



Sex education for people with intellectual disabilities: Reflections among pupils and staff members at adapted schools in Sweden

Arkadis Fachtagung · Olten · 3 September 2026
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We agree on sexual rights. But what do they mean in practice?

- Sexuality, relationships and self-determination are rights
- People with intellectual disabilities are often positioned through vulnerability and protection
- Professionals are asked to support autonomy — and manage risk
- The difficult work happens in everyday situations

A research journey: listening, theorising, returning to practice



1

2012

“I Want to Do It Right!”

Young people's voices



2

2024

“Killjoys and Thrilljoys”

Crip theory & pedagogy



3

2026

**“Between Rights and
Risks”**

Staff & everyday practice



“I want to do it right!”

**Listening to young people with intellectual
disabilities**

16 young people · aged 16–21 · Sweden

What did young people tell us?

- Sex education was often experienced as inadequate or irrelevant
- A strong focus on risk did not match many participants' life situations
- Participants wanted more space to talk about relationships, partners and sexuality
- The need was not only for information — but for knowledge that could support participation

When risk becomes the whole story

RISK → PREVENTION → PROTECTION → CONTROL

can make other dimensions of sexuality less visible:

**DESIRE · INTIMACY · RELATIONSHIPS · PLEASURE ·
AGENCY**

Killjoys or thrilljoys?

KILLJOY

“That's too risky.”

“We need to protect them.”

“They may not understand.”

THRILLJOY

“What are they trying to tell us?”

“What support would make this possible?”

“How can we make this safer?”

**But being a “thrilljoy” is not
always easy.**

Between Rights and Risks

- Sexuality, Consent and Relationships Education is integrated across school subjects
- Staff are expected to address sexuality-related issues as they arise
- Everyday practice requires ongoing judgement
- Staff want to support sexuality — while remaining alert to vulnerability



“Catch the question in flight.”

Spontaneity can be an opportunity — and a challenge.

The internet: catalyst, not simply risk

1

POSSIBILITIES

Communication

Friendship

Identity

Intimacy

2

RISKS

Harassment

Sexting

Pornography

Exploitation

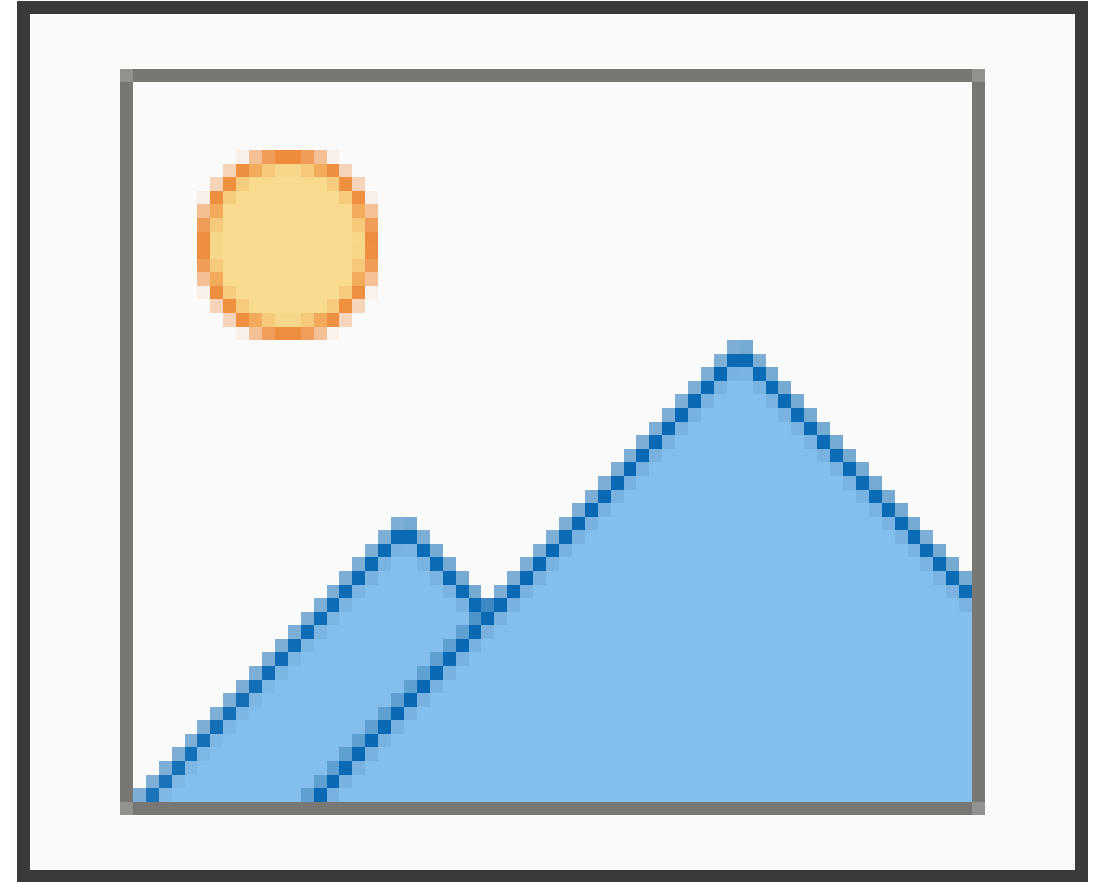
3

PRACTICE

**Digital sexuality needs
knowledge and critical tools**

The school as a sexual arena

- • It can be one of the few places to meet friends and potential partners
- • Staff may support students in developing relationships
- • Parents, school rules and professional boundaries can enter the picture
- • Limited alternative social arenas make the school's role more powerful



Rights and risks are not opposites

1

RIGHTS

Love
Intimacy
Desire
Relationships

2

PROTECTION

Consent
Safety
Safeguarding
Support

3

THE TASK

Make rights possible
with appropriate support

Four principles for everyday practice

1. Start with the person's wishes — What does this person want?
2. Do not let risk become the whole story — What else matters here?
3. Make sexuality discussable — Can we talk about it before there is a crisis?
4. Think support, not only permission or prohibition — What would make this safer and more possible?

One question to take back to your workplace

When a person with intellectual disability expresses a wish for intimacy, sexuality or a relationship — what is our first response?

Can we become thrilljoys without becoming naïve about risk?

Thank you



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