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- A Dad's Perspective
- Free Workshop Series

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**Wildwood Programs**
Learning Disabilities Association of the Capital Region

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**Wildwood Programs**
Learning for Life

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**reaching out**

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**Wildwood Programs is a non-profit, non-sectarian organization that serves people with developmental disabilities, complex learning disabilities and autism. Wildwood is affiliated with the Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA).**

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**Summer 2012**

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**Relationships:**

**What do People Want?**

Donna Dorsey, LMSW
Residential Social Worker

Most people are not solitary creatures and tend to reach out to bond with other human beings. We are typically social beings that look to others to fill our needs and compliment our individuality.

Should it be expected that this tendency is any different for people who happen to have a disability?

What do people who have a developmental disability want from others? The best way to answer that question is to ask yourself what you want. People who have a disability want the same things.

I have been supporting adults who live in their own homes around relationship issues for nine years. In my experience, people want their lives to count for something and they want to have meaning and purpose. They want to have meaningful friendships, to date and maybe to marry.

In general, people who have a disability don’t want to be seen as different from the

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**Cindy and Ben:**

**Time and Commitment**

Tom Schreck
Director Of Communications

Cindy met Ben when both of them were working together at the Menands Workshop. They hit it off as friends almost immediately but because they worked together they weren’t sure a relationship was something they wanted to be public knowledge.

“We decided to keep it quiet so all the people at the job wouldn’t know. We didn’t want everyone talking about us especially in a place where we both worked,” Cindy said.

Though they started as friends their first date came not long after they met. It turned out that they shared many of the same interests and spending time together came naturally.

“We both really liked going to the movies and playing pool and it was easy and fun to share time like that,” Cindy said.

Ben lived in a supported apartment while Cindy lived with family. A family circumstance led to Cindy moving out and into her own supported apartment. The best part of that arrangement was that Cindy moved into the same supported apartment complex as Ben.

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Dear Friends...

To love and be loved is a universal need of all people, regardless of one’s level of ability. Part of normal social development involves the desire to connect with others, beginning with friendships, and possibly evolving into more intimate relationships. This is especially true as individuals watch siblings or family members move through such experiences and wish the same for themselves.

Social relationships will be different based on a person’s age and ability. For some, it is enough to be someone’s “boyfriend” or “girlfriend,” to have someone to call each night, or see at recreational events. Others express the desire to make a long-term or lifetime commitment to their partner, choosing to date them exclusively and perhaps envisioning an apartment together, or even marriage.

All parents want to see their children in healthy and happy relationships. With that said, when relationships begin to develop parents and family members may have concerns about the safety and wellbeing of their loved one. Given some individuals’ level of vulnerability due to poor judgment, decision-making skills and desire for “normalcy” these concerns are valid. As an agency, Wildwood recognizes these vulnerabilities and takes serious the need to educate individuals about the importance of making safe choices. At the same time we believe that taking reasonable risks are a part of personal growth and development.

This issue of Reaching Out explores the challenges and successes that some of the individuals Wildwood serves have faced in their journey towards intimacy and connectedness. We hope their stories illustrate that regardless of age and ability, loving and being loved is an essential component of the human experience.

Sincerely,

Maggie Pascucci, LMSW
Residential Social Worker

Marianne Simon, PsyD
Residential Psychologist

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In general, people who have a disability don’t want to be seen as different from the world they perceive around them. I asked several women with developmental disabilities what the most important things are to them in a relationship. Some of the things that they weighed in with: someone you can trust, a good friend who shows respect, getting to know the person really well before dating them, a companion, someone to do things with. The men replied: love, honesty, loyalty and dedication, compassion, compatibility and a 50/50 two-way street.

Individuals with a disability also don’t want to be seen as different from the world they perceive around them. That can present challenges and affect how they feel about themselves.

Things that they see in the media can skew their perception of healthy relationships and combined with some negative relationship experiences from the past, it can take a toll. Sometimes life experiences put a heavy strain on relationships. They may struggle with issues that impact their ability to communicate effectively and may also get in the way of building new relationships.

I have seen that impulsivity; misinterpreting social cues and boundary issues create many problems in relationships. When I ask people with disabilities directly about their relationship struggles, they have asked: how and where can I meet people, how do I know that I can trust someone, how do I start and end conversations, how do I deal with pressure from family and friends, how soon after meeting someone should I start to date? So many of these are fears that we all share.

