

Title: Exploring parental knowledge and sharing of sexual health and dating information with their autistic adolescents

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Background: Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a common neurodevelopmental disorder that impacts social communication and flexibility. Information about sexual health and advice pertaining to romantic relationships often are not addressed with autistic adolescents, as their social difficulties may appear to preclude sexual and romantic relationships. Parents may delay or avoid discussions about sexual health and romantic relationships with their autistic adolescents for a variety of reasons that may be unique in comparison to their neurotypical peers, such as underestimating their adolescent’s interest for a romantic partnership or interest in sexual behaviors. Parents may also have concerns about providing information when they believe their teen may not have the skills, interest, or experience to successfully apply it, or that they may become overly focused on it.

Objective: We will (a) investigate autistic teens’ level of knowledge regarding sexual health and romantic relationships and examine potential concordance with the knowledge of their parent/caregiver. (b) We will also measure, for each sexual health and romantic relationship knowledge item, how much the caregiver believes their autistic teen is informed on that topic.

Methods: Electronic surveys will be collected from 45 verbal adolescents with ASD (ages 15-17) recruited from Developmental Pediatrics’ assessment, intervention, and support group programs at Children’s Hospital Colorado and Boston Children’s Hospital. Youth will be surveyed¹ about their knowledge of sexual health and romantic relationships. The autistic adolescent’s parent/caregiver will be surveyed regarding their own knowledge of sexual health concepts and their perceptions of their teen’s level of knowledge of each item. Demographics and beliefs regarding sexuality will also be collected to better understand barriers in knowledge. Other variables to be considered within demographics will be level of teen independence and skill and knowledge of information technology. A Likert scale will be employed to assess confidence in topics.

Results: Data collection has not yet started, although (a) we predict discordant knowledge between adolescents and their parents. (b) We predict discordancy between a parent’s perception in comparison to what teen’s know regarding sexual health and romantic relationships.

¹ “Sexual Vocabulary Test,” Ousley & Mesibov, 1991 and
“Knowledge of Sexual Health Questionnaire,” Walsh & Ward, 2010

Conclusions: A mismatch of comprehension between parents and their autistic teens would potentially highlight gaps in knowledge. Identified gaps would potentially guide development of supports parents would benefit from in informing their adolescents regarding sexual health and romantic relationships. Data could provide guidance for clinical practice as well as future research regarding autistic adolescents.