Navigating Healthy Relationships in Adolescence

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Learning Objectives:

- Explore core components of relationship building for adolescents with ASD including gender identity, dating, and social safety.
- Identify challenges for adolescents with ASD in building healthy relationships with others and the particular impact of COVID-19.
- Discuss strategies for skill building and establishing safe and appropriate relationships with others.
ASD + Adolescence
What is expected in adolescence?

- Peer groups matter more
- Striving toward independence
- Gender and sexuality exploration is normal
Social demands increase

Increased mental health risk

Increased expectations for independence

Core deficits of ASD
Social communication challenges

- Forming relationships
- Intimacy
- Social cues
Embarrassment & discomfort

New sensory sensations

Sensory Differences

Overwhelming activities

Desire for more independence
RIGID THINKING CAN IMPACT:

- GENDER ROLES
- EXPECTATIONS
- UNDERSTANDING CONSENT
- INCREASED VULNERABILITY

I’m in high school so I have to have a boyfriend or girlfriend

I am a boy therefore I must like girls
INTERESTS + SOCIAL CONNECTION

- Intense interests
- Unwilling to try new things
- Interests are different from peers
THE ROLE OF MENTAL HEALTH
And then there’s COVID-19...
Building Relationships
What do teens need to know?

How are people in relationships?

What do people in various relationships do together? What is ok or not ok?

How do relationships change?

What is intimacy? How can a person be intimate?

What slang do they need to know?
Circle of Relationships
Supporting Relationships in Times of COVID

Utilize strengths and areas of interest to create opportunities

Consider:

- How are current relationships being maintained?
- What opportunities are there to make new friends?
- What do you feel comfortable with as a family?
- Do the opportunities fit your child’s needs at that time?
Teaching Social Safety
Foundational Skills: Public vs. Private

- **Private place**: where no one can see you or just walk in
- **Public place**: anyone can go

- Areas where it can be applied
  - Hygiene and Daily Living Activities
  - Touching
  - Social behaviors
  - Conversations (including internet)
Consent & Decision Making

- Consent is not just about sex!
- Legally who can and cannot consent?
- Consent is not stagnant
- Accepting “no” and increasing flexible thinking
What to Consider

- Is the teen ready and how would you know when they are ready?
- Individual interest
- Family and cultural norms
- Social missteps vs. serious errors
What to Teach

(But first...take inventory of skills and what still needs to be taught)

✓ Hygiene
✓ Daily living skills
✓ Communication skills
✓ Ability to advocate for themselves
Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity
Gender variance more common in individuals with ASD

(Van Der Miesen et al., 2016)
Interventions aimed at gender conformity or attempting to change gender identity or gender expression, are coercive, can be harmful, and should not be part of behavioral health treatment. (SAMHSA, 2015)
Gender Affirmative Model

- Create space to explore and express gender
  - Observe and support the teen’s developing gender identity
  - Follow the teen’s lead
  - Teach and instill healthy messages about gender
Affirm and Move Forward

May be time to take transition steps

Refer to gender competent therapist or multidisciplinary team for gender diverse children
When to Seek Help

• Behavioral changes
• Increased concern about mental health

• Concern for safety
• Causing problems in daily life

• Parents need support in navigating adolescence
Websites

✓ OHSU Disability & Sexual Health Guide: https://www.ohsu.edu/university-center-excellence-development/disability/sexual-health-resources

✓ Vanderbilt Healthy Bodies Toolkit: https://vkc.mc.vanderbilt.edu/healthybodies/

✓ NCIL Video Library: https://ncil.org/sex-ed-for-individuals-with-i-dd/

Additional Resources

- Young Adult PEERS curriculum (no sex education component): https://www.semel.ucla.edu/peers/resources/role-play-videos
- TRUE Center for Gender Diversity at CHCO – Gender Identity
- SOAR Clinic at CHCO – Sex Development Disorders
- ONE Colorado: http://www.one-colorado.org/
- Gay and Lesbian Medical Association: http://www.glma.org/
- Trans-Youth Education and Support of Colorado (TYES): http://www.tyes-colorado.org/
- Rainbow Alley: https://lgbtqcolorado.org/programs/rainbow-alley/
- See flyer for Birds and Bees group in Developmental Pediatrics
QUESTIONS?