Much of my relationship facilitation occurs in real life social settings. The idea is to have people practice in situations similar to the ones in which they live. Likewise, I believe in putting the “social” in social work so most of my work occurs in natural community settings like restaurants and malls, especially in settings that may have caused concerns. We also work in informal gatherings in each other’s apartments.

Topics in small groups vary but have included: reading social cues; providing concrete examples as to when it’s okay to look at someone and not to stare; how following someone to greet them could be interpreted as stalking. Other popular relationship issues such as how to let go of grudges, understanding communication breakdowns, how to get to know someone, how to host or be a guest at a gathering, and how to grow friendships have all been covered.

All of us have strengths and struggles when it comes to the complex set of skills that are inherent in communication, relationships, and friendships. People with disabilities just sometimes need a little extra support.
Many teens and young adults with developmental disabilities want to date and experience intimate relationships in much the same way as their typically developing peers. They want to get their driver’s license, graduate from high school, move away from home, go to college and/or find good work, date and enjoy satisfying relationships.

However, students with special needs often do not meet these typical milestones in the same way or at the same time as their peers. Accepting who they are and where they are can be very challenging both for themselves as well as their family members.

“It is the school social worker’s role to help the student to have as much control over their lives as possible and as much freedom within the acceptable social norms,” Sue Frost, a Wildwood School social worker said.

The relationship between family, child and school staff is the key to successfully supporting teens and young adults to develop healthy social skills and intimate relationships.

“Building trust and confidence with the student and their family, helping the school team understand and accept the family’s values around sexuality and helping the kids understand the normal conventions around sexuality is so important”, Scott Lovinella, also a school social worker, said. “In addition, it is equally important to provide instruction about the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behavior and to provide concrete, accurate information in a safe environment in order to give students the skills to be as independent as possible.”

Information about anatomy, emotional and physical changes during puberty, hygiene, sexual health, and reproduction are important knowledge-focused topics. Student behavior is part of the overall education process. Safe behavior is emphasized and situations like the difference between private and public behavior, legal and illegal actions, appropriate social boundaries and internet safety are thoroughly covered. Instruction is modified as needed to meet the student’s developmental needs and is often most effective when provided in structured small group settings so students can role-play, model and practice social skills in a safe environment.

However, there is much more to the topic than education.

“There are many components to supporting teens and young adults with sexuality. There is the education piece but even more importantly, the emotional piece,” Gwen Buckley, a social worker with school said. “Many students with a disability feel that they are different and are aware of having a disability. They may be ashamed and feel de-valued.”

Acceptance of self by the student and their family and providing students with needed skills and information offers them the opportunity to be as independent as possible.
A Dad's Perspective

Danielle Mazza
Director of Medicaid Service Coordination

When you start to talk about how Dads feel about their daughter’s dating, you are sure to get into some emotionally tough territory. Dads by nature are often protective and when a daughter has a disability the urge to protect may grow even stronger.

Wayne is a typical Dad and when his daughter began to show interest in boys at 14 years old, he said he reacted like most fathers by declaring:

“No Boys!”

Wayne, however knew this wasn’t a practical stance to take and over time Melissa began to do things in mixed groups like co-ed dances and social get-togethers. Her interaction with the opposite sex did not progress to dating and that was something that suited Wayne.

About 10 years ago, when Melissa was 30, she met Anthony at the Menands Workshop and he became her first real boyfriend. They would spend time together, enjoy holidays in each other’s company and talk on the phone.

Wayne worried but relied on Melissa’s Mom to have some of those more personal conversations with her. He stressed that they were very open in their communication and that was essential in helping everyone to feel comfortable. Eventually, Anthony moved away, and although he and Melissa tried to stay in touch, like many long distance relationships, it didn’t work out. During this time Wayne and Melissa’s Mom encouraged her to be social through different activities to cope with the loss of this relationship and to meet others.

About seven years ago Melissa met Kevin at Special Olympics. On July 15 they moved into their own apartment together. They have talked about marriage, but want to be sure they are compatible living together first.

Despite his earlier worries, Wayne feels that this relationship has really enhanced Melissa’s life. He has seen her grow and seen her and Kevin teach each other some things, just like any other relationship where different partners bring different things to the table. He has seen her learn to compromise in ways she hadn’t before and he feels she is better for being in this relationship.

