

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Making Comprehensive Sexuality Education accessible to Adolescents and Young People with Disabilities

Introduction

Breaking the Silence (BtS) aims to make comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) accessible to learners with disabilities. Developed in South Africa, [19, 20] Breaking the Silence (BtS) draws on group-based, interactive learning methods alongside a whole school approach to empower educators with the confidence, skills and tools to deliver comprehensive sexuality education to all learners.



PR4k: Relationships and Touch: Bullying Among Children



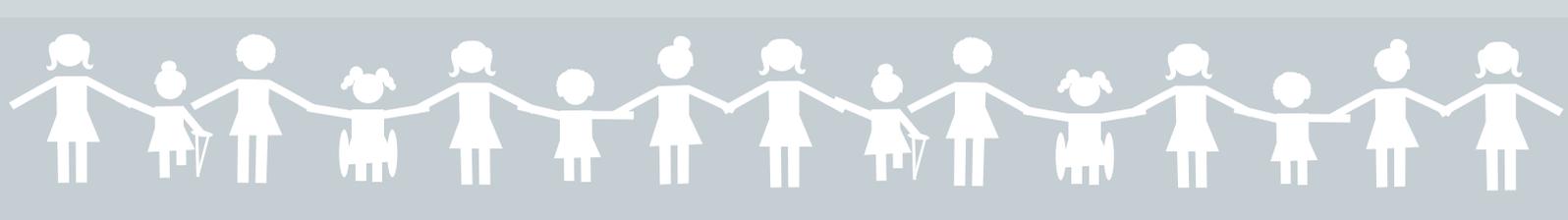
PR4l: Relationships and Touch: Inappropriate Touch at School

Figure 1: Example of pictures resource identifying relationships and types of touch

Background

Adolescents and young people with disabilities have the same sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) needs as their peers without disabilities [1]. While all adolescents and young people may experience attitudinal and structural barriers to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), those with disabilities experience additional exclusion [2-8]. As a result young people with disabilities lack knowledge about sexuality, sexual transmitted diseases such as HIV and safer sexual practices and the skills to enjoy their sexual reproductive rights on an equal basis with others [3, 9-11].

It is well recognised that people with disabilities are at increased risk of violence (sexual, physical, emotional, psychological) [12-14]. In low and middle income countries women and girls with disabilities are even more vulnerable, especially to intimate partner violence (IPV) as they are 2-4 times more likely to experience IPV than their peers without disabilities [15]. The low knowledge and skills and high prevalence of violence against women and girls with disabilities emphasise the acute need for prevention interventions for this group [14, 16, 17].



Background (continued)

Research has shown that educators are likely to take a risk-focused approach to sexuality education of learners with disabilities aiming to prevent all sexual activity and exposure to sexual violence or exploitation, but fail to acknowledge positive aspect of sexuality and

relationships. Restrictive cultural norms, lack of materials, skills, knowledge and self-confidence hinder educators to implement comprehensive sexuality education with learners with disabilities [5, 17, 18]. Hence, educators need support and training to address these barriers.

What is the Breaking the Silence approach?

The BtS approach is ideally implemented as a whole school intervention that integrates a number of supportive programmes (such as educator training and support, parent-support groups and peer-supported education). The central pillar is a three-day educator training programme that aims to:

1. Engage educators to **understand how negative attitudes and social norms [17, 18, 20, 21] negatively impact the sexual health** of learners with disabilities.

2. Advance educators **facilitation skills and confidence** to use participatory and interactive learning methods so essential to comprehensive sexuality education.
3. Offer a **structured curriculum aligned to the UN Technical Guidelines on Comprehensive Sexuality Education [22]** and its eight key concepts of comprehensive sexuality education.¹
4. Provide a **toolkit; visual resources and step by step activities** to support implementation in the classroom and beyond (e.g. parents, peer education).

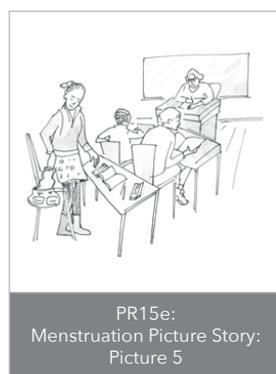


Figure 2: Picture story explaining menstruation management to learners with intellectual disabilities or those who are deaf (Johns 2020)

What is included in Breaking the Silence?

