



### **Curriculum for High School Students**

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## Funding Disclaimer

This project was developed to design, implement, and disseminate a replicable, sustainable, trauma-informed sexual assault risk reduction and response program created with and for youth and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and the people in their daily lives. The SAFE Alliance is committed to equipping students and adults with disabilities with information, skills, and tools that promote healthy and safer relationships and strengthen self-advocacy.

Through the *My Rights My Life* high school curriculum and classes, students build the knowledge and confidence to advocate for themselves in their relationships. Participants practice identifying personal boundaries, communicating needs, and speaking up for their safety with friends, family members, teachers, peers, and others.

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# Introduction

## Rationale for My Rights My Life for High School Students

Research about abuse, violence prevention education, and people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) is somewhat limited. However, we know that people with disabilities are at high risk for abuse, and that education on safety and sexuality can decrease that risk. For 30 years, SAFE's Disability Services program has provided personal safety and sexuality education for youth and adults with disabilities in Central Texas and beyond. Those trainings and important research and studies on these topics laid the foundation for the contents of the *My Rights My Life (MRML)* curriculum for adults. At the request of many in our community, we have now revised the original curriculum, making it appropriate for high school students.

In our experience, public school administrators, parents, and residential services staff are more likely to support healthy relationship and safer sexuality education for youth and adults with IDD when they are familiar with evidence-based research on abuse of people with disabilities, sexuality of people with IDD, and the effectiveness of sexuality education.

### ***Abuse of people with disabilities***

Studies consistently show that individuals with disabilities face an increased risk of experiencing abuse compared to their peers without disabilities (Barger, 2009; Powers, Hughes, & Lund, 2009). In a large-scale national survey on abuse of individuals with disabilities that netted over 7,000 responses, more than 70% of people with disabilities said they had been victims of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect. Most respondents reported experiencing abuse on more than 20 occasions, with only about half of these abusive incidents being reported to authorities (Baladerian, Coleman, & Stream, 2013).

While all people with disabilities are at an increased risk of experiencing violence not only once, but often multiple times throughout their lifetimes, individuals with some disabilities are especially vulnerable. People with intellectual, communication, or mental health disabilities report experiencing the highest rates of victimization (Sullivan & Knutson, 2000; Powers, Hughes, & Lund, 2009). In particular, rates of sexual assault are extremely high for these populations (Barger, Wacker, Macy, & Parish, 2009). In 2018, National Public Radio released a series of reports on sexual assault of individuals with IDD. For their investigation, they reviewed unpublished federal crime data and determined that people with IDD experience sexual assault at a rate seven times higher than do people without disabilities. Clearly, there is an epidemic of violence against youth and adults with disabilities.

In response to fears about safety, many families and caregivers decide that they need to provide heightened protection for their loved ones with disabilities by limiting their

independence, isolating them from the broader community, and/or preventing their access to information about relationships and sexuality. Yet, evidence suggests that the exact opposite approach—community inclusion and building self-advocacy and self-determination skills—is much more effective in preventing abuse.

In a 2005 study, researchers provided evidence that individuals with IDD who demonstrated higher levels of self-determination were more successful in recognizing and resisting abuse (Khemka, Hickson, & Reynolds, 2005).

*My Rights My Life for High School Students* devotes a significant amount of education and class time to encouraging students to practice advocating for themselves and to take ownership of their relationships and their own boundaries.

Additionally, to increase safety, youth and adults with disabilities need to be part of a community support network; isolating them from the broader community is not an effective means of abuse prevention.

*Self-Determination.* The concept of self-determination began in the field of special education. As early as 1972, ombudsman at FUB (the Swedish parental organization for children with intellectual disabilities) Bengt Nirje wrote about the need for self-determination for people with disabilities: “a person’s rights to have control over decisions regarding their personal lives and access to information necessary in making those decisions.”

A self-determined life is characterized by having opportunity, information, and support in making conscious choices and important decisions about one’s life (Loman et.al, 2010; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1996, 1997, 1998).

Self-determined individuals with or without disabilities can make things happen in their own lives. They work with clear goals or purpose, sometimes with the actions or supports of another person on their behalf (Loman et.al, 2010).

*The myth of stranger-danger.* Research also indicates that people with disabilities, especially people with intellectual disabilities, are most likely to be abused by someone they know and trust.

In one study, 97-99 percent of individuals with intellectual disabilities knew their abusers. Forty-four percent of the abusers in this same study had a relationship with the victim specifically due to their disability, such as being an accessible transportation provider or a physical therapist (Baladerian, 1991).

Isolating people with disabilities from the broader community is not an effective means of supporting self-determination, developing self-advocacy skills, or of preventing sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation. Removing people with disabilities from broader society or teaching platitudes such as stranger danger does nothing to protect them from abuse at the hands of those they know well, especially when they are living or spending their days in institutional settings, without a community-based network.

