

Sexuality in Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Learning Objectives:

- Discuss common misconceptions around sexual development and intimacy in adolescents with ASD
- Explore core components of relationships and sexuality for adolescents with ASD including gender identity, dating, social safety, and sex education.
- Learn skill building strategies for promoting health sexual development in adolescents with ASD

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Autism Spectrum Disorder

Social Communication

- Difficulties with social reciprocity
- Deficits in nonverbal communication (eye contact, gestures)
- Difficulties developing and maintaining friendships or relationships

Restricted Interests/Repetitive Behaviors

- Repetitive motor movements
- Inflexibility, strict adherence to routines
- Highly intense or restricted interests
- Sensory differences

Myths about ASD & Sexuality

- Individuals with ASD do not have sexual drives / interest
- Physical development of youth with ASD occurs at a different rate to typically developing peers
- Sexual behavior in individuals with ASD is aberrant, wrong, predator-like
- Teaching about sexuality creates problems
- Individuals with ASD should be protected from society
- Society needs to be protected from individuals with ASD

Problems with How Sex Ed is Done Now

- Traditional sexual education programs in school
 - Variable access for autistic learners
 - Lots of variation by state, district, or school
 - Myths may lead to gaps in curriculum & understanding
 - Ignore core deficits
 - Ignore important topics to individuals with ASD
 - Often ignores LGBTQ relationships and identities

Are there gaps in knowledge about sex?

- Some research indicates:



So where are people getting their information?

Common sources of reported information

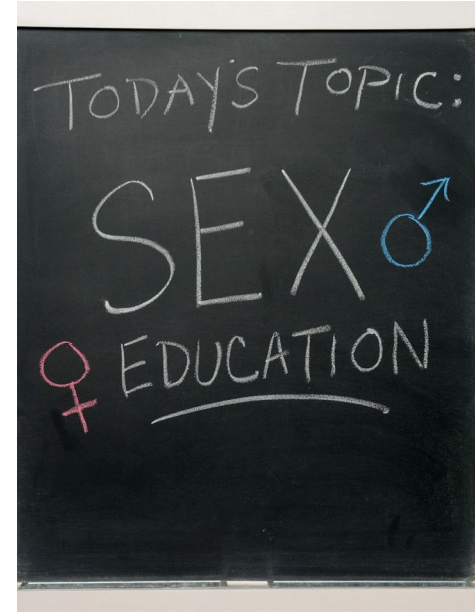
Reputable websites

Websites of “unknown” quality

Peers

Parents

Providers



Why don't we talk about sex

- Uncertainty who should teach
- Uncertainty what to teach
- Uncertainty of how to teach
- Own comfort or confidence in teaching

