

Toolkit

**Having children,
what does that involve?**

**My child
wants a child...**

**Information folder for parents
of people with an intellectual
disability who want to have a child.**

Ask people you meet by chance what they think is important in their lives. Often you will hear things like: health, happiness, friendship, love, money, work, a home, and a child.

This is no different for people with an intellectual disability. They too want to the same things that make life pleasant and meaningful. They want to participate in society and have a sense of inclusion.

The attention our society places on family and the value of it that is held so dear, means that people with an intellectual disability also have the feeling that they should have a child; that you are incomplete without a child. You can only be happy if you have children. A home, a child, and one on the way: that is the ideal image.

Perhaps your child also wants a child and asks for your parental advice to see if this is sensible. Many parents of children with an intellectual disability are hesitant regarding discussions about this issue. Although, avoiding discussions about this may create an intensely biased focus on the topic.

What can you do as parents?

Talk about children and parenthood at an early stage in their development and in a straightforward way.

What are all the things you have to be able to do when you are a mother or a father? While children are being raised, you can provide them with information about the things a mother and a father have to do. This is part of learning proper social behavior. For example, when toddlers or school-aged children play house together, you can say something when they drop a doll or if they pick it up too roughly. When children reach the age to go to primary school, you can tell them the kinds of things you have to do as a parent: getting out of bed when your child cries, doing laundry, cooking, helping with homework, and many other things.

Discussions about tasks and responsibilities of parenthood should be a part of raising a child. This is true even if the child has an intellectual disability. By talking about parenthood at an early stage and in a natural, informal way, a child acquires a more realistic impression of all kinds of things that it entails.

Give sexual education when it is appropriate.

Children are confronted with sexuality at an increasingly early age. They are also sexually active at an increasingly younger age. This applies to children with an intellectual disability just as well.

As soon as a child reaches puberty, sexual education takes an important place. A child should know that when you want to have sex, but do not want a child, you must use contraception. Then of course, she or he has to learn how to do that. This can prevent a potential unwanted pregnancy. Sexual education can likewise protect a child from abuse. She/he has to know that sex against your will is wrong, and that people may not touch you without your consent.

It is important that a child gets proper sexual education when it is appropriate, and in such a way that she/he can understand it. If you find that difficult to do yourself, speak about it to others at the school or with professional care workers who are involved with your child or your family. They can help you with that.

Talking about the future is also talking about whether or not you will have a child.

Among the things involved in parenthood is providing guidance to children in learning how they can function as independently as possible. This is how they can grow into adulthood with their own dreams and desires for the future.

Talking about the future is a part of raising a child. It can involve all domains of life: health, home, work, leisure time, finances, relationships, friendships, and family. By letting your children share their ideas and desires with you, together you can explore what they have to do to realize these desires. This can create a meaningful and realistic life perspective.

The same is true if you have a child with an intellectual disability. It is important to talk about her/his future and explore together what is genuinely possible. How can you achieve what you want? What can you do yourself? What do you need to learn? What do you need help with from other people? This also

includes what your limitations are and what you have to take into consideration.

Together with your child you can make a plan for the future: what would you want, how and when, and who can support you with that. This is how you get an impression of your child's desires and you can talk with each other about what she/he has to be able to do for that and if that is achievable.

When a child with an intellectual disability becomes an adult, she or he can express the desire to have their own child. Sometimes you hear that from your child directly. Your child asks you to think along or asks you for support. It may also be that she/he does not come with such a question directly, but you notice a heightened interest for everything that has to do with babies. You might also suddenly be faced with a *fait accompli*. Your child is pregnant and a decision has to be made if the pregnancy should be brought to full term.

Listen to your child's wishes.

If your child wants to have a child, it is important that you listen carefully. That is not the same as approving or encouraging.

Talk with each other about what this desire means. Try to figure out if the desire to have a child also includes a longing to become a parent. Perhaps it is more like a need to be like everyone else, to feel warmth, and to give and receive affection. If the latter is the case, you and your daughter/son can explore to see if there is another possible satisfying alternative.

You clearly do not have to deal with this on your own. Seek out contact the professional care workers who already support your child. You can indeed do more by doing it together.

Emphasize that other people also have to first think carefully about big decisions in their lives and that is why they discuss them with people whom they trust.

Make sure that you get into the habit of having straightforward discussions and exchanges of ideas with your child regarding important issues. Having children is one of those issues. You do not make a decision about this from one day to the next. People without an intellectual disability also take time taking thorough consideration about making big decisions such as this in their lives, and they get advice from people whom they trust and who are dear to them.

If your child has the feeling that you are there for her or him, and that you always lend them your ear, there is a greater chance that your child will confide in you at an early stage about any desire to have a child she or he may have. This also increases the chance that, at a later phase, she/he will be willing to ask for support and accept advice. This enables you as a parent to be a supportive

cornerstone and you can think along with your child.

If your child really does want a child, it is important to go through all the things that are required for that. Your daughter or son has to gain insight into what caring for and raising children actually entails. This is probably much more than she/he initially suspected or knows.

Questions... questions

Many parents of children with an intellectual disability are concerned about the possible future parenthood of their daughter or son.

Among the questions they have are:

- Is my child able to care for a child?
- What does that mean for my grandchild?
- Will that child's needs be met?
- What does that require of us as parents?
- Do we have to help them raise and care for the child, or even have to assume responsibility for it?
- Can we muster up the strength to enter into a second period of parenthood instead of just being able to enjoy parenthood?

Make contact with other parents.

Do not walk around alone with your questions. Talk with other parents who are dealing with the same thing. That is possible through the care facility from which your child receives support, via a regional parent association, or via your local agency dedicated to serving people with intellectual disabilities. If your child is still attending school, it can also be a topic for a theme evening, for example in combination with information about sexuality, lover boys (pimps), and teenage motherhood.

Make contact with your child's social network.

Make sure that you are well aware of who your child's friends and acquaintances are. You would then be better able to appraise what type of support she/he receives or what type of things she/he is subjected to. Who are those friends and acquaintances? And would they be able to provide any support if a child should arrive?

Make contact with your child's professional network.

In many cases, a child receives some form of professional support at work, school or training program, or in her/his living environment. Perhaps she/he also has her/his own general practitioner. Make sure that you maintain contact with this professional network. You can also ask for additional support for yourselves as parents. You can mean more for your child collectively than by doing it on your own.

Information

Do you need any further information? Here below are a few websites that you may be interested in.

www.kijkopkinderwens.nl

a national project to coach when people with an intellectual disability want to have a child

www.begrensdeliefde.nl

a site about sexuality for everyone who is involved professionally, or as a parent, with people with an intellectual disability or physical disability.

www.babybedenktijd.nl

information and order site for the importer RealCare Baby (practice doll)

www.onderlingsterk.nl/www.lfb.nu

information from the Landelijke Federatie Belangenverenigingen Onderling Sterk [A Dutch national federation of special interest groups dedicated to serving the needs of and run by persons with an intellectual disability collectively]

www.langsdelevenslijn.nl

information site MEE

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