Instead, our youth must be taught how to recognize when their boundaries are being crossed or violated and how to get help in those situations, two key topics explored in great depth in *MRML for High School Students*.

## **Sexuality of People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**

There is growing evidence that comprehensive relationship education can help reduce risks of sexual assaults, abuse, and exploitation of youth and adults with disabilities (Hughes et al., 2010; Robinson-Whelen et al., 2014; 2020).

Youth and adults who learn about *consent, bodily autonomy, setting personal boundaries, self-advocacy*, and other topics can increase their awareness of the rights they have to their own bodies, as well as of the rights of everybody else. Through comprehensive healthy relationship education, youth and adults with disabilities can gain the knowledge and the anatomical vocabulary necessary to accurately report a sexual assault, abuse, or exploitation. When a sexual assault survivor cannot articulate what happened to them and when physical evidence cannot be collected, there is virtually no option for perpetrator accountability.

Rape culture relies on victim blaming, “slut shaming,” and old ideas about gender norms and consent, notes a report from Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights (2019). Healthy relationship education provides a tool to teach about consent, communication, respect, and boundaries instead, which helps keep young people more safe.

Despite the potential benefits of a healthy relationship education that addresses topics such as consent, and friendship, many individuals with disabilities, especially those with IDD, do not receive this information. Sometimes this lack is due to local or state-wide restrictions against any healthy relationship or sex education in public schools. Even in districts where such classes are allowed, students in special education classes tend to be left out. Or, if they do attend, the information is presented in an inaccessible manner. Even though students are physically present in classes, their individualized learning needs are not met. In many other cases, students with IDD are removed from relationship and sexuality education classes either by their guardians or school staff.

Removing students from healthy relationship or sex education classes may be motivated by an effort to protect or the pervasive and incorrect belief that people with disabilities are asexual. It has been our experience that people with disabilities report that, throughout their lives, community members infantilize and assume they are incapable of having adult relationships. Yet only a small number of people, with or without disabilities, are asexual. There is no evidence that individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities identify as asexual at higher rates as do people without disabilities (Advocates for Youth, 2008 & Elevatus Training, 2018).

People with disabilities have a right to information about and to understand their bodies and sexuality as they learn to navigate healthy relationships. The type of information presented to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities should be based on their biological age. However, *how* that information is presented must be adapted to meet an individual's disability related support needs (Elevatus Training, 2018). *MRML for High School Students* provides a variety of modifications and accommodations built into each lesson to assist teachers in meeting the needs of the greatest array of students possible.

### ***The Need for LGBTQIA-Inclusive Education***

Another widely-held misconception relates to how people with disabilities express their gender. People commonly and erroneously believe that people with disabilities are all straight and cisgender (cisgender is a term used to refer to individuals whose current gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth).

Other family members or guardians may actively try to prevent people with intellectual and developmental disabilities from expressing anything other than heterosexuality, or dressing in a way that does not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth.

This is unfortunate, given that research indicates that people with and without intellectual disabilities identify as gay or lesbian at about the same rates as do people without disabilities (Noonan & Gomez, 2011). Although more research is needed about people with disabilities who align under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, these two studies suggest that inclusive curricula for people with disabilities must provide information that addresses the needs of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

*LGBTQIA rates of abuse.* Inclusion and affirmation of all gender and sexual orientation identities become even more important when one considers the consistent research evidence that LGBTQIA+ individuals experience violence at rates similar to or higher than the general U.S. population (Brown & Herman, 2015 & NISVS, 2010).

Bisexual women experience more violence than lesbian or heterosexual women, and bisexual men experience more violence than gay or heterosexual men (Walters, M.L., Chen, J., & Breiding, M.J., 2013 as cited in VAWnet, n.d.). Research indicates that transgender people experience disproportionately high rates of violence (James et al., 2016 as cited in VAWnet, n.d.).

In recognition of these and other findings, and our commitment to inclusive services and practices, *MRML for High School Students* includes resources and activities for talking with students with IDD about gender, LGBTQIA+ identities and the celebration of all identities.

*Anonymous questions.* In keeping with current research, *My Rights My Life* is comprehensive and evidence-based. Each class is designed specifically for teens, in settings where all genders are welcome. We do recognize, however, that some students

may feel particularly reluctant to ask certain questions in front of their peers, or in front of their peers of a specific gender. To address this discomfort, *MRML* facilitators are encouraged to distribute blank notecards at the end of each class. Students have the option to anonymously write a question on the card, and then leave the card on their desk or discreetly turn it in to a facilitator. During the next week's class, facilitators can answer the question(s) without identifying its source. If students do not use written communication, they also have the option to ask someone they trust to help them write their question on a notecard, or to talk privately with one of the facilitators. These students might also be able to use the Important Words Sheet (a session-specific communication board found within each PowerPoint) to ask their question using picture supports.

