



Understanding the 'Vulnerability' of People with Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities to Sexual Violence from a **New Lens**

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Webinar developed & presented by Nancy M. Fitzsimons, PhD, MSW, LISW
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Welcome to the webinar: Understanding the 'vulnerability' of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to sexual violence from a new lens. My name is Nancy Fitzsimons and I will be your instructor for this training.

Presenter note: The intended audience for this training is SVC advocates, The Arc GTC Program Office, and The Arc GTC VV Director through Managers

Webinar Objectives



Understand ableism increases risk for sexual violence.

Understand why people with an intellectual and developmental disability are more 'vulnerable' to sexual violence.

Identify barriers that perpetuate sexual violence.

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There are three objectives for the webinar.

First, understand ableism increases risk for sexual violence.

Second, understand why people with an intellectual and developmental disability are more 'vulnerable' to sexual violence.

And third, identify barriers that perpetuate sexual violence.

Overview of Webinar



1

PART

- UNDERSTANDING 'DISABILITY' & 'VULNERABILITY' TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE
- SIZE OF THE PROBLEM
- INDIVIDUAL-MEDICAL MODEL
- ABLEISM

2

PART

- THINKING ABOUT DISABILITY IN A DIFFERENT WAY
- SOCIAL MODEL
- ECOLOGICAL MODEL

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The webinar is broken into two parts.

Part 1 focuses on understanding the problem of sexual violence perpetrated against people with intellectual and developmental disabilities from a 'people-with-a-disability' problem rooted in ableism.

Part 2 focuses on changing how we think about disability and changing how we think about vulnerability to sexual violence. The social model of disability and the ecological model of vulnerability will be explained.

Barriers to safety will be discussed throughout the webinar.

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PART

- UNDERSTANDING 'DISABILITY' & 'VULNERABILITY' TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE
- Size of the Problem
- Individual-Medical Model
- Ableism

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Part 1 of the webinar focuses on understanding the problem of sexual violence perpetrated against people with intellectual and developmental disabilities from a 'people-with-a-disability' problem rooted in ableism. As we go through the information it will become clearer what a "individual' or 'people-with-a-disability' problem means AND how this perspective increases 'vulnerability'. You may be familiar with the term "vulnerable adult", but we are talking about something different today. The state of Minnesota labels some people with disabilities as "vulnerable" to describe the services and extra protection they get. We are talking about vulnerability in a new way today.

First, let's think about the size of the problem.

The Size of the Problem: National Crime Victimization Survey



Violence against people with disabilities is at least **2 times** the rate for people without disabilities.

- The rate of serious violent crime was more than **3 times** the rate for people without disabilities.
- People with **cognitive disabilities** had the **highest rates** of crime and assault.
 - Males – more than 3 times
 - Females – more than 5 times

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The National Crime Victimization survey is really good research and it is supported by many other smaller research studies conducted throughout the U.S.


Every year the rate of violent victimization against people with disabilities was at least **2 times** the rate for people without disabilities.

- The rate of serious violent crime (**rape or sexual assault**, robbery, and aggravated assault was more than **3 times** the rate for people without disabilities)
- People with **cognitive disabilities** had the **highest rates** of violent crime victimization among all people with disabilities
 - The rate of violent victimization for **men with cognitive disabilities** was **3 times the rate** for men without disabilities.
 - For **women with cognitive disabilities**, the rate was **more than 5 times** the rate for women without disabilities.

These rates are likely even higher given that people who live in institutional settings (like nursing homes) are not included in the study. People who live in group homes, where many adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities live, are most


likely under-represented.

The 'Individual-is-the-Problem' Ways of Thinking about Disability




Moral

- Disability is evil
- People are bad and the disability is punishment



Triumphant

- Disability is tragedy
- People are heroes for their achievements "in spite of their disabilities"



Medical

- People are sick, damaged, broken
- Disability is a problem that must be fixed
- Professionals know best

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In order to understand the 'vulnerability' to being a victim/survivor of sexual violence, it is important to know the ways that people with disabilities have been viewed in the past, and still to this day, that perpetuate negative beliefs and create barriers.

The three 'ways of thinking about disability' all focus on the individual or person in a negative way.

In the gold box is an explanation of the moral model way of thinking. In this way of thinking, disability is that same thing as sin or evil. People with disabilities are suffering or being punished for someone's bad behavior, either their own or a family member's bad behavior. This is the earliest known way in which people with disabilities were viewed in society.

The orange box in the middle is the triumphant or resilient explanation that views having a disability as a personal tragedy that people must try hard to overcome. People without disabilities may be in awe or impressed by the achievements of a person with a disability – but they still view disability in a negative way.