The educator manual has six modules that address the Key UN concepts²:

Module 1: **Skills for Health and Well-being**

Module 2: **Violence and Staying Safe**

Module 3: **Relationships**

Module 4: **The Human Body and Development**

Module 5: **Sexuality and Sexual Behaviors**

Module 6: **Sexual and Reproductive Health**

The UN key concepts of understanding *Values, Rights, Culture and Sexuality* and *Understanding Gender* are integrated as cross-cutting themes.

The educator manual provides practical activities for participatory learning. Learning objectives for these activities **target knowledge, attitudes and skills** so that learners:

¹ UNESCO (2018) Key concepts for comprehensive sexuality education: Relationships; Values, Rights, Culture and Sexuality; Understanding Gender; Violence and Staying Safe; Skills for Health and Well-being; The Human Body and Development; Sexuality and Sexual Behaviors; Sexual and Reproductive Health).

² **Note:** Two key concepts from the UNESCO guidelines, namely 'Understanding Gender and Values' and 'Rights, Culture and Sexuality' are integrated across all six modules through specific activities and the educator including discussion on gender norms, social values and rights.



- Gain accurate, **evidence-based information about sexuality** and sexual health.
- Explore **how values and attitudes can impact sexual decision making** and sexual health rights.
- **Identify their rights** and particularly their right to information and sexual and reproductive health.
- **Practice the communication, problem solving and decision-making skills** essential to putting knowledge into practice.

The toolbox includes **visual resources** to communicate about; body parts, sexual development, body changes, emotions, and consenting and non- consenting touch. The pictures and stories help to depersonalize sensitive themes and allow educators to assess the learners' understanding through their engagement with the pictures. The manual also includes instructions on **how to develop and adapt tools for the blind based on tactile and verbal information** that can be sourced from low cost materials.

Which age and disability groups are targeted?

The BtS approach can be used in inclusive and special settings and provides adaptations to accommodate learners with different disability types. The educator manual identifies these adaptations for visual, hearing, emotional, behavioural, physical and intellectual disabilities. Content is also adapted to developmental stages of the learners. However, it is up to the educator to match lessons content to their learners age, stage of development and cognitive ability. In general:

- **Modules 1-3** are suitable for all age learners and focuses on understanding emotions, relationships, body parts and rights.
- **Module 4** is intended for pre-pubescent learners but is also relevant to older learners in learning about sexual development and sexual feelings.
- **Modules 5 and 6** focus on equal relationships and safer sexual behaviour, STI and HIV prevention and is suitable for teenage learners and young adults.

How is Breaking the Silence experienced by educators?

In a formative evaluation of BtS educators indicated that the training and materials increased their skills and confidence to provide sexuality education to learners with disabilities. It also shifted educators' perspectives on sexuality and disability by demonstrating the importance of teaching assertiveness, choices and values as well as sexual development to learners with disabilities.

Teachers felt empowered to provide sexuality education in accessible and appropriate formats as well as to address sexual abuse and engage with community stakeholders, colleagues and parents.

“I will be able to change the mind set of educators and parents about sexuality education toward learners with disabilities.”

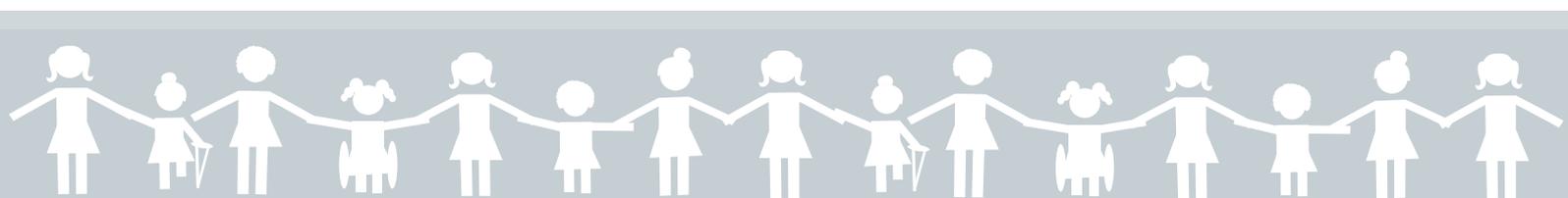
Participant in Breaking the Silence workshop

“The games and teaching aids will help me to implement sexuality education in learners with intellectual disability.”

Participant in Breaking the Silence workshop

How can you access Breaking the Silence training and tools?

BtS can only be implemented by trained educators. Hence, you will have to organize a BtS training at your school. In this training participants will be provided with the training manual and resource toolkit. For further information you can contact Jill Hanass-Hancock Jillhanass@gmail.com.



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