## **Responding to Abuse Disclosures**

Due to the content of *My Rights My Life classes*, there is a high likelihood that, students will disclose past or current experiences of abuse, neglect, sexual assault, or exploitation. These disclosures may feel scary or overwhelming for a teacher, but they don't have to be. With the right information and planning, facilitators can know when to report potential abuse to authorities, and how to respond in a trauma-informed manner to abuse disclosures.

### ***When to report abuse against people with disabilities: Reporting laws***

**Children.** Every U.S. state and territory has laws requiring mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect. The specific people or professions required to make a report vary, and there are also differences among state laws about whether a report can be made anonymously, penalties for failure to report, and organizational obligations. We encourage you to research your state laws if you are not already familiar with them.

**Adults.** Mandatory reporting of abuse of "protected adult" populations exists in some capacity in each American state and some territories (National Center on Elder Abuse, n.d.). State rules and regulations vary. For example, while 90% of states investigate abuse of adults age 18 and older with disabilities, some states only investigate abuse of adults in later life. Laws also differ about who is required to report, whether a report can be made anonymously, penalties for failure to report, organizational obligations, and more. We encourage you to research your state laws if you are not already familiar with them.

Some states may additionally require a report to local law enforcement when a crime has occurred. Consult your jurisdiction's mandatory reporting statutes for further information, and always call 911 in the case of an emergency.

**People with disabilities.** As noted, not all states mandate reports of abuse, neglect, or exploitation of people with disabilities. Even in states that do, the specific disabilities that lead to a mandatory report differ. Many types of disabilities would not meet this

requirement. When in doubt about if you are required to make a report, consult your state statute or local Adult Protective Services department.

**Current or past abuse?** One final factor in deciding whether you need to make a report of suspected abuse is when the abuse occurred. For adults with disabilities, it can be particularly complicated. Guidelines about when to report past abuse should be explained in your state/territory's mandatory reporting laws.

*Title IX.* If you are working in a school setting, you may have additional responsibilities to report any abuse disclosures to your institution's Title IX Coordinator. Title IX is a federal law that prohibits sex discrimination in any educational setting that receives federal funds through the U.S. Department of Education (almost all schools and universities). This means that schools have an obligation to prevent and address sex discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual assault, regardless of whether these were perpetrated by a student, a school employee, or a third party (Know Your IX, n.d.). School employees typically have a responsibility to report Title IX violations experienced by students to their employer's Title IX team. If you are a guest working in a school setting (for example, a disability service provider or an employee of a domestic violence agency), you are likely not obligated to make a Title IX report, though you should confirm this with your agency's legal team. For all individuals providing My Rights My Life in a school setting, more information on Title IX reporting obligations can be obtained through contacting your educational institution's Title IX office.

### ***Trauma-informed responses to disclosures***

Facilitators of these classes can prepare to respond to abuse disclosures in a trauma-informed way. Trauma is an emotional response to an event that is deeply distressing or disturbing, often one that poses a threat to our social-emotional self, physical body, or life (SAMSHA, 2015). Abuse, neglect, and exploitation are all examples of forms of trauma that people with disabilities commonly experience.

Trauma-informed care is a shift in approach to how we interact to people who are coping with previous traumatic experiences with behaviors that are not working for them or others. These behaviors may include interrupting others, not responding, shutting down, or getting angry easily. Rather than wondering what is wrong with the person, or attributing the behavior to a disability, we consider what traumatic events might be impacting how they respond.

Think of all behavior as communication. Humans behave in ways that do not work when something is not right in their lives. As facilitators, we can work to understand the meaning behind student behaviors. Another way to be trauma-informed in these classes is to incorporate five principles of trauma-informed care into your classroom: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment (Fallot, 2011). One of these values, choice, is explored in more depth below.

You can foster choice and decision-making in the mandatory reporting process by asking students who have experienced abuse how involved they would like to be in the reporting process itself. A student can make a report of their own in addition to your report, make a report with you, sit and watch while you make a report, or not be involved with the reporting process at all. Respect the student's decision. You can further support a student's choice by sharing as much information as you have about what will happen next in the abuse investigation, and what the student can expect as the investigation progresses.

A final consideration when making a mandatory report is obtaining support for the student who has experienced violence, any student who heard the disclosure, and for yourself. Talk to the student who disclosed abuse, and help them identify sources of support. Is there a safe family member they can talk to? A trusted adult friend? Do they need your support telling this safe family member or friend about the abuse? Have they already reported the abuse to someone else?

If you are working in a school setting, there are legally-mandated protections and supports that can be put in place through the Title IX process (see "Title IX" section for more information). In addition, a school social worker or counselor may be available who could, with consent, meet with the student and help connect them with additional resources and support.