The last way of thinking explained in the blue box – the medical model – is the most

widespread way of thinking about disability today.

- People are seen as sick, damaged, or broken.
- Disability is a problem that must be fixed.
- Professionals know best

Most of our policies and services, past and present, for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities come from this medical model way of thinking, this includes the term “vulnerable adult” that I mentioned before. Many of the laws and protections the state has for people with disabilities are based on this medical way of thinking.

The 'Individual-is-the-Problem' Ways of Thinking About Disability: Rooted in Ableism



Discrimination against people with disabilities.

Always a child

Someone to feel sorry for

A threat to society

Sick and suffering

A burden to society

Ugly, unattractive, nonsexual

Incompetent

Freaks, oddities

Prejudicial Beliefs & Attitudes



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All three of the 'individual' or 'person-is-the-problem' ways of thinking about disability are rooted in ableism.

Ableism is discrimination against people with disabilities.

Ableism begins with the belief that **because** people with disabilities are not 'typical' of the nondisabled majority, they are inferior, or not as worthy as others. There are many prejudicial beliefs and attitudes that contribute to Ableism.

Let's review some of the beliefs. The language may seem harsh, but that is because the beliefs and attitudes are harsh – they are very damaging and **hurtful** to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Always a Child: People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are viewed and treated as children regardless of age.

Someone to feel sorry for: People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are viewed as people no one would envy; people no one would want to be.

Menace or Threat to Society: People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are seen as people to be feared and to be protected from.

Sick and suffering: People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are seen as people who are sick and suffering, so they must be taken care of. They do not work or live productive lives. They are expected to be passive recipients of treatment and services.

A Burden to Society: The difference in brain and body functioning is seen as not normal and their “specialness” requires accommodations that are costly to society.

Ugly, unattractive, and Sexless: People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are viewed as damaged people, therefore not beautiful, not attractive or sexy, and seen as asexual – not interested in sexual activity or intimacy.

Incompetent or having no life skills: The assumption made about people with intellectual and developmental disabilities by others is that they are incompetent AND this view of incompetence is based upon nondisabled people's perception of “disability”.

Freaks, oddities: People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are seen as spectacles to gawk at, laugh at, condemn, and to bully.

The 'Individual-is-the-Problem' Ways of Thinking About Disability: Rooted in Ableism



Ableism perpetuates oppression.



Source: <http://www.advocations.org/working-definition-disability/>

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Ableism isn't just about beliefs or attitudes. Rather, it is the beliefs and attitudes that result in discrimination, segregation, social isolation, and unfair social & economic policies. That means that people with disabilities are not treated equal to people without disabilities. This limits opportunities to be fully part of our society.

From a traditional or 'individual is the problem' way of thinking – people with disabilities are the problem. People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are expected to be passive recipients of services aimed at curing or at least managing the 'impairment'. Services are best provided by many different professionals, often in separate 'special' settings.

The 'Individual-is-the-Problem' Ways of Thinking About Disability: Understanding 'Vulnerability'

Examples of Personal Attributes

Assuming disability is a 'vulnerability' (Fineman, 2008).

Vulnerability is associated with personal attributes. Those personal attributes are the result of individual impairment in how the brain and/or body functions.

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The 'individual-is-the-problem' way of thinking has led to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities being presumed to be 'vulnerable' because of individual 'impairment' or differences in how their brain or body works. "Individual impairment" is also called **personal attributes or personal characteristics**.

From this way of thinking, the vulnerability to sexual violence is **because of personal characteristics, such as:**

- Needing help with activities of daily living
- Less able to assess risk
- Less able to physically defend against an attack
- Having impaired communication.
- Having cognitive or thinking and learning 'deficits'

This way of thinking about vulnerability holds the person responsible for their own victimization.

The 'Individual-is-the-Problem' Ways of Thinking About Disability: Understanding 'Vulnerability'

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On the left hand side of the slide are 4 more personal characteristics or attributes that are believed to make people with intellectual and developmental disabilities vulnerable to sexual violence.

The problem with this way of thinking about 'vulnerability' is that it ignores that most of the 'personal characteristics' are not, fixed characteristics of the person, they are not born with these characteristics but learn them. Most of the characteristics that are believed to make people with intellectual and developmental disabilities more vulnerable are a direct result of opportunities and experiences – or the lack of knowledge, opportunities and experiences – **under the power and control of other people**, such as parents and other family members, teachers, therapists, case managers, and others.

Let's examine each of the 4 personal characteristics believed to make people more vulnerable.

- **Learned Helplessness:** People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are not born 'helpless'. Rather, people learn to be helpless as a direct result of how they are treated by others.

