



## Overview

### Summary

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are harmed by sexual assault more often than others. They are usually harmed by someone they know. This can include family members, other people with IDD, and support staff. Yet, people with IDD often struggle to set and keep clear boundaries with the different people in their lives. This confusion can worsen when:

- Others use language and behavior that are inappropriate to their relationship. They may try to convince a person with IDD to cross a boundary.
- A person with IDD wants friendship so much that they ignore safe boundaries. Others may take advantage of this.

Understanding what healthy boundaries look like and how to keep them helps maintain safety. To prevent assault/abuse, we must be aware of and alert to signs of crossed boundaries. We must also know what to do when boundaries are crossed.

You can use this toolkit in many ways.

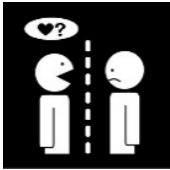

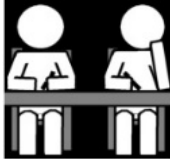

- You can self-pace through its contents to learn on your own.
- Teams can work together in person or remotely for staff development.
- You can share the videos and activities with the self-advocates you work with.



# Safe Boundaries Toolkit



## Vocabulary

Share these words, pictures, and definitions before you begin working with others. Make sure everyone understands what they mean. Revisit the vocabulary before you start each module.

Word	Picture	Definition
Boundary		The line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. When a person's behavior does not match the relationship, that person has crossed a boundary.
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.
Professional Relationship		People who work together. It may include high-fiving or shaking hands. It does not usually include hugging. It never includes kissing, touching each other sexually, or having sex.
Friendly Relationship		Caring friends who support each other. It may include hugging or hand holding. It does not include kissing, touching each other sexually, or having sex.



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Word	Picture	Definition
Romantic Relationship		Beyond friendship. It may include long hugs and kissing. It may lead to a sexual relationship. Both people agree to romantic contact.
Sexual Relationship		Beyond a romantic relationship. It includes touching each other sexually or having sexual intercourse. Both people understand and agree to sexual contact.

Symbols used/adapted from: [www.sclera.be](http://www.sclera.be)



## Trauma-Informed Approach

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 to. 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:



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“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)  
[RAINN Online Hotline-English](https://hotline.rainn.org) (https://hotline.rainn.org)  
[RAINN Online Hotline-Spanish](https://hotline.rainn.org/es) (https://hotline.rainn.org/es)
  - Your local rape crisis center. [Find a list at RAINN](https://centers.rainn.org) (https://centers.rainn.org).
  - Some self-care activities. [Find some at RAINN](https://rainn.org/articles/self-care-after-trauma) (https://rainn.org/articles/self-care-after-trauma)



## **Pacing**

There are three modules in the Safe Boundaries Toolkit. We recommend exploring these resources in three 30-minute sessions.

### **Session 1: What Are Boundaries?**

1. Preview the Video, 5 min.
2. Watch the Video, 5 min.
3. Use the Discussion Guide, 20 min.

### **Session 2: Teaching & Learning Boundaries**

1. Preview the Video, 5 min.
2. Watch the Video, 5 min.
3. Use the Role-Play, 20 min.

### **Session 3: Crossing Boundaries**

1. Preview the Video, 5 min.
2. Watch the Video, 5 min.
3. Use the Checklist, 20 min.



## What Are Boundaries?

### Preview

We all have different boundaries. Some people like physical touch. Some do not. Some people use loving names for everyone. Some only use such names for people they know very well.

Physical touch or loving words that don't match your relationship can be confusing and harmful. They can cause pain to people who have been hurt in the past. They can make people think it's OK to cross boundaries, too. This can create small and large problems.

Talking honestly about our healthy boundaries helps us all. We learn to think or ask before we speak or act. We learn that it's OK to talk about uncomfortable things.

Before you watch the video, review the vocabulary list.

### Watch the Video

- Watch [What Are Boundaries](https://youtu.be/LdZkQufoQOo?si=sD-LbUHbLy-rOiAC) on YouTube.  
(<https://youtu.be/LdZkQufoQOo?si=sD-LbUHbLy-rOiAC>)
- Remember to use the trauma-informed approach described previously.



## Use the Discussion Guide

Work through the discussion questions.

- If you are working alone, reflect on the questions.
- If you are working in a group, discuss them with your peers or the self-advocates you are working with.

Remember to watch for signs of past trauma. Remind participants that it's OK to:

- Take a break.
- Walk away or leave the group.
- Ask to talk with someone privately about what they are feeling.

1. How do your words of affection change with different people in your life?

- What words do you use in your friendly relationships?
- What words do you use in your romantic relationships?

2. How does your physical touch change with different people in your life?

- What forms of touch do you use with your family that you don't use with your friends?
- What forms of touch do you use with your friends that you don't use with people at work or school?

3. Has someone ever used words or touch that crossed your boundary?

- How did it make you feel?
- Do you think they knew they were crossing your boundary?
- Did you feel comfortable telling them they crossed a boundary?





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4. Have you ever used words or touch that crossed a boundary?
  - How did you realize you had done that?
  - What negative consequences did it have?
5. How can you keep from crossing boundaries with people you know?



## Teaching & Learning Boundaries

### Preview

Knowing our own and others' boundaries keeps us safe and healthy. We can make sure the people in our lives treat us with respect. We can recognize people who might mean harm.

We can also keep from crossing the boundaries of others. This helps others feel safe and comfortable with us. It keeps us safe from negative consequences. We all make mistakes. But it's important to fix them in a positive way.