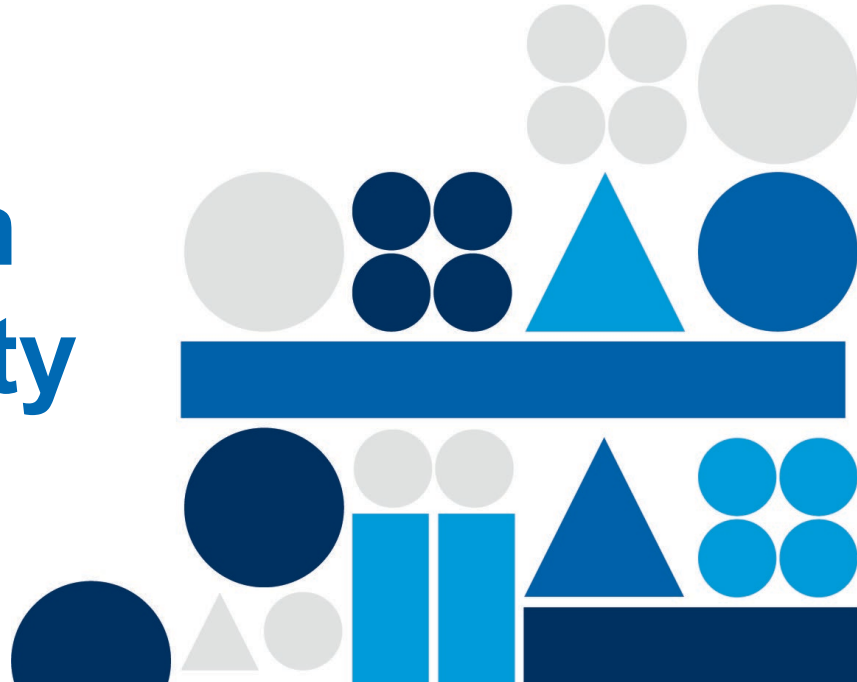
General Factors to Consider

- Values and Intersecting Identities
- Sexuality & sex education in the context of social-communication and relationships
- Foundational skills and needs
- Logistics and strategies to use
- Do we need to “undo” prior learning or address bigger issues first?

Local organizations that can help

- Occupational Therapy
- Sex & Relationship Education
 - Garden Autism
 - Advocacy Denver
 - Arc of Colorado
 - Developmental Pediatrics at CHCO- Birds & Bees Group

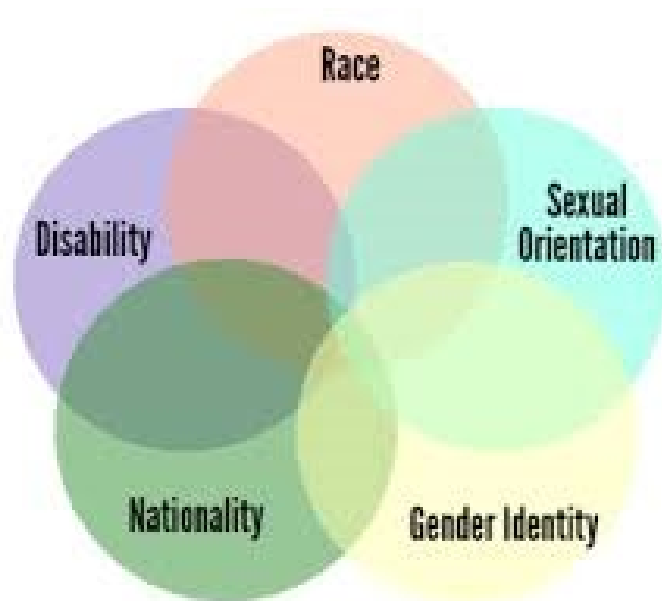
Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity



The 'Sex Talk' Now

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1j4rrgr0KeU>

Intersecting Identities



Sexual Orientation and ASD

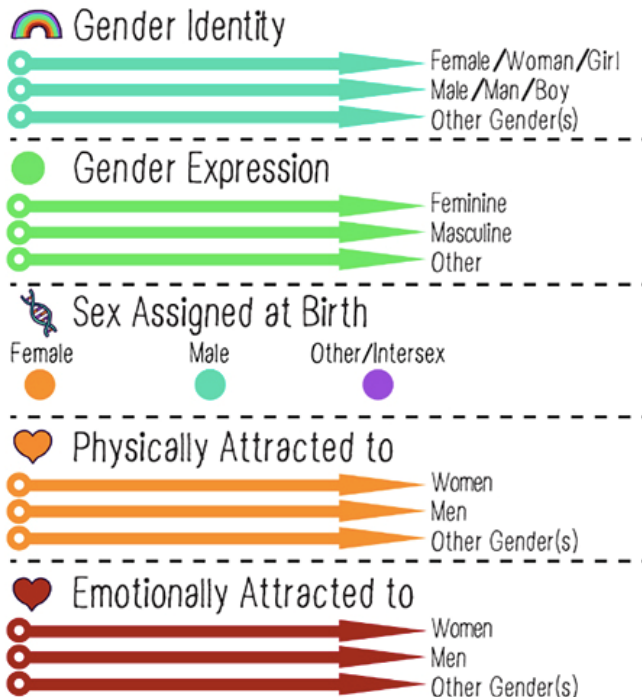
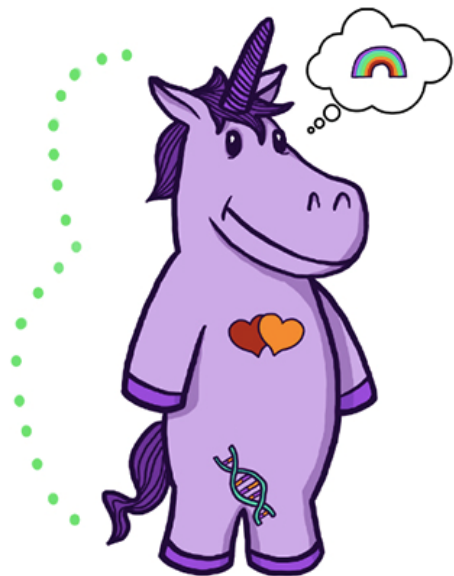
1 in 6 Gen Z adults identify as
LGBTQ (2021 Gallup Poll,
Washington Post)

