They mean that some disabled people don't learn:
 1. how to say no;
 2. how to extricate themselves from abusive interactions; and
 3. how to find alternate ways to get their personal assistance



I wasn't able to say, "Knock it off," to my family who was doing my personal care. I thought it was normal to be tossed around in my chair. To have a comb dragged through my hair so hard it comes out. To be left on a toilet for an hour. It took me about five years of hiring people, when I realized that I didn't have to accept those things. Because of that experience growing up, I feel more vulnerable to allowing it to happen now. Now I feel the power to say, "No, this isn't going to be okay."

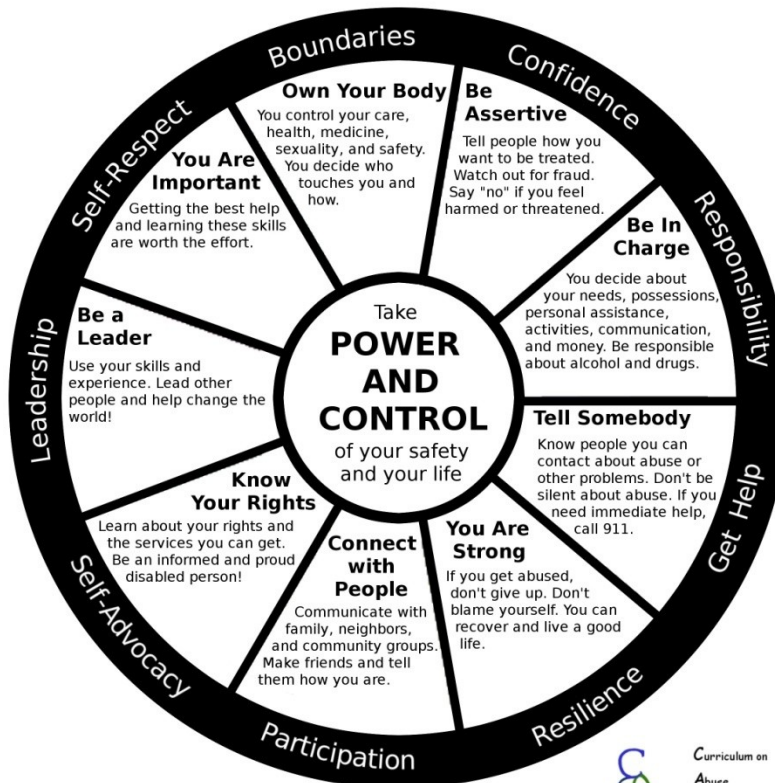
Disabled focus-group participant

What Improves Interpersonal Skills and Creates Higher Expectations for Quality Assistance?

- Opportunities to learn new social skills and personal assistance management skills.
- Chances to practice them and get reinforcement
- Positive interactions with peers.
- Direct interaction with others in all aspects of life.
- Programs or counseling that promote positive interactions, including classes, support groups, training events, interactive games, stories, movies, and other fun and empowering social activities.

Tools for Empowerment

Empowerment Wheel for People with Disabilities



- Go to www.wid.org/cape for more information and tools.