- **Learned Compliance:** People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are not born agreeing with people or following directions anyone gives. Rather, people learn to be compliant because they are trained to be compliant, expected to be compliant, and are often punished for not doing what they are told.
- **Desire to Please Others:** People with intellectual and developmental disabilities may be more compliant, out of a desire to please others, because they want to be included, accepted, and liked by others in a society that often excludes and belittles them.
- **Underdeveloped Personal Boundaries:** People with intellectual and developmental disabilities may not have a sense of personal boundaries because their personal boundaries are repeatedly being broken by others.

All of these reasons for increased vulnerability occur **IN RELATIONSHIP** with other people in the places where they live, learn, work, play and worship.

Furthermore, none of these personal characteristics are the cause of sexual violence. **Perpetrators of sexual violence are the CAUSE and must be held accountable.**

2

PART

- RE-THINKING DISABILITY & 'VULNERABILITY' TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE
- Social Model
- Ecological Model

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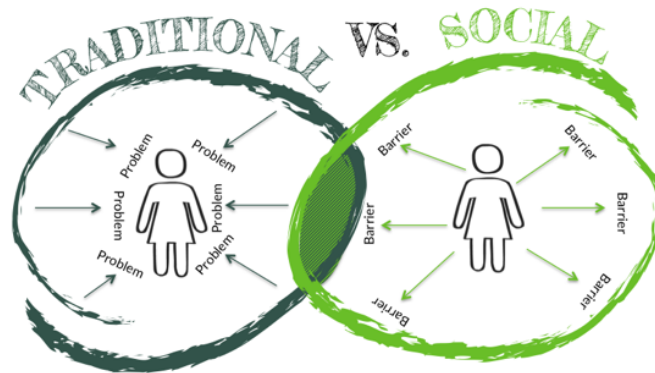
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So far, we have begun to re-think the problem by recognizing that the people in relationships with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are directly involved and responsible for much of the increased vulnerability.

In this last part of the training we will continue our journey of re-thinking 'disability' to a social model way of thinking AND re-thinking 'vulnerability' to sexual violence using the Ecological Model – sometimes called the socio-ecological model. The ecological model is a way of looking at the causes of a problem from different parts of the world we live in, including our own personalities, the people who we know, the places where we live, and the society around us.

The Social Model of Disability Rooted in Empowerment



Source: <http://www.advocations.org/working-definition-disability/>

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The Social Model of Disability is also called the Liberation Model or the Civil Rights Model of disability.

The 'social-model-of-disability-way-of-thinking' about disability grew out of the Disability Rights Movement of advocates and allies fighting for their rights.

As the picture in bright Green shows, from the 'social-model-way-of-thinking', the disadvantage of 'disability' is not differences in how the brain or body works. Rather, it is societal barriers, whether physical, programs, policy, or attitudes, that have the biggest impact for people with disabilities.

From the Social Model perspective, people with disabilities are **empowered advocates and activists, working with allies, together, working for equality**. Allies share **power with**, not power over people with disabilities.

Re-Framing Vulnerability to Sexual Violence: The Ecological Model

Society Culture, norms, laws and the media

Environment Where people learn, work and play

Relationships

Individual Characteristics + knowledge, skills, opportunities and experiences

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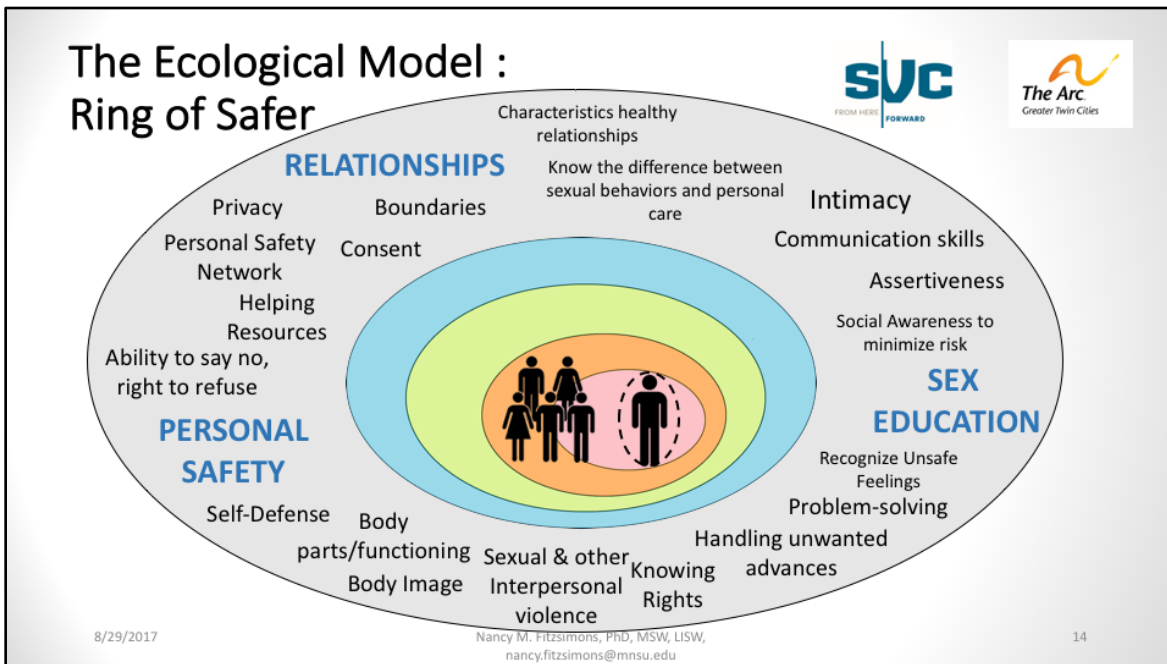
This is the **Ecological Model of Risk to Sexual Violence**.

