# Crossing Boundaries Checklist

## Why It’s Important

Most people with IDD are sexually assaulted or abused by people they know. This could include family members, other people with IDD, and support staff. Often, these people **groom** their victims. They may offer gifts. They may offer friendship which the victim desperately wants. They may even convince their victim that they are a romantic partner.

That is why setting and maintaining clear **boundaries** is important. It helps people with IDD know exactly what the relationship is. They know when something happens that is inappropriate to the relationship.

## Vocabulary

Use these words, pictures, and definitions when you talk about crossing boundaries. Make sure everyone understands what they mean.

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| Grooming |  | When a person plans ahead to harm someone. They might pretend to be a friend or romantic partner. They build trust. They know that a person is less likely to report harm done to them by someone they trust. |
| Boundary |  | The line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. When a person’s behavior is inappropriate for the type of relationship, that person has crossed a boundary. |

*Symbols used/adapted from: www.sclera.be*

## Key Points

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| **Set Ground Rules** | | |
| **✓** | Be clear about your relationship. Tell the person with IDD what type of relationship you have. Be specific. For example, “I’m your personal care attendant. I am here to help you with personal hygiene. We may become friendlier over time, but our relationship will always be professional first.” |
| **✓** | Be clear about how you may need to touch the person. For example, if it is your job to help a person bathe, say “I need to see you and touch you when you are naked. But I will only do that to help you stay clean. And I will only do that if you say it's okay.” |
| **✓** | Define how the person can tell you if you are crossing a boundary. For example, “If I touch you in a way you do not like, say ‘stop’ or hold your hand up. If you cannot tell me, tell \_\_\_ (a trusted person such as a family member, supervisor, or case manager).” |
| **Match Communication to Relationship** | | |
| **✓** | Use a greeting that matches your relationship. For example, if you are working with a client you don’t know well, use their title and last name (Mr. Jones). Or, if you have worked with them for a while or if they tell you it’s okay, use their first name (Jeff). | |
| **✓** | Avoid words that are too familiar or that might not be appropriate to your relationship. For example, many people use the term “sweetie” or “buddy” even for people they do not know. Those words might be confusing to a person with IDD. The person might think you mean that you are sweethearts or that your relationship is closer than it is. | |
| **✓** | Use physical touch that matches your relationship. For example, if you are celebrating someone’s victory, offer a high five rather than a hug. If you ask for a hug and the person does not want one, respect that. | |
| **Be an Ally** | | |
| **✓** | Help people with IDD set healthy boundaries. For example, when new staff join the team, talk openly about their role and expected behavior. “Brian is a new personal care attendant. Would you like him to call you ‘Mr. Jones’ or ‘Jeff?’ He will not help you bathe right away. When you feel comfortable to let him help you that way, tell me.” | |
| **✓** | Watch for others crossing boundaries. If you see something that concerns you, ask the person with IDD. For example, “I saw Angela hug you. Was that OK with you? Would you like support to ask her not to do that?” Or, speak with the other person. For example, “We do not use the word, ‘sweetie.’ It makes relationship boundaries more confusing.” | |
| **✓** | Trust your instincts. Research suggests that people with IDD may be seven to 10 times more likely to experience sexual assault than people without disabilities and that 90% of people with an intellectual disability may experience some type of sexual abuse. If you see someone who might be crossing a boundary, do something about it. | |
| **Have a Plan and Use It** | | |
| **✓** | Crossing boundaries can be an early sign of grooming for sexual assault/abuse. Make sure your organization has a plan for addressing sexual assault/abuse that includes what to do when boundaries are first crossed. The plan should make the person with IDD’s safety and wellness the priority. | |
| **✓** | Communicate the plan to everyone. Include the people with IDD you work with and other staff members. Allow everyone to ask questions and provide input. | |
| **✓** | Follow the plan consistently. Make sure that the person with IDD knows you are following the plan if something happens. | |

## Resources

RAINN: [Your Role in Preventing Sexual Assault](https://www.rainn.org/articles/your-role-preventing-sexual-assault)

NSVRC: [Sexual Assault Response Training Toolkit](https://www.nsvrc.org/sarts/toolkit/6-6), Victim-Centered Approaches

# Caution

Many people with IDD are sexual assault survivors. Some people don’t want others to know. Some do. Some don’t realize they are survivors until they start talking about it. Some survivors are triggered when they talk about sexuality and sexual assault. They relive their trauma. This can be very painful. It can happen unexpectedly.

Talking honestly about sexuality and sexual assault is important. It’s also important to keep everyone safe and supported. Use these guidelines when you talk about sexuality and sexual assault.

## Plan Ahead

* Read these guidelines. Share them with people who will join the discussion.
* Have a safe space ready. That could be a Zoom breakout room. It could be a room or outside space where you are talking. Let people know where it is. Tell them they can use it whenever they need. They do not need to ask for permission.

## Watch for Triggers

* Watch faces and bodies. You might see signs of anger, fear, or sadness.
* A person might start fidgeting. They might get up and try to leave. They might rock or hug their arms to themselves.
* Sometimes, you can’t tell at all from the outside.

## Give Support

* You might see someone struggling. Ask if they need a break.
* Someone might share something personal or upsetting. Use words of comfort and support:

“I believe you.” “You are brave to share this.” “It is not your fault.”

“I care about you.” “I’m sorry this happened to you.” “I am here to help.”

## Follow Up

* Check in after the discussion. Check in more than once.
* Share good resources like:
  + National Sexual Assault Hotline: 800.656.HOPE (4673), [hotline.rain.org](http://online.rainn.org/), [hotline.rainn.org/es](https://www.rainn.org/es) (Spanish)
  + Your local rape crisis center (find it at [centers.rainn.org](https://centers.rainn.org/))
  + Some self-care activities (find some at [rainn.org/articles/self-care-after-trauma](https://rainn.org/articles/self-care-after-trauma))

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