When asked what advice he’d give to other families in regards to their children in relationships he said patience, guidance, understanding, communication, and above all open mindedness.

Cindy and Ben

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“The staff knew we were dating and they supported it. It wasn’t a secret or discouraged and they helped us,” Cindy said.

Cindy and Ben dated for eight years and their relationship grew quite strong. Reflecting on it, Cindy thinks there was good reason why the relationship worked for her and Ben.

“I think it is important to not rush a relationship. It takes time and it is really important to get to know someone,” Cindy said. “Then, when you know it feels right it is time to go for it.”

Still, being in love isn’t always easy, especially when parents aren’t immediately approving. Both Cindy and Ben’s parents wanted them to marry someone of their same background. Cindy didn’t waiver and decided she wanted to marry Ben despite the family pressure.

“Eventually both of our parents accepted our marriage and were very supportive. It just took time and our commitment to each other,” Cindy said.

For Cindy and Ben the keys to their relationship staying on track were not hurrying the process and letting it come naturally while taking time to get to know each other really well. Accepting guidance from supportive people in their lives also played an important role. Once they made that commitment they kept it front and center as the focus of their lives.
WILDWOOD PROGRAMS PRESENTS
FREE FAMILY & PROFESSIONAL WORKSHOPS

OVERVIEW OF THE AGING PROCESS IN PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES AND STRATEGIES FOR CARE-GIVERS

Kari VanDenburgh, Director of Nursing at Wildwood Programs and Donna Dorsey, Social Worker at Wildwood Programs supported apartments, present an overview on aging including the myths, stereotypes and factors that affect the aging process. They will compare the aging process in the general population to those with intellectual and developmental disabilities as well as review the body system changes that are affected by aging.

Participants will gain practical information on therapeutic activities, memory aids and environmental modifications as well as guidelines for communication and strategies to manage aggressive behaviors. Participants will also learn of coping strategies for families and staff and the relationship of aging to the process of grief and loss. Lastly, community resources and supports related to aging will be provided.

When: Friday, September 28, 2012
9:00-11:00am
Where: Wildwood Programs Latham Office, 1190 Troy-Schenectady Rd., Latham, NY
To Register: Call 518-640-3300 by September 24, 2012

IPAD, SMART-PHONE AND TABLET APPS THAT ASSIST PEOPLE WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES

Mikaela Perez is a social work student at the College of Saint Rose. She completed a research project on the use of apps and technology to support people who have developmental disabilities. Ray Blanchard is in a Community Mental Health graduate program at the College of St. Rose. Ray became interested in technology after seeing the hundreds of apps for people with developmental disabilities.

There are now countless applications for devices like iPhones, iPads and laptops that can be used to assist people with autism spectrum disorders and other developmental disabilities as well as their families, care-givers, teachers. This workshop will explore some of these applications, their use, benefits, and cost for people with disabilities.

Please feel free to bring your devices as you will be able to connect to a wireless network.

When: Friday, October 26, 2012 9:00-11:00am
Where: Wildwood Programs Latham Office, 1190 Troy-Schenectady Rd., Latham, NY
To Register: Call 518-640-3300 by October 15, 2012

PREPARING FOR ADULT LIVING

Members of Wildwood Programs Residential team as well as other Capital District residential services providers present a workshop on how people with developmental disabilities still have opportunities to move into their own homes despite the ever changing landscape of supports and services. Please join us to hear information about the residential innovations taking place in the Capital District. We will also discuss how you can help to prepare your adult and yourself to become ready to live away from home.

Sue Hanson, Wildwood Programs Director of Residential Services, will facilitate this workshop.

When: Wednesday, October 17, 2012
9:00-11:00am
Where: Wildwood Programs Latham Office, 1190 Troy-Schenectady Rd., Latham, NY
To Register: Call 518-640-3300 by October 15, 2012

Questions: Marie Awn Floyd, 518-640-3346 mawnfloyd@wildwoodprograms.org
There is no charge for attendance
If you are unable to come to these workshops in person, you can now participate from home using your computer. You need to have a camera and audio capability on your computer and broadband Internet service. Please contact Andy Karhan at akarhan@wildwoodprograms.org or 518.640.3355 to get connected.