[Note: Use the pointer to point to each part of the model as it is explained.]

The model shows the many forces impacting our lives

- The **individual** – consisting of personal characteristics or attributes AND knowledge and skills;
- **In relationship** with people within the immediate **home**;
- Within the **larger environment** where people live, learn, work, play and worship;
- And within the larger **society** made up of the culture, norms, laws, the media.

The next 4 slides will explain each part of the model.



[Note: Use the pointer while explaining.]

In the middle of the picture is the Ecological Model of Risk to Sexual Violence. We are going to examine the very center of the picture that **focuses on the Individual**.

The **VULNERABILITY** associated with the individual are **PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES OR CHARACTERISTICS** combined with **knowledge, skills, opportunities, and experiences**.

We know that most of characteristics that are believed to make people with intellectual and developmental disabilities more vulnerable are a direct result of the lack of knowledge, skills, opportunities and experiences – under the power and control of other people.

Risk reduction-related knowledge and skills can help a people with intellectual and developmental disabilities reduce their own risk or vulnerability to sexual violence – also known as **creating a RING OF SAFER**.

The Ring of Safer shows what a comprehensive approach to risk reduction would look

like. Written in blue are the three of the main ways to empower people to reduce their own risk.

- **Sex Education** includes information about body parts & functioning, distinguishing sexual behaviors from personal care, and sexual intercourse and other sexual behaviors
- **Relationships** includes information about characteristics of healthy, mutually respectful relationships; boundaries; consent, assertiveness, and communication skills
- **Personal Safety** includes information and skills in self-defense, recognizing unsafe feelings, being aware of unsafe situation, and handling unwanted attention or sexual advances.

In the next two slides we will examine two specific skills that are part of the Ring of Safer.

Ecological Model: Creating a Ring of Safer The Power of Knowing Words



“A young woman attempted to report sexual [assault] by saying she had a stomach ache. She had no language for her genitalia and the body part closest to her genitals that she could name was her stomach. She attempted to tell for a year that she had been hurt. On her first introduction to the word ‘vagina’ she was able to clarify what she had meant and clearly report what had happened to her” (Hingsburger, 1994, p. 73).

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The first example from the Ring of Safer is the power of knowing words.

The importance of knowing words should not be underestimated – including the names for genitalia and other body parts.

“A young woman attempted to report sexual [assault] by saying she had a stomach ache. She had no language for her genitalia and the body part closest to her genitals that she could name was her stomach. She attempted to tell for a year that she had been hurt. On her first introduction to the word ‘vagina’ she was able to clarify what she had meant and clearly report what had happened to her” (Hingsburger, 1994, p. 73).

This young woman knew that what happened to her wasn't right. She tried to report the sexual assault. While there are likely many other red flags that went unnoticed, had she been given the power of knowing the words for her genitalia and the perpetrators genitalia, she would not have had to suffer in silence for an entire year. The perpetrator could have sooner been held accountable.

Ecological Model: Creating a Ring of Safer The Right and Ability to Non-comply



“Saying ‘no!’ conveys to the perpetrator that the person knows the rules. A person who understands the rules can report when the rules have been broken. This is a person [less likely] to be trifled with” (Hingsburger, 1994, p. 75).

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The second example from the Ring of Safer is the right and ability to non-comply, or to say ‘no.’