Higher rates of autistic adults identify as LGBTQ compared to neurotypicals

Higher rates of anxiety, depression, mental health concerns in autistic individuals who identify as LGBTQ compared to heterosexual autistic individuals

The Gender Unicorn

Graphic by:
TSER
Trans Student Educational Resources



Gender variance more common
in individuals with ASD

(Van Der Miesen et al., 2016)

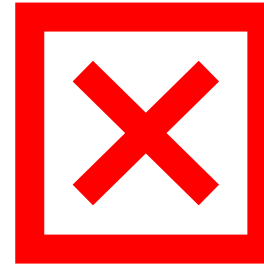
To learn more, go to:
www.transstudent.org/gender

Design by Landyn Pan and Anna Moore

Correct and Redirect

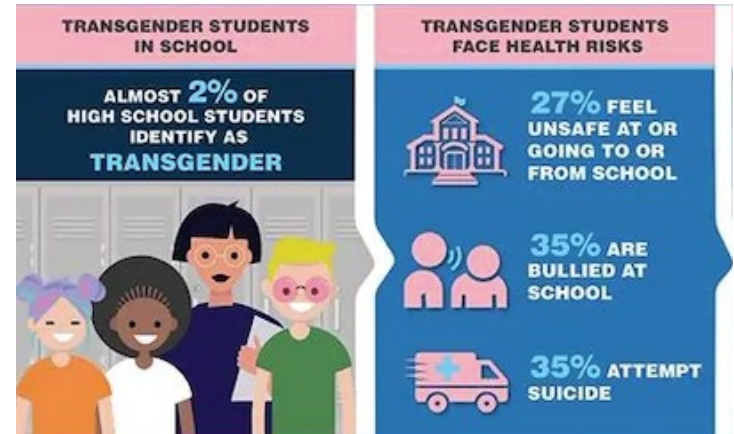
Interventions aimed at gender conformity or attempting to change gender identity or gender expression, are coercive, can be harmful, and should not be part of behavioral health treatment.

(SAMHSA, 2015)



Outcomes

- Children rejected or unsupported are at increased risk during adolescence:
 - Depression, poor satisfaction with life, self-harm, isolation, posttraumatic stress, incarceration, homelessness, and suicidality



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



Outcomes

Family acceptance and support during adolescence is tied to the following in young adults:

Social support, better mental health outcomes, less depressive symptoms, greater self-esteem, greater life satisfaction (compared with youth whose families were non-supportive)

How to Support

Talk about gender roles and sexuality in less absolute terms (e.g., “some girls wear dresses”; “some men date men”).

Talk about LGBTQ people openly and with respect, modeling acceptance for the child.

Follow the child or adolescent’s lead. Try not to assume that you know their gender or sexual orientation.

