

Title: The Birds & Bees: A pilot study of a parent-led sexual health education program for autistic youth

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Background: Currently there are few formalized supports for families and caregivers of autistic youth in navigating sexuality, changing bodies, and other issues related to puberty and adolescence (e.g., Pugliese et al., 2020). There is also evidence of disparities in access to more formal sex education supports for autistic youth (Holmes et al., 2020) and these supports may neglect important topics for autistic individuals (e.g., sensory needs, gender diversity, social safety; Hannah & Stagg, 2016). While parents are often their child's first sexuality educator, many parents report feeling underprepared and lacking support in having these discussions with their children (e.g., Blakeley-Smith & Nichols, 2009). As such, it is important to consider parent-led sexual health interventions for caregivers of autistic youth in order to mitigate the risk of adverse sexual health outcomes and support overall well-being of autistic individuals.

Objectives: (1) Evaluate the initial acceptability and feasibility of a novel parent-led sexual health program and (2) Evaluate changes in knowledge of core content, parent self-efficacy in discussing issues related to sexuality with their child, and expected outcomes of discussing sexual health topics with their child.

Methods: Two separate groups of parents of autistic youth (ages 10-13 and 14-18, respectively) were recruited to participate in the Birds & Bees pilot program. Eligible parents attended a 90 minute telehealth group for 8 weeks (see Table 1 for content areas). Participants completed the Parent Knowledge Questionnaire, the Parent Self-Efficacy Scale (PSES; DiLorio et al. 2006) and the Parenting Outcome Expectancy Scale (POES; DiLorio et al. 2001) pre- and post-treatment. Parents also provided feedback regarding overall acceptability of the program. The first cohort of parents consisted of mothers (N=4; mean age= 39 years) who had cisgender autistic sons (N=2) and daughters (N=2) (mean child age= 10.5 years). Six parents have been recruited to begin cohort 2, which is anticipated to end in December 2022.

Results: Preliminary results indicate that acceptability for the Birds & Bees program was high on the parent feedback form, with all participants endorsing that they strongly agreed or agreed with

their overall satisfaction and perceived helpfulness of the program. Parent knowledge was high both pre- and post-treatment, yielding medium effect sizes following the intervention, Cohen's  $d = .55$  (-0.93 - 3.75). Parent self-efficacy also demonstrated positive initial effects, Cohen's  $d = .50$  (-1.67-3.36) as did parent outcome expectations, Cohen's  $d = .68$  (-0.85-3.54). See table 2 for additional details. Full results including both cohorts are forthcoming.

Conclusions: Overall, the Birds & Bees pilot program demonstrates promising initial acceptability and changes in outcomes for parents of autistic youth. Parents found the group to be helpful and displayed positive trends in their content knowledge, self-efficacy and outcome expectancies in serving as sexuality educators to their children. Implications of these results illustrate the positive impact of an innovative parent-led sexual health program for caregivers of autistic youth. Limitations include the small sample size, which limits the ability to measure more robust changes pre and post intervention.

Table 1. Summary of Content for the Birds & Bees program

Session Number	Title	Sample Content
Session 1	Introduction, Goals, Communication & Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication of Challenging Topics</li> <li>• Conveying values</li> </ul>
Session 2	Teaching Anatomy & Addressing Puberty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Terminology &amp; Slang</li> <li>• Physical &amp; Emotional Changes</li> </ul>
Session 3	Caring for Changing Bodies During Puberty & Beyond	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Healthy habits &amp; Hygiene</li> <li>• Public vs. Private</li> </ul>
Session 4	Changing Relationships in Adolescence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Healthy Relationships</li> <li>• Dating &amp; Crushes</li> </ul>
Session 5	Sexual Intimacy, Reproductive Health & Challenging Sexual Behaviors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparing for Medical Appointments</li> <li>• Intercourse &amp; Intimacy</li> <li>• Masturbation, Erections, Nocturnal Emissions, Pornography, &amp; Fetishes</li> <li>• Contraceptives &amp; STI prevention</li> </ul>
Session 6	Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intersecting Identities</li> <li>• Supportive practices for LGBTQIA+ Youth</li> <li>• Social Support &amp; Safety for LGBTQIA+ Youth</li> </ul>
Session 7	Supporting Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consent &amp; Decision Making</li> <li>• Healthy &amp; Unhealthy Relationships</li> <li>• Internet Safety</li> <li>• Abuse Prevention &amp; Interpersonal Safety</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stalking, Bullying, &amp; Harassment</li> </ul>
Session 8	Review of Concepts & Termination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review Specific Topics Based on Group Needs</li> </ul>

Table 2. Preliminary Means and SD for Outcome Measures

<b>Outcome Measure</b>	<b>Pre-Treatment M (SD)</b>	<b>Post-Treatment M (SD)</b>
Parent Knowledge	25 (1.83)	26.5 (3.42)
PSES	87.25 (39.26)	102.5 (17.6)
POES	79.5 (13.53)	87.5 (9.81)