Another resource to consider is your local domestic violence, and/or sexual assault center. Find information about your local or state:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline (800.799.SAFE)
- RAINN (800.656.HOPE)

In addition, talk with any students who were present during the abuse disclosure, and acknowledge that it can be difficult to hear about someone else being hurt. Check in with class members to see how they are feeling, and try to find out if they need further support. Be prepared to provide information about where they can find support if they need extra time to process what they heard. Finally, take care of yourself. Hearing abuse disclosures and making mandatory reports can have a large emotional impact. See the *Preventing Burnout* section for information on healing resources for yourself and others.

### ***Protection and Advocacy System***

One final resource to support a student with a disability who has experienced violence is your state or territory's Protection and Advocacy System (P&A). P&As are mandated by law in all US states and territories, and they provide legal support, information and referral, and technical assistance to protect the civil and personal rights of individuals with disabilities (Administration on Community Living, 2019). All crime victims have rights, and people with disabilities also have the right to be accommodated through the

criminal justice process and in all victim services settings. If you feel that a student's rights are not being respected, ask if they would like to get in contact with the local P&A. With consent, you or the school counselor may be able to support them in calling the P&A to explore possible rights violation. You can find your local P&A by reaching out to the National Disability Rights Network.

### **Preventing Burnout**

No matter what your role is—parent, teacher, disability service provider, domestic violence/sexual assault center employee—chances are you have a pretty busy schedule. We hope that after reading the *Research* section of this manual, you are convinced of the vital need to provide healthy relationship information to youth with disabilities in your life. Even with this conviction, however, deciding to provide instruction on of *My Rights My Life* may add extra work and exposure to violence-related issues. In recognition of this fact, we have included the resources below on preventing burnout.

The Mayo Clinic (2018) defines job burnout as “a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves a sense of reduced accomplishment and loss of personal identity.” Facilitating healthy relationship education is hard work, and you may need to plan for how you will compensate for this new challenge. In fact, research has shown that teachers with more proactive coping skills experience less feelings of job burnout (Starchenkova, Kruglova, & Stolyarchuk, 2017).

Before you begin to facilitate this curriculum, take some time to think about what things you will do to help avoid experiencing burnout. You may even choose to write down a self-care plan that you can refer to throughout the year. Often, our first line of defense against burnout is connection with people we trust. Identify who the people are on your campus, in your organization, and elsewhere you can talk to after a tough class, or when you're preparing to teach new content. Everyone needs allies and mentors in this work. If you don't have someone at work who fills this role, maybe there is someone in your personal life you can connect with for support as needed. SAFE Disability Services is also available for technical assistance on delivering *MRML* content and can be reached at [disabilityservices@safeaustin.org](mailto:disabilityservices@safeaustin.org).

During classes, you will spend a lot of time helping students understand their boundaries in relationships, and how to set them. It is equally important for you to be able to set boundaries in your professional life in order to prevent burnout. Sometimes, saying *no* to things can be a huge gift to your self-care. Make sure to find time to not be working, and to seek out activities, places, and people that rejuvenate you. Self-care includes, but is not limited to, physical, social, creative, spiritual, and professional care:

- *Physical self-care* focuses on movement and the body, and includes things like going for a walk, dancing to a favorite song, getting a group together to play a sport, or even just getting a good night's rest.
- *Social self-care* can include calling up a close friend, or going out to eat with loved ones.

- *Creative self-care* might be drawing and painting, crafting, taking photos, gardening, or writing.
- *Spiritual self-care* taps into the things that refill your spirit, and could include anything from going to a place of worship, reading a great book, meditating, or being outside in nature (consider tree or beach therapy).
- *Professional self-care* might involve setting boundaries, obtaining continuing education, and finding a support network at your place of employment.

If none of these things appeal to you, you can also consider incorporating self-care that connects to the senses, such as writing in a journal, listening to music, doing artwork, smelling flowers, or having a hot drink. There's no right or wrong way to do self-care, and each person's self-care routine will be as unique as they are.

## Practical Considerations

### Engaging Parents

This curriculum has been designed for a high school audience. The majority of these students live at home with family. We are also aware that some sites may use this curriculum with younger students. In recognition of these facts, we have included some information about how to engage parents in this work.

While sex education can elicit strong opinions in some communities, recent research shows that more than 89% of U.S. parents on both sides of the political aisle support including a wide range of topics in their children's high school education, including puberty, healthy relationships and abstinence. The majority of respondents in this study (75-92% depending on political affiliation) also supported inclusion of information on sexual orientation in high school curricula (Kantor & Levitz, 2017). Evidence suggests that it is a relatively small, though perhaps vocal, group of parents who may oppose the use of a curriculum like *My Rights My Life*.

Our team recommends two main strategies for engaging parents and trying to elicit their support for *MRML* in the classrooms. First, at the beginning of each school year, consider holding a parent launch meeting during the evening after workday hours. At this meeting, present the curriculum, starting with some of the information from the "Research" section of the Introduction of this manual. Starting your presentation with some facts about people with IDD's sexuality, you can address many parent anxieties, and lay the groundwork for the rest of your presentation.

