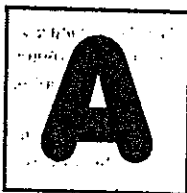


**Education**  
SPECIAL NEEDS

# Learning To Protect Themselves

An innovative program teaches developmentally challenged students to protect themselves from sexual abuse and physical harm.

**Randi Sherman**  
Editorial Assistant



A group of teenage girls, all with special needs, are sitting down to lunch at a kosher restaurant in Bergen County, N.J., when they are approached by a frum man who offers them a ride in his car. An innocent child's first reaction might be to believe the man, he is religious after all, and if he says he knows your mother, he must be telling the truth.

These girls have been taught better, however. No, they tell him. We have to wait for our teacher. We can't leave. These

students have mastered the NAT strategy, taught to them in the Jewish Self program: Yell No! Run Away! Must Tell!

Educators from SINAI Maayanot Girls High School in Teaneck, N.J., secretly observed the interaction between the girls and the man during a "contrived dangerous situation." The frum man, asked by the school to help test the girls, was actually the director's brother and posed no real threat, although the girls themselves did not know this. Based on this test it was clear these girls had learned the lesson about who in the community could be trusted — figureheads such as doctors, policemen and security guards — and who not to speak to, including anyone they do not know, frum or not, who approaches them in public.

"The Jewish Self: Sexual Education for Life" program was developed by Rabbi Gil

## Life Skills, 101

On a recent Thursday afternoon, Miriam and Leora, students at the IVDU school for the developmentally disabled, were practicing telephone etiquette. Their chairs were positioned back-to-back so that they could not see each other as they engaged in a mock telephone conversation before several classmates.

Meanwhile, in a nearby IVDU classroom — the school is housed temporarily at Touro's Lander College in Flatbush — a handful of young women were brushing up on protocol for riding in an elevator. "Stand back; give space to others; leave with all of your things."

At the IVDU girls' school, begun four years ago, skills for living are at the core of the curriculum. Interspersed with reading, writing and some basic Jewish studies, students — 10 14- to 21-year-olds with severe developmental disabilities like Down's syndrome, autism, and various forms of mental retardation — learn to interact with the world.

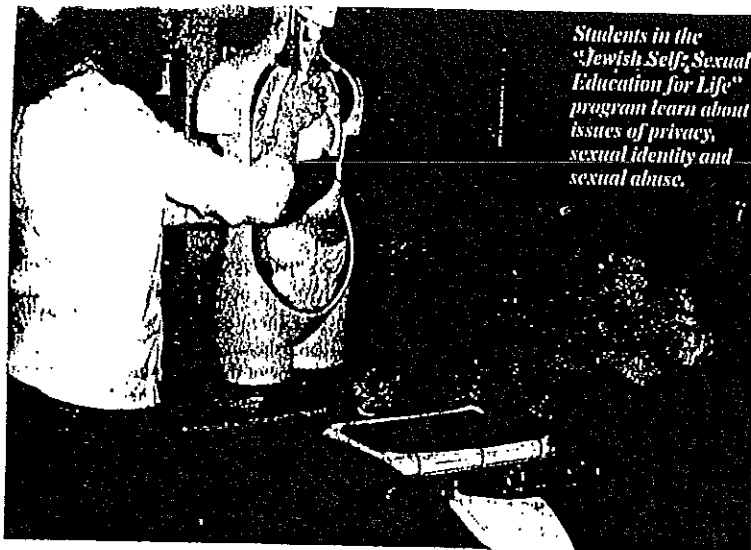
"Many of our students are so used to being led around," said Marilyn David, IVDU's program director. "[To the extent] that they're capable of it, we want them to take hold of themselves."

IVDU stands for Individual Vocational Developmental Unit, and is a Hebrew word meaning working with joy. In addition to teaching life skills — making phone calls, riding elevators, crossing streets, reading maps, preparing meals — the school stresses job training and finds internships for its able students. In the fall, the OU's National Jewish Council for Disabilities, known as Yachad, plans to open a companion school for disabled boys and young men.

Dr. Jeffrey Lichtman, the national director of NJCD/Yachad, said IVDU is one of several programs for high school age students — others include SINAI Special Needs Institute in New Jersey and Kulanu Torah Academy on Long Island — that are beginning to fill Jewish education's special needs "vacuum." He said that, while disabilities remain shrouded in shame and secrecy in certain pockets of the Orthodox community, things are beginning to change.

Schools like IVDU, Lichtman said, help chip away at the stigma of disabilities by teaching the skills that "facilitate inclusion in the Jewish community, and the community at large."

Gabrielle Birner



Students in the "Jewish Self: Sexual Education for Life" program learn about issues of privacy, sexual identity and sexual abuse.

