



How Can Daniel Find a Girlfriend?

by Linda L. Cooper

Daniel was in tears. Rubbing his eyes, he hoped I'd think it was his hay fever. But these were genuine tears - tears of frustration, of impotence, of helplessness.

At 24, Daniel is tall, athletic, attractive, with dark hair and a winning smile. The only thing that doesn't seem right, that indicates he is different, is his posture. He is so stooped that sometimes it is hard to see his face. Daniel is retarded, labeled developmentally disabled. He takes part in a state-financed adult learning program.

The police had just left the center. They had come to talk to Daniel. He had made a nuisance of himself again, approaching girls, asking for their phone numbers and following them around. In the past, when some girl took pity on Daniel and gave him her phone number, he would call the number persistently for days, until everyone involved scolded him severely to get him to stop.

Daniel said nothing to the police. He just looked sullen and defensive and scuffed the rug with his toe. I told the officer: "We're aware of Daniel's behavior. I think we are making progress, but you must understand progress will be slow. It'll take time."

After the police left, Daniel and I had a talk, or more correctly, I talked and Daniel fidgeted. I asked him: "What were you doing, Daniel? Why were you bothering the girls? When they asked you to go away, why didn't you?" He just ducked his head, shrugged his shoulders and kept throwing his ball, hard, into his baseball mitt.

"I want a girlfriend. Find me a girlfriend," he mumbled finally. He sees couples everywhere, on television, commercials, and billboards, in homes and movie theatres, everywhere the sexes are paired. He doesn't really understand his

sexual desires. He can't comprehend the urges that beset his mind and body. All he knows is that he wants something and everybody else seems to have it.

What do I do with a retarded young man who wants a girlfriend? I talk about not going off with strangers. I explain to him about the parts of his body. I tell him about sexually transmitted diseases. I tell him that sex should be more than a physical act; it should be love and caring for another person. I talk about sexual preferences. I talk about the sexual act. Does he understand? Yes, I think so, but that does not find him a girlfriend. He

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has as much right to a girlfriend as any of us have a right to a significant other.

The sexuality of the developmentally disabled is often regarded as a Pandora's box. If it is opened, it will loose untold evils. But consider: Our society tries to ensure the rights of people, including developmentally disabled people, who can be — and by law are allowed to be — sexually active. They can love, they can marry and have children (who may be of normal intelligence). With proper education about birth control, medical check-ups, and acceptable behavior, the developmentally disabled adult should cause no additional burden on society.

The human sex drive is instinctual, no different from that of any other living creature. Many of us with average intelligence sometimes have difficulty expressing our sexual frustrations rationally.

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He does not understand social niceties. He does not know how to carry on a conversation, the give-and-take of response and answer. If he gets bored with a task, he simply wanders off and finds something else more to his liking. If I insist he complete a job that doesn't interest him, he becomes stubborn and is suddenly beset by physical pains. He seems more like a 13-year-old boy than a 24-year-old man.

Daniel has a life outside the center. He goes to dances sponsored by various organizations for the handicapped. He attends camp run by a Catholic outreach program. He goes with his parents to the seashore and Florida. He does many things in which he meets other people. But he does not have the social graces to attract a girlfriend.

Daniel needs a big brother - someone who will run with him, someone who will play ball with him, someone he can emulate. He desperately needs "male bonding" so he can play off some of his energy and learn appropriate social behavior. I could play ball and run with him, but as a woman I'm not a suitable role model. Although the social and educational programs in which he participates cover many needs, sex education is limited. For people like Daniel, there are few safe channels to work out sexual desires. In his pursuit of a girlfriend I can tell him how to act, but he needs a specific example.

I can find no program for Daniel. As far as I know, there isn't a place where Daniel can play ball, hang out with the guys and learn to moderate his behavior.

Daniel and I are both trapped. I tell Daniel I cannot find him a girlfriend. I will help him look his best. I will try to teach him appropriate behavior. I will coach him on things he may say to his prospective girlfriend, but I cannot find him one. For Daniel, it is another night of frustration.