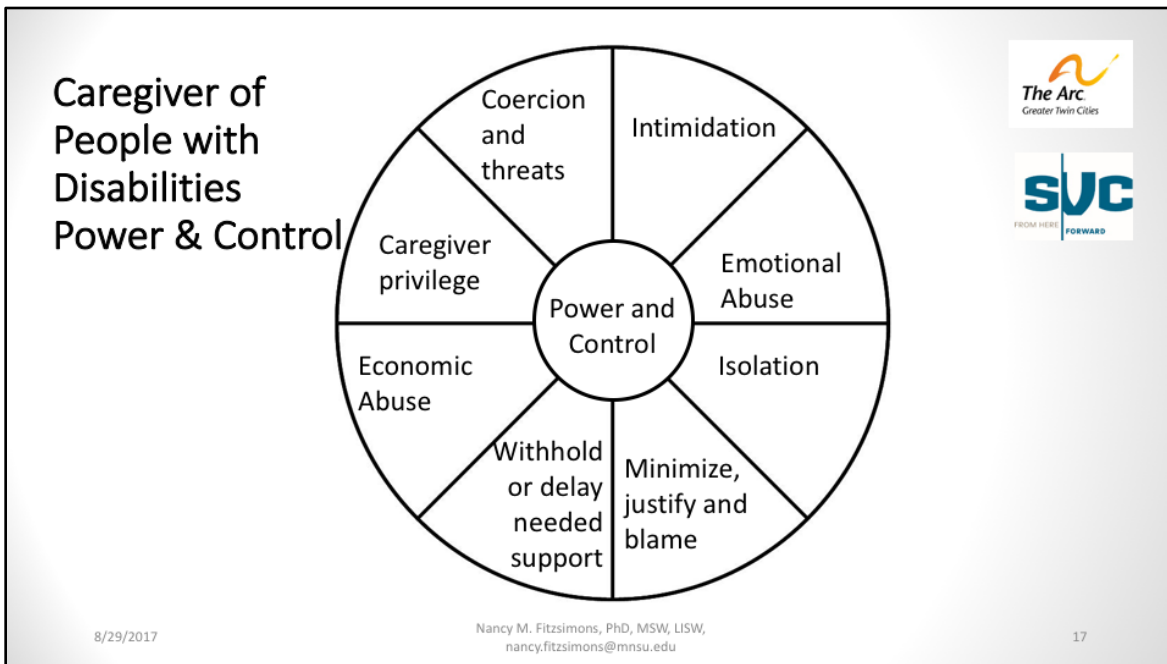
The right and ability to non-comply, also known as the right to refuse, is about giving people choices, teaching assertiveness skills, and, **most importantly**, honoring the choices and preferences of people in all of the everyday decisions and activities of life.

“Saying ‘no!’ conveys to the perpetrator that the person knows the rules. A person who understands the rules can report when the rules have been broken. This is a person [less likely] to be trifled with” (Hingsburger, 1994, p. 75).

We should not expect people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to know that they have the right to say ‘no’, when their ‘no’ is routinely ignored by others.

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities need knowledge and skills and ‘real-life’ opportunities to learn and practice throughout their lifetime. Tragically, too many people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are denied this

comprehensive array of vital risk reduction knowledge and skills – if any knowledge and skills at all.



Refer to your copy of the Caregiver of People with Disabilities Power and Control Wheel for this slide.

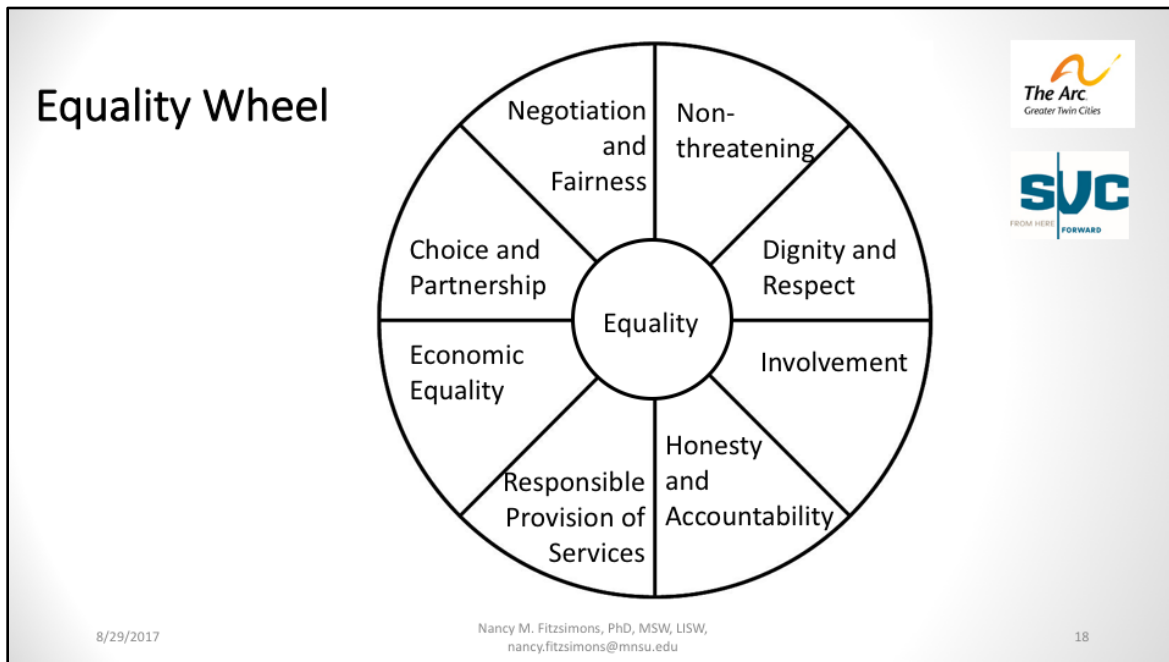
This slide is about relationships. This includes relationships with all people in someone’s social network, including other people in the home and people we know where we learn, work, play and worship.