After demonstrating through research why youth with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, highlight the primary curriculum topics in *MRML*. The parent launch meetings can be an excellent opportunity for parents to get to know the class instructors, and to safely ask questions about the curriculum. It is also an opportunity to cover what information would be shared with parents (topics covered in class), and what information will remain confidential (specific stories shared or questions asked by students, unless a mandatory report of abuse is required). Hold these meetings in the evening, based on feedback from parents that this is the easiest time for them to attend. Other options include holding an in-person meeting during the day, scheduling a virtual meeting, or recording an online overview that parents can view on their own time.

A second strategy that can be used for parent engagement is sending home a monthly newsletter electronically and/or in paper copy, depending on parent preferences. Each newsletter should have four key components. First, a monthly calendar informing families of which class topics will be covered on which days. Next, each newsletter should include a more in-depth summary of the class content for that month. The back of the newsletter can feature tips to help students continue practicing healthy

relationship and self-advocacy skills at home, as well as links to resources for further information. Finally, each newsletter should include contact information for the instructors should family members have further questions.

## **Creating Classroom Cultures of Consent**

One of the biggest things you can do to support student understanding of healthy relationships is to create a culture of consent in the classroom. Consent should be practiced every day. In *My Rights My Life* classes, you will teach students that consent means getting someone's permission or asking for their okay to do something, and that there are many times every day that we must ask for and receive consent. Help students think through examples of when they need to get consent: to borrow something from someone, to share what someone else told them, to take a picture of someone or share it online, to touch someone in any way, etc. This everyday practice creates a culture of consent that can further students' understanding of the curriculum and help prepare them to practice healthy relationship skills.

In order for consent to happen, four things need to be true:

1. Both people need to be **thinking clearly**. This means that everyone is awake, and free from the influence of alcohol or drugs.
2. Both people give an **excited yes!** If a person doesn't say anything, or if they seem unsure, this is not an excited yes. For students who use nonverbal communication, an excited yes can be shown through body language, facial expression, communication devices, a thumbs up, nodding the head. Remind students that it is always okay for someone to change their mind, even if they initially said yes to something.
3. There is **no pressure**. No one should be forced or threatened into giving consent.
4. There are **ongoing check-ins** to make sure that both people are still saying yes.

Set the expectation that everybody in the classroom—teachers, assistants, students, and other staff—will ask for consent before touching others, borrowing something, or sharing stories that are not theirs. It is important that students see examples of authority figures such as staff practicing boundaries and consent by asking students before touching them or before providing assistance. "Can I help you get your jacket on? How would you like me to help?" Emphasize to students that they can always say no to anyone who does something that they are not comfortable with or that does not feel right. This practice can help them learn their own boundaries and how to communicate those boundaries to others.

Students also need to learn how to accept no for an answer. While it is normal to feel disappointed when someone says no to something we want, students need to understand that they have to respect the other person's right to tell them no. You can

role play different scenarios when someone asks for consent, and the appropriate ways to respond when someone says no.

You can also strengthen your classroom culture of consent by using a comprehensive informed consent process for *MRML* classes. We recommend that each student receive an outline of class topics and have a chance to ask questions about the curriculum before the classes begin. If they want to participate in the class, they sign a plain-language informed consent document. Students can have the opportunity to opt into and out of individual sessions. In addition, students should always have the right to take a break, or to decide in the moment that they no longer want to participate in *MRML* classes. Never force a student to complete an activity or participate in a lesson that they do not wish to do—this is not consent.

Allowing students to step outside for a few minutes, or even to sit quietly and listen without directly participating in an activity, may increase the student's interest in continuing to be a part of *MRML* classes.

If a student has a legal guardian, that person may need to sign the consent form. You should, however, still get the student's consent to be in the classes, and that student should still be allowed to take breaks from classes as desired. If a legal guardian does not want to provide consent for a student to participate, ask if they are willing to share their concerns with you. You may be able to address those concerns, or find a compromise that would allow the student to at least participate in some *MRML* activities. Ultimately, however, a legal guardian may have the right to remove students from your classes.

## **Making Learning Sustainable**

Each *My Rights My Life* lesson is designed to last about an hour to an hour and a half. While a lot of repetition is built into *MRML* classes throughout the year, one class per week may not be enough for most students to be able to fully understand and apply the healthy relationship and self-advocacy skills from this curriculum.

You may find that you are the first person who has provided students with accessible information on consent and their bodies. Depending on the students' experiences and support needs, this lack of previous education may make it more difficult for them to acquire and maintain healthy relationship skills, including consent and boundaries.

To address this challenge, each week's lesson plan includes tips and suggestions for both a pre-teach lesson and for continuing conversations post-lesson in your classroom. If you work in an external agency providing classes within a school district (for example a disability services provider or a domestic violence/sexual assault center), you can provide pre-teach and post-teach materials to your partners at the school district.