Elmaleh, former director of therapeutic services at SINAI Special Needs Institute. Understanding the vulnerability of special needs children to sexual abuse, Rabbi Elmaleh devised a comprehensive manual, published in 2003, to guide teachers in exposing special needs children to issues of privacy, sexual identity and sexual abuse. Since its inception, over 130 children have gone through the program and requests for the manual have come from New York, California and Maryland. SINAI attracts students from throughout New Jersey as well as New York, and as far as Dallas, Texas, and even Norway. Students come to SINAI with a broad spectrum of special needs, including Autism, Downs Syndrome and other developmental disabilities.

"Special needs kids have processing difficulties, difficulty expressing themselves.

They can misinterpret suggestions and intentions. They want to be accepted, liked, to win approval. We want them to protect themselves and express themselves correctly," said Laurette Rothwachs, dean of the SINAI Special Needs Institute, which administers a number of schools including SINAI Maayanot and the Rabbi Mark and Linda Karasick Shalem Sinai High School for Boys at the Torah Academy of Bergen County. "This is more than just the sexy thing to do. There is documented evidence of real need for this kind of program. Everyone needs to take these issues seriously."

Mrs. B was relieved to find out her daughter Hani, an 18-year-old with Downs Syndrome, would be participating in the program starting

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a few years ago (Names have been changed). "My daughter is innocent and vulnerable," Mrs. B said. "I needed her to have the ability to say no, to know what an inappropriate relationship is, to have the words. Anything that she learns makes her more self-confident, more able to talk about things."

While Hani, like most teenagers, doesn't share a lot with her family, Mrs. B has noticed that Hani now talks a lot more about what parts of her body and behaviors are private.

Lessons are taught with a combination of vocabulary training and role-playing activities as well as interactive real life applications when possible. After teaching her class of 5 girls about private and public places and private and public clothing, Chaviva Rothwachs, a teacher at Maayanot, took the girls for swimming lessons at the JCC. Although outside the classroom setting, the girls learned that although other people were in the women's locker room, it was still a place where a woman was allowed to change her clothing, where being naked was okay, as long as they remained in their designated area.

Opportunities to reinforce class lessons outside of the classroom are important to teaching the Jewish Self program, said Rabbi Shraga Schofield, who teaches at the Rabbi Mark and Linda Karasick Shalem Sinai High School. Just walking in a park or down the street can become a teaching opportunity, such as when his male students see a woman on the street and make comments.

"That's when the teaching kicks in," Rabbi Schofield said. This "counseling in the moment" is when you discuss how to approach women, appropriate words and body language. "They're expressing teenage concerns about changes in their

bodies that don't match their cognitive abilities," so SINAI relates a concrete form they understand, religious texts, Rabbi Schofield said. "We teach that religious texts are texts of controlling urges, that their feelings are natural but can't always be shown. We teach about bodily changes and relationships with girls through themes in Chumash or parsha."

Sensitivity to halachic guidelines and the students' needs enabled the program to obtain approval from the Rabbinical Council of Bergen County and the OK of parents. SINAI has no set timeframe to teach the program. Individual students are introduced to the program when they need it, some as early as fifth grade, and at a pace that fosters learning rather than finishing. One-on-one sessions are used to clarify students' individual questions and concerns.

Heather Hagler, the current director of therapeutic services at SINAI, recalls one student who did not quite understand menstruation and pregnancy. "She thought she would bleed for nine months," Hagler said. "It was clear we needed to review the facts." Rabbi Schofield had to review issues of privacy with one student who touched himself inappropriately during class. Rothwachs, the dean, recounted one incident where a case of sexual abuse was uncovered during a lesson on appropriate and inappropriate touching, when a fifth grade student raised his hand and asked, "Is that what my cousin does to me when he comes to visit?" The entire family was called in for counseling.

Whereas the manual's graphic illustrations and blatant discussions of sexuality might initially worry some Orthodox parents, rabbinical endorsement along with understanding the need for the lessons eases many concerns.

"There is always concern, but never objection," Dean Rothwachs said. "Parents are unsure whether their children need exposure at all, since it is pretty aggressive for yeshiva teaching, but the students now feel better about themselves because they

have the language to express themselves regarding pre-teen and teen issues like hormones, emotions and relationships."

"Hani looks to her siblings for advice about boys and behavioral questions," said Mrs. B. "She now has the way of thinking, and there's a sense of relief that she has the background the Jewish Self program gave her. She hasn't run into any hostile situations but I hope and pray that this training will enable her to deal." ■

*Staff training and manuals from The Jewish Self: Sexual Education for Life program are available through Rabbi Elmaleh and SINAI. For more information, call (201) 833-9220 or write to info@sinaiinstitute.org.*