The picture is the **Caregiver of People with Disabilities Power & Control Wheel**. The wheel shows what a relationship between people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and the other people involved in their lives, including family members and people paid to provide support, looks like when it is based upon **POWER and CONTROL OVER** people with disabilities.

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities are more vulnerable to physical and SEXUAL violence when other people in their lives use the Power and Control Tactics of:

- Intimidation
- Emotional abuse
- Isolation

- **Minimizing** pain or abuse. **Justifying** abuse as necessary or part of behavioral management. And **blaming** the disability for the abuse.
- Withholding, misusing or delaying needed supports
- Economic abuse, like stealing or controlling the person's money
- Coercion and threats
- And **caregiver privilege**, including treating the person like a child, denying privacy, denying opportunities for learning and growth, and **ignoring the person's preferences, wishes, and choices IN FAVOR OF THEIR OWN.**



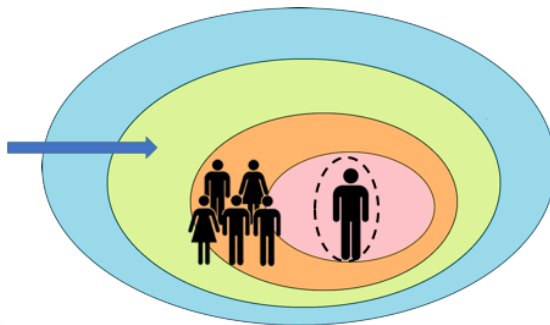
Refer to you copy of the Caregiver of People with Disabilities Equality Wheel.

This is a picture of the equality wheel. Vulnerability to sexual violence is reduced when the other people in the lives of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities value, uphold, and regularly practice the qualities of **equality and respect**.

This includes:

- Fairness
- Non-threatening behavior
- Dignity and Respect
- Involvement in decision making and other activities
- Honesty and accountability
- Responsible provision of services
- Economic equality
- And, Choice and partnership

Ecological Model: Environment-Based Vulnerability



Separate classrooms and work

People with high support needs are grouped together

People are taught to do what they are told

Call abuse 'treatment' or 'behavioral intervention' to make it okay

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The blue arrow is pointing to the **Environment ring** of the Ecological Model that focuses on **Environment-Based barriers** that add to vulnerability.

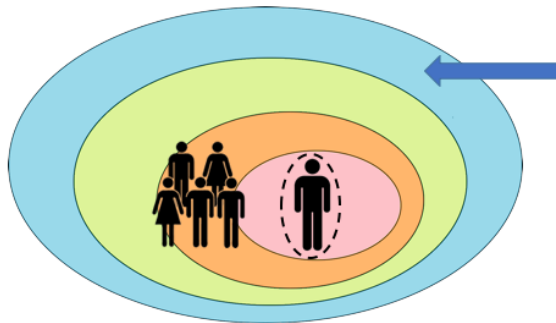
Environment-based barriers means the places where people learn, work, play and worship. The 'people' in these places influence and are influenced by the policies, practices, and attitudes that exist within each environment.

The qualities and characteristics of places that contribute to increased vulnerability include;

- Places where people are segregated or separated from mainstream helping environments, where disempowering practice can flourish, & where discovery is less likely to occur.
- Places that emphasize 'power and control over', teach and reinforce compliance, & group together people with the high support needs.
- Places that justify controlling, dehumanizing, and abusive practice by calling the practices 'treatment' or 'behavioral intervention'.
- Places that have a closed culture, where few 'outsider' come 'inside' and engage in a prolonged or meaningful way with people with intellectual and developmental

disabilities.

