



Supporting Healthy Relationships & Sexual Development for People with IDD

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Washington State Director



Among Friends

Social Sexual Support Services

Introduction: Myles Maxey, PhD

- Accessibility - Self Description
- **Human Developmentalist and Family Scientist** with more than 15 years of experience researching, teaching, speaking, and presenting about healthy human and relationship development, both within normative/neurotypical and nonnormative/neurodiverse contexts.
- **Interdisciplinary incorporation of other fields of study** into my work, such as trauma informed care, collaborative & proactive solutions, and intersectionality.



Our Agency's Specialty

Our area of expertise is helping parents and professionals support someone's basic human needs and rights related to:

- **BODIES** - body parts, bodily functions, body image
- **GENDER** - exploring gender identity / expression, transitioning
- **SEXUALITY** - orientation, activities, risky behaviors
- **RELATIONSHIPS** - friendship, dating, partnership, breaking up
- **COMMUNICATION** - boundaries and consent
- **RIGHTS** - self determination and supported decision-making
- **AND Other Related Topics** - online connections and sexual expression, safety and legalities, ...and much, much, more!!!



Our Agency's Priorities

We aim to help people keep their behaviors **SAFE, HEALTHY, LEGAL, and “SITUATIONALLY APPROPRIATE”** so that they are able to maintain their services, housing, access to school, job, etc.

We also emphasize:

- ~ Supporting the **whole person** and their **full human experience**
- ~ **Promoting alternative behaviors** that are safe, healthy and legal
- ~ Helping people meet their **basic human needs**
- ~ Protecting their **legal rights**
- ~ Improving their **quality of life** and **increasing their independence**