Students' abilities to apply the skills they are learning in *MRML* will be greatly enhanced with these strategies.

You may want to keep the curriculum's Healthy Relationship Toolbox displayed in the classroom throughout the school year, and help students find a variety of ways to practice these tools on a regular basis. For example, you might ask a student to grab the I Statements Tool out of the Toolbox, and practice using an "I" statement to communicate their feelings or boundaries to another student or staff member. The more opportunities you give students to practice these skills throughout the year, both as situations naturally arise and through planned role plays, the greater likelihood that students will be able to fully comprehend *MRML* content.

## **For Disability Services Providers or Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault Centers**

### **Engaging School Districts**

The SAFE Alliance is a nonprofit working to stop abuse for everyone. We serve survivors of sexual assault and exploitation, domestic violence, and child abuse. For this project, the Disability Services Program of SAFE, chose to revise the existing My Rights My Life curriculum for adults 18+. It was helpful to use a curriculum already in use. If you choose to work in school settings, you may want to consider creating a school district workgroup to facilitate the project's success.

### **Policy Considerations**

The relationship and sexuality policies enacted by residential settings for people with disabilities vary widely. If you work in a domestic violence and sexual assault center and are providing classes in a residential setting for youth with disabilities, ask to see the agency policy on resident relationships. It's important to know what kind of relationship behaviors are supported, and what, if any, are forbidden. Some agencies forbid even holding hands. The *My Rights My Life* curriculum was written to empower people with disabilities to advocate for what they want in their relationships. You must recognize, however, that there may be a conflict between what this curriculum teaches and what is allowed in some residential settings. However, you may be able to use the research presented in this facilitator's guide to advocate for residential setting policy changes. As subject matter experts on preventing abuse and sexual assault, you have a responsibility to educate decision makers about how access to healthy relationship education is a protective factor for all people, including those with disabilities.

If you are a residential service provider for youth with disabilities, take this opportunity to review your agency's policy on residents' rights to healthy relationships. Does your agency have a policy on these topic areas? We know that a lack of clear policies creates a lot of confusion for staff, as well as inconsistency in the support provided to residents. This gap may also increase residents' risk for abuse.

## **For Parents**

### **Advocating with Schools**

One way you can support your child's development of healthy relationship skills is by having conversations with your student and school district staff about the types of relationship education the district provides. Ask what types of relationship education may be provided and included in the school's curriculum.

It's also important to ask how relationship education information is made accessible for students with disabilities. If there is no accessible relationship education, you may need to advocate with school leadership for that education to be provided. Research noted in the Introduction section of this guide, could be helpful to you in having these conversations. For additional support, you can contact SAFE Disability Services at [disabilityservices@safeaustin.org](mailto:disabilityservices@safeaustin.org).

### **Support Staff and Residential Settings**

As you and your student are hiring support staff or considering residential housing options, you may want to ask potential staff about any policies they have regarding client rights to relationships. Ask to review their policies. What is the role of support staff in helping people with IDD have healthier and safer relationships? Will paid staff support them in gaining access to any needed education? For more information, see the "Policy Considerations" subsection of "For Disability Service Providers or Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Centers" above.

## Instructions for Using this Manual

*Accessing the curriculum:* All *My Rights My Life (MRML)* curricular materials are on the SAFE website at <https://myrightsmylife.safeaustin.org/>. On this webpage, you will find PowerPoints and Lesson Plans for each of the 16 *MRML* classes. All curriculum materials are available in English and Spanish.

### Content Overview

#### Core Values

Each lesson of the curriculum was written with the following values in mind:

- **Accessibility.** We believe that people with disabilities deserve equal access to information about their bodies, and relationships. We believe that this information should be provided in a way that is fully accessible. And we believe that students with disabilities should see themselves reflected in the visual materials utilized in this curriculum.
- **Safety.** We believe that all people deserve and have the right to participate in relationships that are free from any and all forms of violence and abuse. We seek a future where all relationships are built on trust, respect, safety, equity, and healthy communication. We want people with disabilities to be in meaningful and safer relationships of their choosing, and to know how to get help if anyone ever hurts them.
- **Designed for youth.** We believe that youth have the right to honest, evidence-based, and comprehensive information regarding their bodies, and relationships.
- **LGBTQIA+ inclusion.** We unequivocally support, affirm, and celebrate our LGBTQIA+ students. This curriculum is written to be inclusive of various gender identities and sexual orientations. We have also chosen to use gender neutral language whenever possible. Finally, we believe that LGBTQIA+ students should see themselves reflected in the visual materials utilized in this curriculum.
- **Anti-racism.** We strive to be anti-racist in our work with students, while also acknowledging that we must continue to grow and improve in this area. We believe that students of color should see themselves reflected in the visual materials utilized in this curriculum. In this curriculum, we also strive to address harmful stereotypes related to race and sexuality.
- **Safety at every size.** We believe that people of all body sizes and shapes deserve access to healthy relationships of their choosing. We also believe that students of all body sizes should see themselves reflected in the visual materials utilized in this curriculum.
- **Language access.** All *MRML* materials are available in English and Spanish. For each lesson, we have also included a communication board featuring SymbolStix picture symbols for students who communicate using picture supports.