How to Support

Read up and identify areas of discomfort

Ask questions!

Have resources in your office or waiting room

How to Support

Work with your child's school team for appropriate accommodations

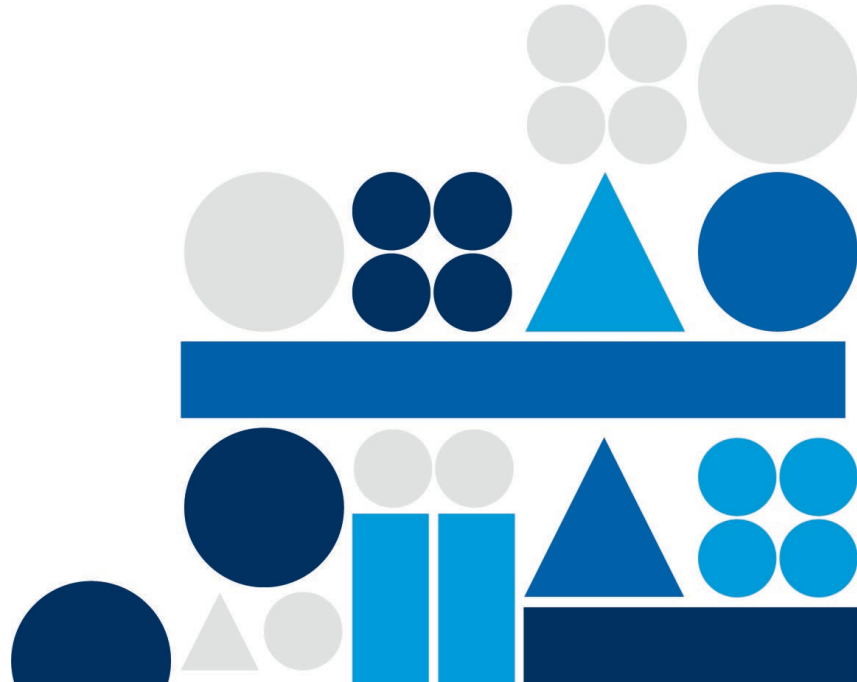
Identify champions and advocates at school

Support LGBTQ and GSA groups in school

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

Dating



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What to Consider

- Is the teen ready and how would you know when they are ready?
- Individual interest
- Family and cultural norms
- Safety skills
- 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



What to Teach

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

- ✓ Where do people find a date?
- ✓ What happens on a date?
- ✓ How to stay safe on a date?
- ✓ Handling rejection



