

NEW WRITING

Making sense of relationships, bodies, love and sex: Communicating through the use of 3D models

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available innovative teaching resources that respond to the sex education needs of young people of all abilities and disabilities. Bodysense works in collaboration with Me-and-Us (www.me-and-us.co.uk).

Summary

This article describes an experimental method of addressing the need for young adults with learning disabilities to acquire social skills relevant to current youth culture if they are fully to access the social scene with dignity and remain safe. It then gives an account of the teaching materials used for this project.

The night club project

A Transition Pathway Co-ordinator working with the adult learning disability services in Worcestershire responded to requests from young adults for 'a life' by supporting a small group to investigate local facilities. One of the nightclubs in Kidderminster was identified as the best resource and, with the help of three local organisations, some 'private parties' were organised for the young people they supported. For those who were most able, it served as a learning and confidence builder to go there on other, mainstream evenings. For others, it was a social event where they felt safe surrounded by people similar to themselves and knowing there were support staff in the wings. Some of the young people involved would find it very difficult to cope in a mainstream nightclub. This project was extremely successful. For many of these young people it was the first opportunity for them to do something away from their parents. It also introduced them to a very different environment; lighting, music, alcohol, emotions and intimacy. The project also highlighted a need for information or training on how to behave in this setting. Support staff witnessed some people kissing where one party was clearly not comfortable, attempts to undress someone and sexual arousal. Clearly, most of these young people had not previously

had these experiences or the opportunity to develop skills to cope.

I was asked to deliver a training session around some of these issues to be run in the nightclub for authenticity – when it was not open to the public. A separate workshop was arranged to address the issues around the use and abuse of alcohol so I was free to concentrate on the sexual and relationship issues. The aim was to reduce the risk of inappropriate behaviour on the part of young people with learning disabilities leading to unintended sexual advances or negative responses from other nightclub users, and thereby reduce the risk of unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. We also needed to help them develop self-protection skills and, on a more positive note, skills that would bring them acceptance, love and pleasure in relationships developed through attending a nightclub.

With this in mind, I developed a programme to help participants to understand what level of intimate contact is acceptable in a nightclub setting and to learn appropriate ways of initiating friendly contact with another person they felt attracted to. I introduced strategies designed to offer them appropriate ways of rejecting unwanted intimate contact from another nightclub user and to recognise body language and other signs that would indicate embarrassment in another person or rejection of their advances. Finally, I presented scenarios designed to help them to understand the possible outcomes of engaging in intimate contact or behaviour that might lead to sexual arousal in a nightclub setting.

These tasks were facilitated by interactive teaching strategies based on my experience of using half life-sized, realistic, **Male and Female Cloth Models**. The models were dressed in appropriate clothing for the ages and social groups of the participants and the nightclub setting. Participants were asked to contribute by developing the 'characters' of the four models (two male and two female). The half-day session comprised a series of role plays enacted by the cloth models with the assistance of one of the support staff. Although I had prepared a number of scenarios to cover our aims, comments and suggestions were invited from the participants as to the likely outcome of the models' 'behaviour' from their perspective. We also asked what advice they would offer to the

'characters'. We pursued these suggestions to their likely conclusion and drew out lessons as appropriate.

Given the ability level and attention span of the participants, the session had to be limited to around two hours. It would therefore have been helpful for participants to have had some preparation sessions to open up the subject matter – especially for those who had little background knowledge of intimate relationships and who found the subject matter embarrassing and confusing. The main hindrance to learning, however, was the large size of the group attending and the range of ability represented. Some of the less able found the size of the group intimidating and the pace too fast, while those who were more articulate and experienced were insufficiently challenged. Although participants were divided into small groups, each with a facilitator to enable the less articulate to contribute, most of the active involvement was inevitably by the more able participants. However, the session was an enjoyable one with considerable humour enlivening proceedings. Most participants identified very easily with the models, the characters they had created for them and the scenarios that were acted out.

It was immediately apparent that some of the learning objectives were achieved but, for a more accurate evaluation, a follow up session was arranged with a simple questionnaire for participants' responses. This helped me learn what had been most helpful and it gave their support workers an opportunity to help the young people to apply their learning. More importantly, the support workers had learnt a great deal about the level of understanding of the members of their group and this enabled them to continue to work towards the original aim of the project, which is also the aim of the Bodysense male and female cloth models – 'to enable young people to develop relationships that bring them acceptance, love and pleasure'.

The Bodysense 'Male and Female Cloth Models'

Back in the 1980s, when working with Brook Publications, I developed a simple, 12 module, social and sex education scheme for young people with learning disabilities '*Not A Child Anymore*' (Brook Advisory Centres, 1987). This was based on my previous experiences as a

qualified social worker: specialising in work with young people and people with disabilities within social services departments, and in the counselling and outreach work I had undertaken for Birmingham Brook Advisory Centre. All of the group leaders who undertook the trials of the package responded to the illustrated material saying that, although pictures were helpful, a 3D model would be more helpful still when explaining the human body and answering questions about sexual responses. We explored the possibility of using the anatomically correct dolls that are used in disclosure work with children who have experienced sexual abuse. However, it was clear that they were unsuitable for use with post-pubertal children and young adults as they were clearly for use through play, were doll-sized and stylistic in appearance. We needed a product that was more realistic in appearance, had the genitalia in the correct position (the vagina on the female was front facing on the dolls) and was large enough to avoid being viewed as a plaything. With little or no funding, we quickly produced half life-size male and female cloth models that met these requirements and could be used appropriately to support the educational package.

Following this, I continued to use the models when working with children and young adults with learning disabilities in a variety of settings and in training professionals who work with them. I have had valuable feedback on their advantages and also their limitations. This led to my undertaking an extensive survey in 2002 of users to ascertain how best to re-design them with additional features and thus extend the tasks for which they could be used. Their development drew on comments and feedback from those professionals who were responsible for sex and relationship education, counselling and advice for children and young adults with a wide range of learning, sensory and other disabilities including Autism Spectrum Disorders. We also consulted other experts, including a skilled pattern maker, model maker, artist and seamstresses. The aim was to create a quality product at an affordable price and the project was helped by a grant from the Government's (Westminster) Teenage Pregnancy Unit and launched in 2004 by Bodysense. Further response from users indicated a need for a version of the models for use with children and young people with physical disabilities and mobility problems who

use wheelchairs and other mobility aids and are less likely to identify with standing figures. This, more complex, model was developed and launched in 2005 and a model wheelchair added in 2007.

The models are now regularly used in clinic settings to facilitate effective two-way communication and have been found to be an invaluable teaching resource to facilitate learning about the adult body, sexual behaviour and personal and sexual relationships. Within the special school setting they are used by school nurses on a one to one basis with children, and teachers use them on an on-going basis to assist class teaching. Feedback indicates that they are regularly used to teach about the adult human body, male and female differences, appropriate and inappropriate touches, sexual behaviour and protective behaviours. They are also used to facilitate two-way communication about sexual matters, to help answer questions about sexual or personal matters and to support counselling on personal or sexual issues. However, as can be seen from the description of the night club project, they are increasingly being used with young people with learning disabilities for role play, drama or storytelling in order to enhance the development of their social skills.

Body Sense Male and Female Cloth Models