## Lesson Content Index

	Session Title	Objectives	Important Words
1	Introductions and creating a safe space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learn that <i>My Rights My Life</i> classes explore self-advocacy and healthy relationships.</li> <li>Identify one thing they will learn during <i>My Rights My Life</i> classes.</li> <li>Understand that teachers must get help by calling Adult Protective Services (APS) if students report they are being hurt.</li> </ul>	pronouns, safe space, healthy, relationships, dating, family, friend
2	Feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Name and describe common feelings, including happy, mad, sad, and scared.</li> <li>Identify "I feel" statements as one healthy way to respond to feeling strong emotions.</li> <li>Discuss unhealthy ways to respond to strong feelings.</li> <li>Choose at least one thing they can do to feel better when they are feeling mad, sad, or scared.</li> </ul>	feelings, I statements, nervous, tired, grossed out, hurt
3	Self-Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Define self-advocacy and explore everyday situations when they use self-advocacy.</li> <li>Practice using "I want" and "I need" communication tools.</li> <li>Discuss why self-advocacy is so important in relationships.</li> </ul>	self-advocate, choices, talk, I want, I need
4	Different types of relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognize and name different types of relationships, including family, friends, coworkers, and strangers.</li> <li>Decide what kinds of behaviors are safe or unsafe in different types of relationships.</li> <li>Identify one or two trusted adults who can be contacted if the student ever needs help.</li> </ul>	relationship, friend, family, co-worker, teacher, doctor, neighbor, romantic partner, safe, boundaries

5	Practicing boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn that their feelings can let them know when a boundary is crossed.</li> <li>• Know that they have the right to set their boundary by saying NO! to anyone or anything that crosses their boundary.</li> <li>• Explore ways to get safe if their boundaries are crossed.</li> </ul>	boundaries, cool, not cool, self-advocate, I want, I need, safe
6	Consent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define consent and explore why consent is so crucial for healthy relationships.</li> <li>• Learn the four parts of consent: thinking clearly, exciting yes, no pressure, and check-ins.</li> <li>• Practice asking for consent and respecting the answer.</li> </ul>	consent, ask, awake, sober, excited, pressure, check-in, respect, listen
7	Healthy relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify four foundational components of a healthy relationship: safety, respect, equality, and communication.</li> <li>• Practice using active listening skills in order to facilitate healthy communication.</li> <li>• Explore ways to get help if unhealthy or abusive things happen in a relationship.</li> </ul>	safety, respect, equality, communication, healthy, unhealthy, friend, coworker, support staff, and family
8	Internet safety: catfishing and creating online profiles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand the concept of catfishing, where people pretend to be someone else online.</li> <li>• Explore what information is safe to share online, and what information is too private to share online.</li> <li>• Be introduced to the concept of changing privacy settings on social media sites.</li> </ul>	catfishing, public, private, videogame, social media, email, texting, watch videos
9	Internet safety: cyberbullying and sexting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define self-advocacy and explore everyday situations when they use self-advocacy.</li> </ul>	public, private, cyberbullying, sexting, nude,

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practice using “I want” and “I need” communication tools.</li> <li>• Explore why self-advocacy is so important in relationships.</li> </ul>	block, report, screenshot
<b>10</b>	Gender stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define a stereotype as a statement about a group of people that is not all true.</li> <li>• Debunk common gender stereotypes.</li> <li>• Learn how gender stereotypes can affect relationships and be harmful.</li> </ul>	gender, non-binary, man, woman, pronouns, he, she, they, stereotype
<b>11</b>	Getting to know someone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss safety when meeting new people.</li> <li>• Identify and practice using questions that are okay to ask a person they are just meeting and getting to know for the first time.</li> <li>• Explore how individuals move on the Relationship Map from the outer circle, middle circles, and inner circles of trust (red, yellow, and green circles).</li> </ul>	relationship, romantic partner, friend, stranger, meet, ask, talk, online, public, private
<b>12</b>	Rejection and ending relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practice handling disagreements in relationships in a healthy way using I statements.</li> <li>• Discuss break-ups and rejection in dating relationships.</li> <li>• Explore healthy ways to respond to rejection.</li> </ul>	disagreement, healthy, unhealthy, rejection, break-up, self-care
<b>13</b>	Sexual harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define sexual harassment as unwanted sexual words and touch.</li> <li>• Discuss what sexual harassment looks like at school, at work, and in the community.</li> <li>• Explore what to do if they or someone else experience sexual harassment.</li> </ul>	sexual harassment, catcall, unwanted, touch, talk, school, work, community, suspended, fired
<b>14</b>	Healthy romantic relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review the four foundational components of a healthy</li> </ul>	safety, respect, equality,