Beginning a Date – Video Examples

Bad example

Good example

Dating in the time of COVID-19

Online dating

Staying safe during in person dates

Where to seek help

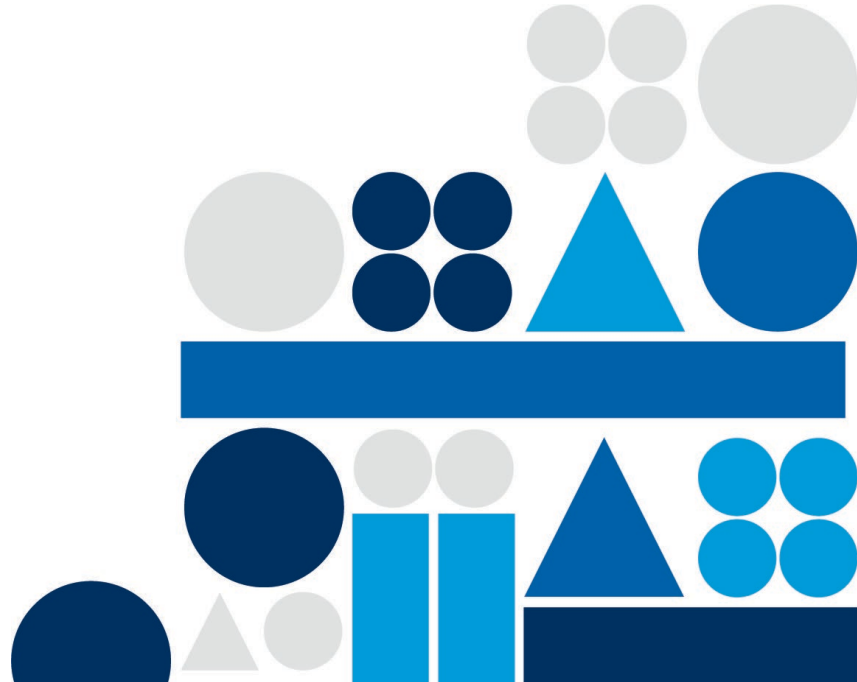
Individual therapy

PEERS Denver - <https://peersdenver.com/>

Garden Autism Center - <https://gardenautism.org/>

Social skills groups

Social Safety



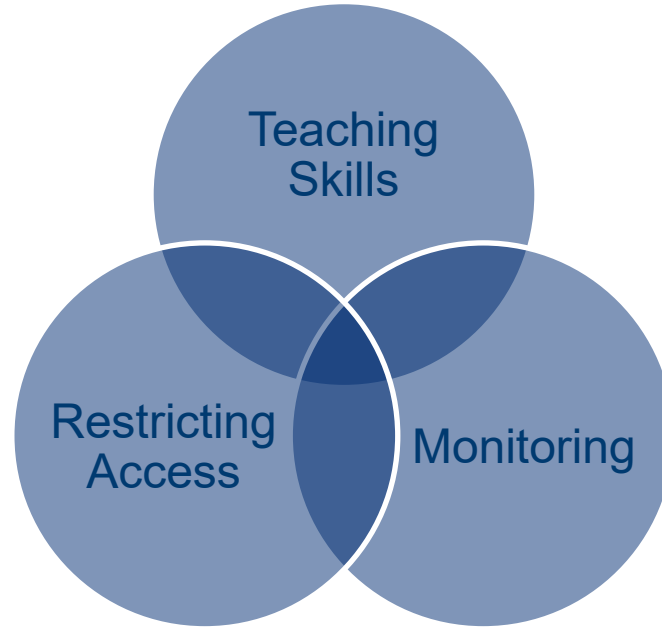
What exactly is social safety?

- Online Safety
- Self-advocacy & Abuse Prevention
- Consent
- Stalking
- Challenging Sexual Behaviors

Online Safety

- Common parent concerns include:
 - Cyberbullying
 - Accessing illicit content or pornography
 - Phishing scams or hacking
 - Buying goods/services online without permission
 - Sexual grooming or exploitation

General Online Safety Guidelines



Example of Online Safety Skills to Teach

- Nothing is private on the internet
- How honest should you be online?
- How do you detect credible information versus a scam?
- Appropriate online etiquette
- What is “realistic” online?



Monitoring & Restricting

- Consider all devices!
- Establish firewalls
- Several apps are available to help you monitor
- Establish rules around internet usage



Teaching Self-Advocacy as a Safety Tool

- Foundational skills to consider addressing:
 - Self-esteem/mental health
 - Communication skills
 - Social understanding
 - Identify trusted people to discuss these concerns with
 - Remember: This is a precursor to understanding consent too

Teaching Self-Advocacy as a Safety Tool

- Ways to practice
 - Teaching how to ask for help or state what they need
 - Reinforcing when they appropriately ask for help (and providing space to try first)
 - Role play difficult situations
 - Discuss how characters in books or movies advocate for themselves
 - Practice in the real world (e.g., ordering food, requesting help with school, advocating with helping professionals, etc)