Ecological Model: Society & Culture-Based Vulnerability



Abuse is treated 'different'

Lack of funding and enforcement of federal and state civil rights laws

Separate systems of education, work, housing, and services

'Special', rather than mainstream services and system.

Restrictive guardianship practices

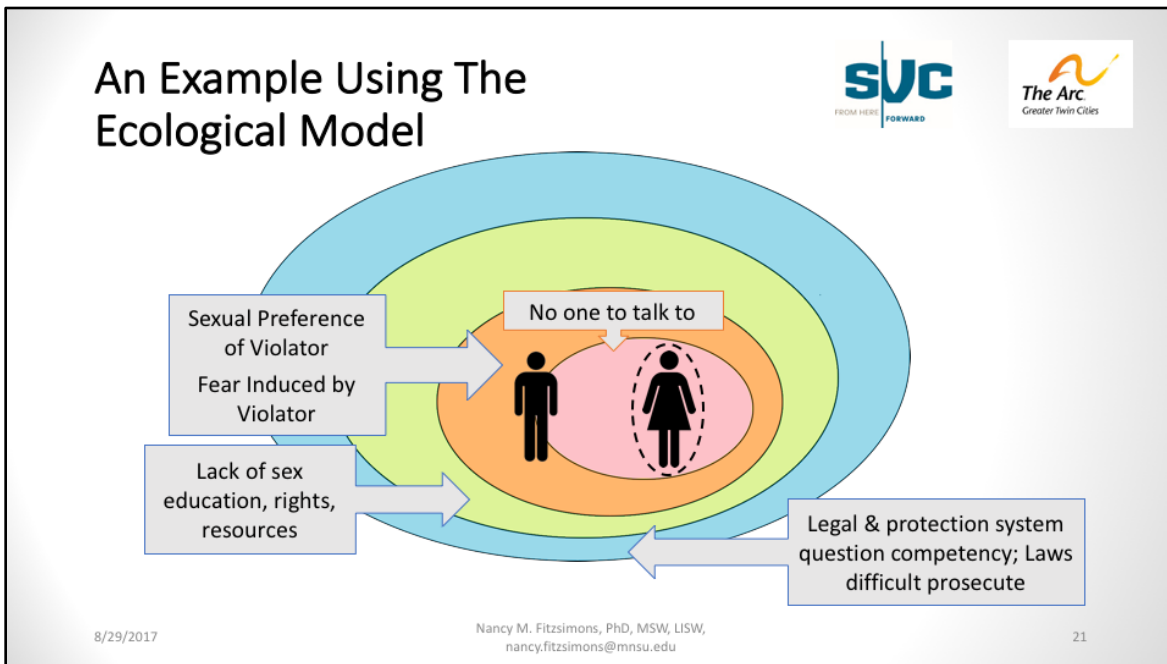
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The outer-most ring of the Ecological Model, the blue ring, focuses on **Society and Culture-Based** barriers that contribute to vulnerability. The qualities and characteristics of society and culture-based vulnerability include:

- Sexual violence and other victimization perpetrated against people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, generally classified as crimes, are viewed as 'abuses' better responded to by licensing and/or protective systems – if at all.
- Lack of funding and enforcement of federal and state civil rights laws, including the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Laws, policies, and practices that favor and support institutional & segregated systems of education, work, housing, and services AND track people into 'special', rather than inclusive services and system.
- Laws, policies, and practices that disempower people with disabilities, such as restrictive guardianship practices.



It should be clear to you by now that the ‘individual-is-the-problem’ way of thinking about disability AND vulnerability is the REAL PROBLEM. However, in case you are still a little unclear, let’s walk through an example.

On the slide you see the five rings that make up the Ecological Model of Risk of Sexual Violence.

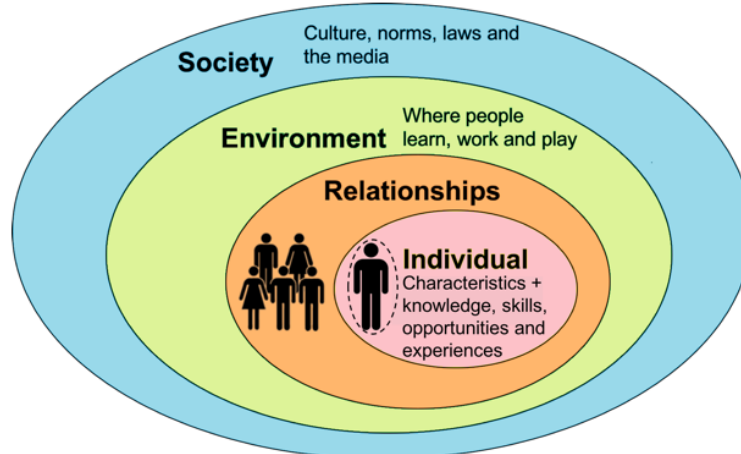
- The smallest ring in the middle with the dashed line represents the **personal attributes or characteristics** of the individual. In our example the person is a woman, let’s call her Mary. Mary has a intellectual disability resulting in a ‘mild’ cognitive impairment based upon ‘intelligence testing’. This means that with the right educational opportunities, accommodation, and supports, Mary has a lot of human potential.