		<p>relationship: safety, respect, equality, and communication.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore how these four qualities can be used in romantic relationships.</li> <li>• Synthesize information from all classes thus far by creating their own healthy relationship recipe.</li> </ul>	<p>communication, healthy, unhealthy, recipe, listen</p>
15	<p>Unhealthy relationship behaviors and abuse</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify warning signs that a relationship is becoming unhealthy.</li> <li>• Discuss dangerous behaviors that indicate a relationship is unhealthy.</li> <li>• Define verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, and discuss ways for violence victims to get help.</li> </ul>	<p>healthy, unhealthy, warning sign, dangerous, verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse</p>
16	<p>Leadership for Safer Relationships</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review the main healthy relationship and safer sexuality topics discussed in <i>My Rights My Life</i> classes so far.</li> <li>• Explore ways they can be leaders for healthier relationships in their communities.</li> <li>• Practice speaking on a healthy relationship issue that is important to them.</li> </ul>	<p>leader, advocate, relationship, vote, march, call, email, talk, group</p>

## Logistics

**Support Needs.** The original MRML curriculum has been used with students with a wide range of support needs and communication styles. Each PowerPoint includes an Important Words slide featuring SymbolStix picture symbols. Students can use this slide as a communication board during each class. Communication board use will be most effective if you actively model how to use the board throughout the class session.

Although a wide array of student needs has been anticipated, you may need to make additional adaptations and accommodations to improve the accessibility of this curriculum for students. Thank you for your efforts to help us provide this important information to as many students as possible.

**Physical Materials.** At the end of each lesson plan, you will find templates and instructions for creating the physical materials that accompany this curriculum. It can be helpful to display some materials, such as the Healthy Relationships Toolbox, in

classrooms throughout the year, even outside of normal *MRML* class time. Students have also benefitted from having a binder where they could keep all of their personal *MRML* materials in one place.

**Timing.** This curriculum was designed to be taught about once a week throughout the course of one school semester. Each class will take about an hour to an hour and half to complete, depending on how actively your students participate in discussions and activities. There is a 5-minute brain break built into the middle of each class, but you are welcome to take a longer break, or to break the class itself into shorter sections that are completed throughout the day or week. You know the needs of your class best.

These classes were crafted to be cumulative, and to gradually build knowledge and skills across the semester. *MRML* classes will be most effective if you teach all 16 classes, and you use the pre- and post-teach materials to reinforce and support learning throughout the school year.

## Resources

**amaze.org** has animated videos on a variety of healthy relationship topics. The website has a section for educators with toolkits and lesson plans, all available for free.

**ConnectSafely** is a nonprofit dedicated to educating technology users about safety, privacy, and security online. They have information written for young adults and for parents. Their "Tips and Advice" section includes fact sheets about Internet safety issues. <https://connectsafely.org/>

**King County** in Washington has a 28-week special education curriculum available to download on healthy relationships and safer sexuality. [www.kingcounty.gov/depts/health/locations/family-planning/education/FLASH/special-education.aspx](http://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/health/locations/family-planning/education/FLASH/special-education.aspx)

**Katherine McLaughlin** has developed a curriculum on sexuality of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). The curriculum is available for sale on her website [www.elevatustraining.com/](http://www.elevatustraining.com/). There are also several webinars available on this site.

**Planned Parenthood** has locations throughout Texas and provides affordable healthcare to individuals with and without insurance. There's also a wealth of educational information on its website: [www.plannedparenthood.org](http://www.plannedparenthood.org)

A report from **Multnomah County** on supporting the sexual health of individuals with IDD may be found here: [multco.us/school/sexual-health-youth-developmental-disabilities](http://multco.us/school/sexual-health-youth-developmental-disabilities)

**The Birds and the Bees** provides information about teaching sexuality to individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities. [asdsexed.org/](http://asdsexed.org/)

## About SAFE

The SAFE Alliance is a Central Texas nonprofit working to stop abuse for everyone. SAFE is committed to providing safety, stability, and healing to anyone who has experienced violence and abuse. Locally, we provide housing, support services, and prevention programs to stop the cycle of violence. Globally, we engage in conversations that shape a culture free from violence and abuse. Learn more at [safeaustin.org](https://safeaustin.org)

Since its inception in 1996, Disability Services has been nationally recognized as one of the primary leaders in the domestic and sexual violence prevention and intervention field for providing education and training on topics relating to violence against persons with disabilities. During the past 25+ years, program staff has provided training and education to more than 90,000 people with disabilities, family members, and professionals.

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