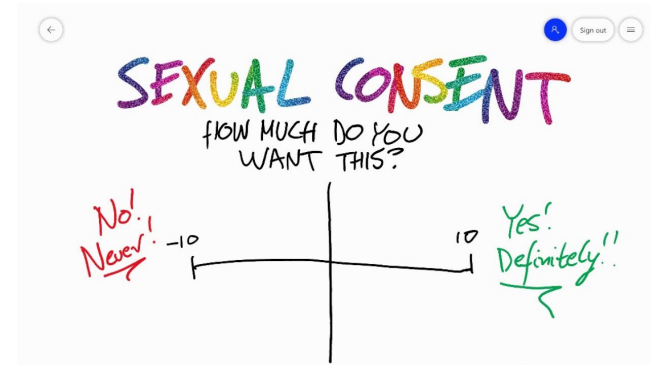


Consent & Decision Making in Relationships

- Considering what makes a healthy relationship and how to recognize signs of unhealthy relationships
- Teaching what is abuse and who can abuse
- Who can be a sounding board for relationships?
- How do you walk the line between being over involved and providing freedom for mistakes?

Consent

- New CO legislation in 2019 mandates consent be covered in sex ed in public schools
- But what exactly is consent and where does it apply?
 - Consent isn't stagnant
 - Is the consent really *informed*?
 - Legally, who can and cannot consent?
 - <https://apps.rainn.org/policy/compare/consent-laws.cfm>
 - Where are the gaps? How to explain the “grey”?



Other Common Social Safety Challenges

- Stalking and harassment
- Challenging sexual behaviors
- Misreading potentially dangerous social situations



What it often boils down to...



Masturbation

- Most common concerns:
 - Excessive masturbation
 - Masturbating in public
 - Masturbating inappropriately
 - Becoming upset when they masturbate
- Masturbation is considered excessive if:
 - The person is hurting themselves
 - It is interfering with other daily living tasks