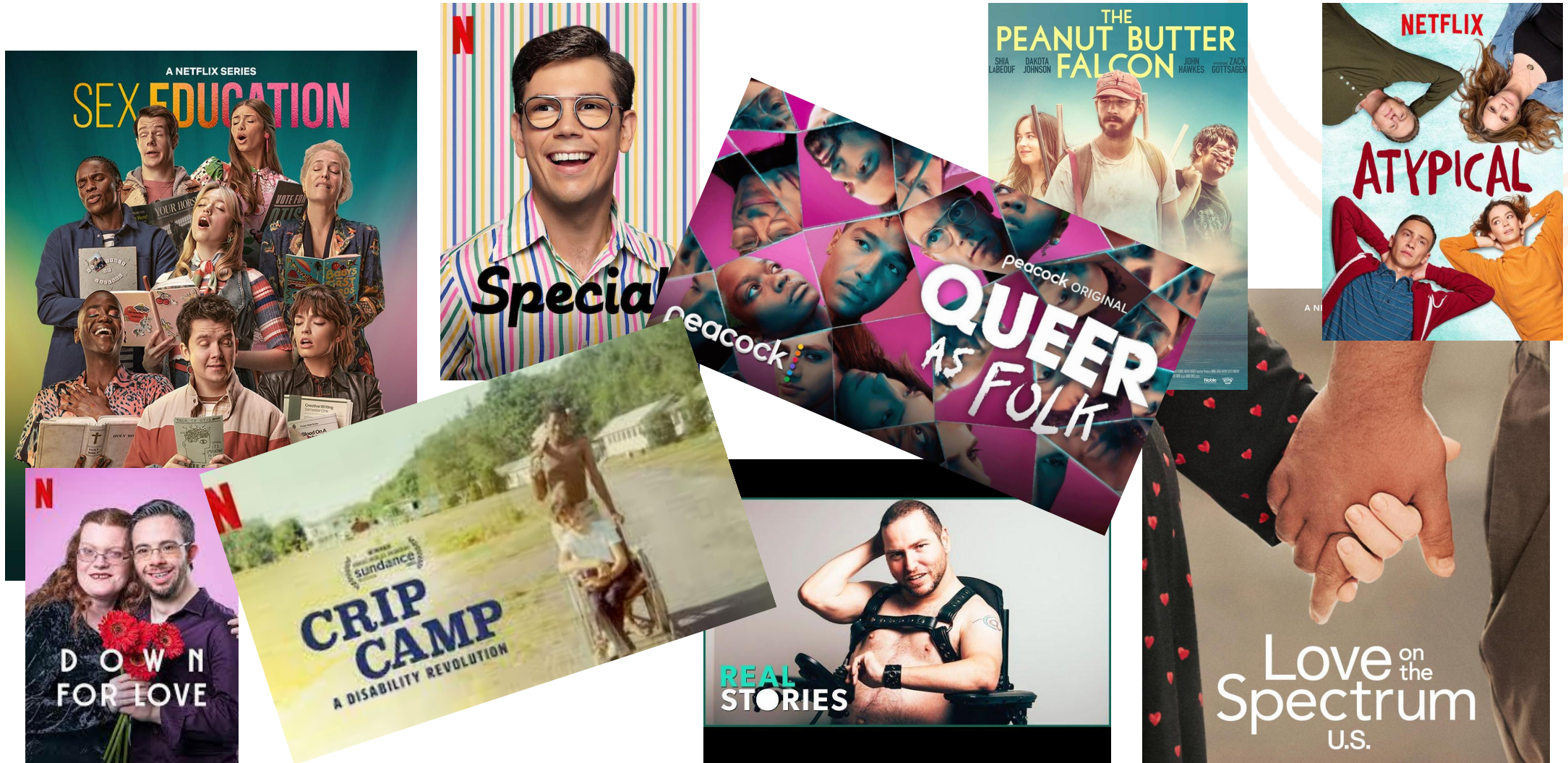
Objectives

- Understand why relationships and sexuality are important aspects of quality of life for people with IDD.
- Explore how stigma, sex-negative beliefs, and overprotection can unintentionally create barriers.
- Identify ways to support healthy relationships and sexual development through positive, person-centered approaches.

Why Are Social-Sexual Services Critical?

- Sexuality is a **birth-to-death experience** - regardless of someone's sexual activities or experiences
- Sexual exploration and play are a **natural part of a person's development** – starting in childhood
- **Puberty** is going to change a person's body, hormones, and sexual drive; and some people with developmental disabilities experience puberty even younger than the average population
- People with cognitive and social challenges who do not receive education and skill-building may be at increased risk for mistakes or misunderstandings that can have **catastrophic consequences**.

Normalizing Sexuality and Disabilities



The Impact of Stigma and Sex-Negative Beliefs

Common assumptions people with disabilities face:

- They are not interested in relationships.
- They are perpetual children.
- Talking about sexuality will encourage sexual behavior.
- They cannot safely make decisions about relationships.
- The safest option is to avoid the topic.

The Reality

- People with IDD experience the same human needs for connection, affection, intimacy, identity, belonging, and self-determination as anyone else.
- Avoiding conversations about sexuality does not eliminate sexuality.
- Lack of education and support often increases risk rather than decreases it.

When these beliefs drive decision-making, they often lead to restrictions intended to increase safety

When Protection Becomes Restriction

Many restrictions begin with good intentions:

- Wanting to keep someone safe
- Fear of victimization
- Concern about legal or social consequences
- Personal, cultural, or religious beliefs

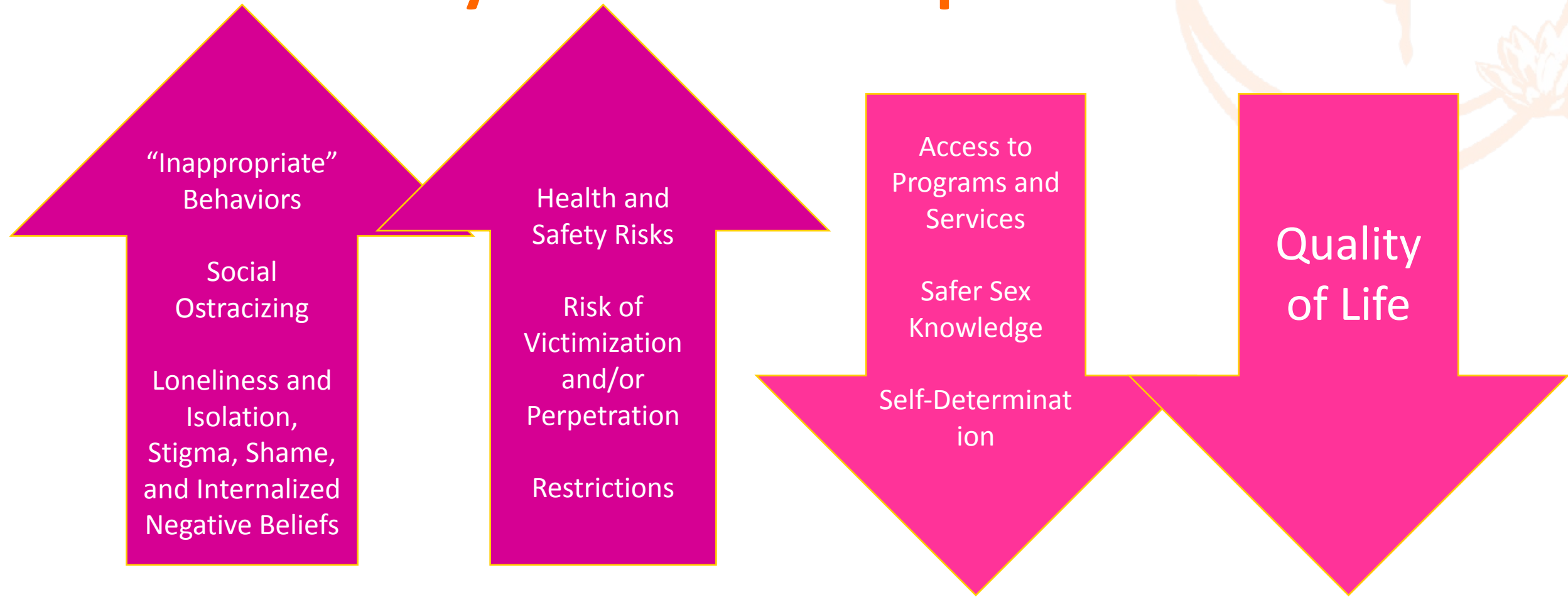
Potential unintended consequences:

- Increased loneliness and isolation
- Lack of relationship experience
- Reduced opportunities to practice relationship skills
- Reduced self-determination
- Greater vulnerability to exploitation
- Difficulty recognizing healthy vs. unhealthy relationships

When Protection Becomes Restriction

The question is not whether people with IDD will experience sexuality and relationships. The question is whether they will have the skills, information, and support necessary to navigate those experiences safely and successfully.

When We Fail At Supporting Relationships and Healthy Sexual Development



What Do Social-Sexual Services Look Like?

People often wonder what social-sexual services are and are nervous about how they work. That is completely understandable given the historically taboo and uncomfortable nature of these topics.

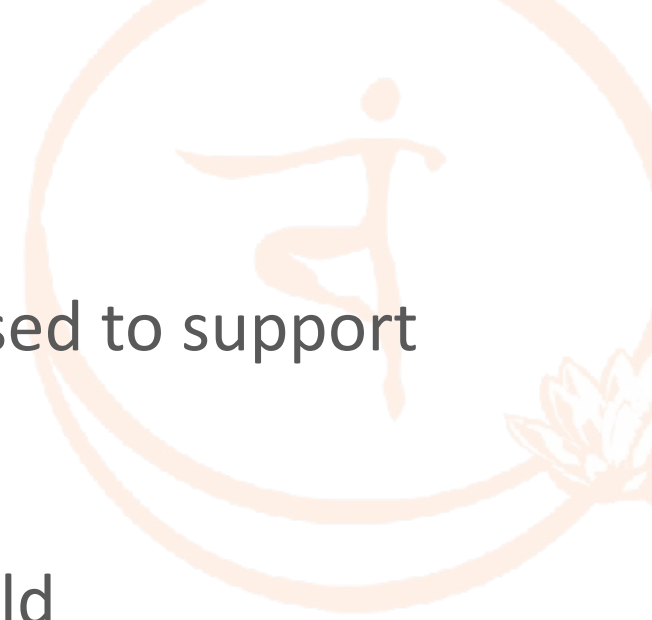
The reality is that there is a huge range of methods for how these services can be provided and strategies for building supports. It is essential, however, for social-sexual services to be: **Positive, Proactive, Preventative,** and **Person-Centered**.

We'll review some of the methods our agency uses, and then we'll give you some specific examples of types of supports.

Designing Innovative Solutions

Here are some specific examples of strategies we've used to support some of our clients:

- Period panties
- Differing religious / cultural values from parent to child
- Addressing illegal sexual content use while preserving dignity, safety, and accountability
- Wanting to have a baby
- Needing safer sex education
- Balancing family concerns about safety with an adult's right to pursue dating and relationships



Moving from Sex-Negative to Sex-Positive Support



A sex-positive approach does **not** mean encouraging sexual activity. It means:

- Providing accurate information
- Supporting informed decision-making
- Teaching consent and boundaries
- Promoting safety and healthy relationships
- Respecting individual values and preferences
- Recognizing sexuality as a normal part of human development

People with disabilities have the same rights to information, relationships, privacy, dignity, and self-determination as anyone else.

Moving from Sex-Negative to Sex-Positive Support

People with IDD do not become safer because sexuality is ignored. They become safer when they receive support, education, and opportunities to build healthy relationship skills.

The goal is not to eliminate sexuality. The goal is to support people in expressing it in ways that are safe, healthy, and legal, and in ways that enhance quality of life.

Contact Information



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