Before you watch the video, review the vocabulary list.

### Watch the Video

- Watch [Teaching Boundaries](https://youtu.be/4TtzqYTS5zI?si=ww2VmwaCU0HZgBNP) on YouTube.  
(<https://youtu.be/4TtzqYTS5zI?si=ww2VmwaCU0HZgBNP>)
- Remember to use the trauma-informed approach described previously.



## Use the Role-Play

Work through the role-plays.

- If you are working alone, reflect on the situations and questions.
- If you are working in a group:
  - Read the role-play aloud if helpful.
  - Do the role-play several times with different volunteers.
  - Then discuss the questions.

Remember to watch for signs of past trauma. Remind participants that it's OK to:

- Take a break.
- Walk away or leave the group.
- Ask to talk with someone privately about what they are feeling.

### ***Role-Play 1: When Someone Crosses Your Boundary***

Service Provider: Hi sweetie! I haven't seen you in a while. Give me a big hug!

Self-Advocate: I don't want a hug.

Service Provider: Now honey, it's just my way. I hug everyone!

Self-Advocate: I'm not OK with that.

Service Provider: Aren't we friends?

Self-Advocate: We are friendly. But we work together. And I don't want a hug.

Please respect my boundary.

Service Provider: I didn't realize. I'll try to do better.



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Self-Advocate: Thank you!

Discussion Questions:

- Has anyone ever asked you for a hug when you did not want one? What did you do or say?
- How do you like to greet friends? Family? People you don't know well?
- What if you don't know how someone wants to be greeted? How can you know for sure?
- Were the self-advocate's words respectful?
- How did the service provider respond to that respect?
- How can role-play help you prepare for situations like this?

### ***Role-Play 2: When You Cross Someone's Boundary***

Self-Advocate: Hi. I'm new to this advocacy group.

Group Member: Hi. Do you have a boyfriend?

Self-Advocate: No...

Group Member: Give me your phone number. I want to text you. I will be your boyfriend.

Self-Advocate: I don't know you. That makes me really uncomfortable.

Group Member: Don't you want to be my girlfriend?

Self-Advocate: I don't think I want to come to this group anymore.

Group Member: Why?

Self-Advocate: You crossed a boundary. I don't feel comfortable here.

Group Member: I'm sorry. I made a mistake. How can I fix it?



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Self-Advocate: Please don't talk about romantic stuff to me.

Group Member: OK. I won't. I'm really sorry.

### Discussion Questions:

- Why did the self-advocate almost leave the group?
- Has anyone ever made you uncomfortable like this?
- Have you ever accidentally made someone else feel uncomfortable?
- Were the self-advocate's words respectful?
- How did the group member respond to that respect?
- How can role-play help you prepare for situations like this?



## Crossing Boundaries

### Preview

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are harmed by sexual assault more often than others. They are usually harmed by someone 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.

Before you watch the video, review the vocabulary list.

### Watch the Video

- Watch *Crossing Boundaries* on YouTube.  
([https://youtu.be/xyZZEVUcgyI?si=h\\_eSfujmZS6e1C-K](https://youtu.be/xyZZEVUcgyI?si=h_eSfujmZS6e1C-K))
- Remember to use the trauma-informed approach described previously.



## Use the Checklist

Work through the checklist.

- If you are working alone, reflect on the checklist items.
- If you are working in a group, discuss them with your peers or the self-advocates you are working with.

Remember to watch for signs of past trauma. Remind participants that it's OK to:

- Take a break.
- Walk away or leave the group.
- Ask to talk with someone privately about what they are feeling.

## Healthy Boundaries Checklist

### 1. Set Ground Rules

- ✓ Be clear about your relationship. Tell the person what type of relationship you have. Be specific. For example, “I’m your personal care attendant (or aide). 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 the use of touch. For example, a person whose job it is to help someone use the toilet may say, “I may need to help you remove your bottoms. But I will only do that to help you to use the toilet. And I will only do that if you say it's okay.”
- ✓ Practice what to say if a boundary is crossed. 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, teacher, or case manager).”



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## 2. Match Communication to Relationship

- ✓ Use a greeting that matches your relationship. For example, if you are working with someone you don't know well, use their title and last name (Mr. Jones). If you have worked with them for a while or if they say 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 or annoying 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.

## 3. Be an Ally

- ✓ Help everyone 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 (or aide). Would you like him to call you 'Mr. Jones' or 'Jeff?' He will not help you use the toilet 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. 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."





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- ✓ 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. It also shows 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.

### 4. Have a Plan and Use It

- ✓ Crossing boundaries can be an early sign of grooming for sexual assault/abuse. Make sure you have a plan for addressing sexual assault/abuse. It should include 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 people with IDD and all people who work with and around them. Allow everyone to ask questions and provide input.
- ✓ Follow the plan consistently. Make sure that everyone knows you are following the plan if something happens.

### 5. Learn more on your own.

- ✓ RAINN: Your Role in Preventing Sexual Assault (<https://rainn.org/articles/your-role-preventing-sexual-assault>)
- ✓ NSVRC: Sexual Assault Response Training Toolkit, Victim-Centered Approaches (<https://www.nsvrc.org/sarts/toolkit/6-6>)



## For More Information

Visit [Seen and Heard: IDD Community](https://www.youtube.com/@SeenHeardIDD)

(<https://www.youtube.com/@SeenHeardIDD>) on YouTube. You will find more videos about this topic. You will find videos about related topics.

## Credit

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