



Disability & Healthy Relationships ECHO Summary

Date: 10/8/2026

Topic: Understanding Sexual Violence and Lived Experiences: Research to Practice

Presenter: Dr. Lynne Tomasa, Celina Urquidez, & Gina Griffiths (University of Arizona)

Presentation Summary: The presentation traced how Arizona's "Untold Stories" research on sexual violence and lived experiences of people with disabilities informed the "From Silence to Safety" initiative. Presenters described efforts to raise awareness, create accessible resources, train professionals, and teach healthy relationships, while Arizona's statewide network coordinates prevention and response across criminal justice, schools, and tribal communities.

Community Questions & Responses:

1. **What messaging (implicit or explicit) did you receive around domestic or sexual violence throughout your life?**
 - Not a lot in some generations; parents just didn't talk about it (true pre-90s especially), much different for the current generation's broader conversation around consent
 - Domestic violence was framed as a "private family matter"; need to be a "good wife," etc., and not make the abuser angry
 - Shifting messages about marriage, equality, respect; basic messaging for little kids like "hug so-and-so" is shifting toward telling them they have a choice and don't have to do anything they're uncomfortable with
 - Messaging framed it as only happening to women; male survivors rarely talked about
 - "Stranger danger" narrative dominated (reinforced by TV/movies); less about close relationships, when data shows most perpetrators are known to the victim, and anything within the family or relationships was treated as a private matter
 - Victim-blaming baked into how people talked about it, like "what were you wearing," "were you drinking"
2. **What messages do you think people with disabilities receive about domestic and sexual violence?**
 - A gray area: how do we teach an individual about what they want vs. what someone else wants
 - Cultural pressure to be quiet, be respectful, not ask questions, not question authority/caregivers
 - Training clinicians: providers get uneasy asking about sensitive topics (suicide, harm, sexual relations)



- Don't get a lot of information in general ("you can't have a relationship," "you don't need to know about this")
 - Other people making choices for people with a disability; lack of choice in daily life, emphasis on compliance
 - Desexualization: people with disabilities often left out of conversations about sex, relationships, and consent entirely
 - Assault treated as near normal or expected in some settings (e.g., deaf student community), going underreported as a result
 - Consent vs. compliance tension: lifelong compliance training blurs the line with genuine consent
 - Organizations (universities, group homes, foster systems) avoid the topic out of liability fear, leading to either silence or rigid lockdown control instead of real education
 - University of Cincinnati's TAP program as a counterexample: shifted from strict control to actively teaching healthy relationships and sexuality education, reportedly working better
 - Underreporting flagged as a major issue internationally (India), specifically for disabled people and children
- 3. How do these messages impact how or if people seek support? How do they impact how we engage across systems and with individuals?**
- It's especially challenging for a person with a disability when they've been conditioned to trust authority figures/caregivers, who may be the ones causing harm
 - Inconsistency across systems is itself a major barrier
 - Secrecy and adult discomfort around the topic actively discourage disclosure
 - Mobile advocacy (meeting people at libraries, health departments, coffee shops instead of requiring office visits) raised as a way to improve access
 - "Stewards of the Children" model referenced: normalizing the conversation early (proper terminology, good touch/bad touch) as itself protective
- 4. What positive messages need to be received and how could this shift our response and ability to prevent violence at a systemic level?**
- As a society, we need to stop avoiding these topics. Ask "what do you want?"
 - Practice having and reframing these conversations, and model speaking up by giving examples of what to do