- The next ring, the pink ring, **represents the knowledge, skills and opportunities** given [or not] given to Mary. Because Mary has lived a very sheltered and protected life. She has very little knowledge and skills in ways to reduce her risk, she has “learned helplessness”, and lacks confidence in herself.
- The orange ring is the **relationship-ring**. Any person in Mary’s life is a potential perpetrator of sexual violence. People who are in a position of authority can pose more of a risk if they choose to use their authority to gain power and control.
 - In Mary’s situation, her work supervisor at her vocational program is using his position to isolate Mary away from anyone else and pressure her into having sex. He is using threats of never letting her get ‘a job in the community’ to keep her quiet.
 - Mary doesn’t know what to do, and because she is afraid she might get into trouble, she doesn’t know who it is safe to talk to.
- The green ring focuses on the **environment**. We know that increased risk is associated with isolation, having multiple and ever-changing caregivers, and grouping people with more support needs.
 - Mary did not have sex education in school or by her parents.
 - Her vocational program did not give information about sexual harassment, bullying, or other workplace violence.
 - Mary doesn’t know about her rights.
 - She also doesn’t know where to report or where she could go for help.
- The blue ring is the **society and culture-based vulnerability**. Vulnerability is increased in societies that presume people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are protected from victimization by Adult Protection laws. Vulnerability is increased when there is a lack of will and resources to take a comprehensive Ecological Model approach to sexual violence prevention.
 - If Mary tells someone, or if someone else finds out about the sexual violence, Mary will not have total control of what happens next.

- If Mary tells someone, she might not be believed.
- If Mary's work supervisor is someone who is well liked and respected, people may believe him over Mary.
- Mary's credibility and competency will likely be questioned by both adult protection services and law enforcement. They might think that she is lying. They might think that she doesn't know or remember what happened. Her believability or credibility will be questioned based on her diagnosis or label of 'intellectual disability' AND because she did not report right away.
- Even if she is viewed as 'credible', the perpetrator probably won't be held criminally accountable because of many legal system-based biases and barriers.

These are just some of the many relationship, environment, and society and culture-based barriers that Mary and other people with intellectual and developmental disabilities face every day.

Re-Framing Vulnerability to Sexual Violence: The Ecological Model



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The ultimate goal of this webinar is to provide you with a new lens for understanding 'disability' AND for understanding 'vulnerability' to sexual violence. When we understand 'vulnerability' from the Ecological Model, we rightfully change our focus away from 'the-person-in-is-the-problem' way of thinking to understanding 'vulnerability as:

- A combination of the INDIVIDUAL's personal attributes & knowledge and skills—in RELATIONSHIP with people within the immediate 'home' environment—within the larger ENVIRONMENT where people live, learn, work, play, and worship; and within the larger SOCIETY.

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This slide shows the references used throughout today's presentation. You might want to access some of these references to learn more.



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We would like to thank the Office on Violence Against Women for their support of this project through Accessing Safety in Hennepin County.

Accessing Safety in Hennepin County



Vision Services that are accessible, person-centered, and trauma-informed.

Victim/survivors are believed, empowered, and supported.

Agencies working to change the current system that does not treat everyone equally.

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This training is part of a comprehensive plan to improve how The Arc Greater Twin Cities and The Sexual Violence Center support victim/survivors with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

On the slide is the vision of Accessing of Safety in Hennepin County. The collaboration of the agencies will improve how we support victim/survivors with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We will work together to provide services that respect and empower victims. We will help victims get the skills and resources they need to heal.

As staff and volunteers, your passion, commitment and skills are critical to move this effort forward to provide the best possible services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who have been affected by sexual violence.

Final Thoughts from a **New Lens**



PROGRESS
is IMPOSSIBLE
WITHOUT CHANGE,
& those who cannot
CHANGE THEIR *minds*
CANNOT
CHANGE *Anything.*[®]

- George Bernard Shaw

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Let me leave you with one final thought. “Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything.”

The Arc Greater Twin Cities and The Sexual Violence Center are making changes to better support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities who experience sexual violence, but change cannot happen without you. I encourage you to re-think disability and vulnerability in your own work.