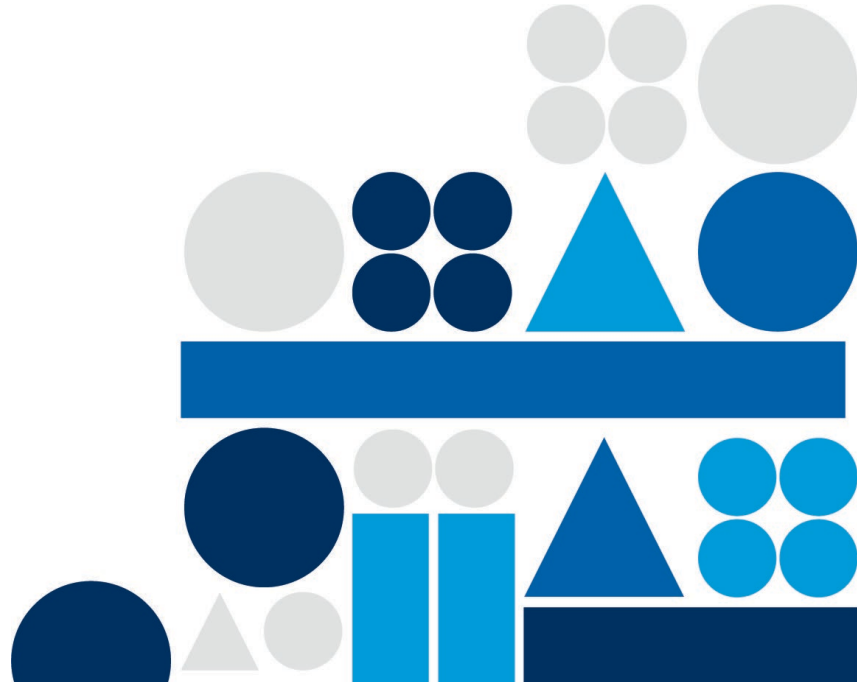
Masturbation

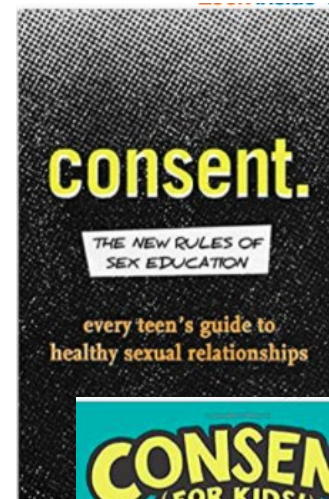
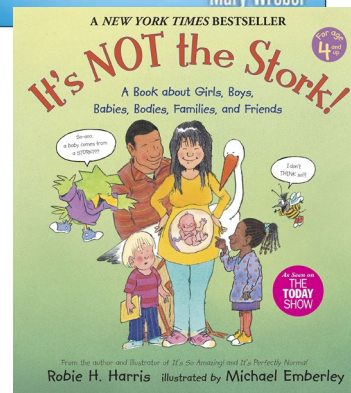
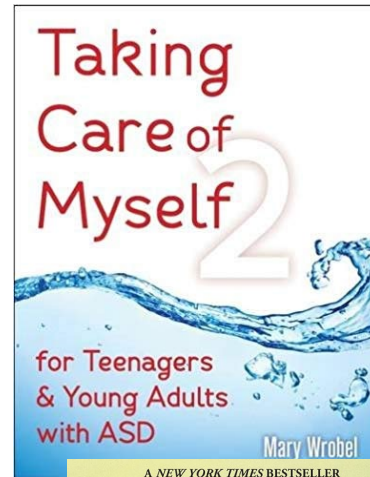
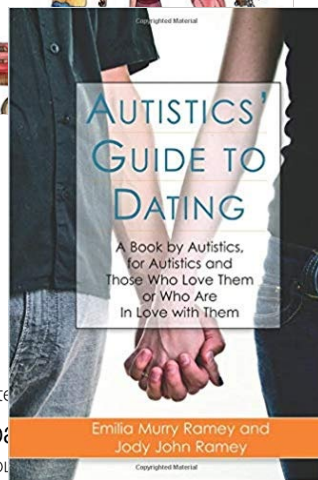
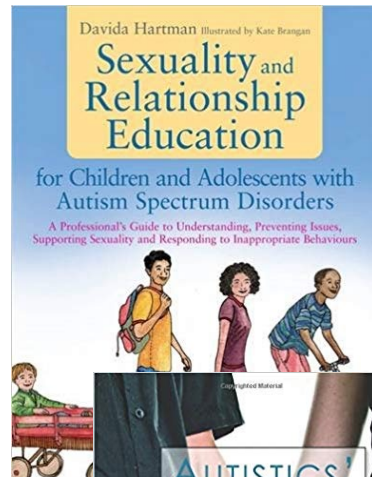
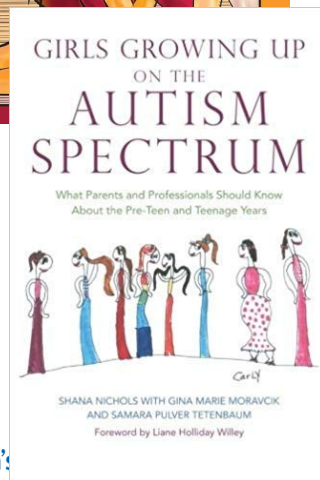
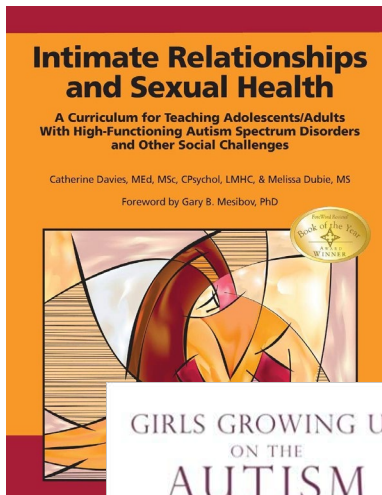
- General recommendations for masturbation:
 - The individual should be able to distinguish between public & private
 - Ensure that a private place is provided for masturbation
 - If someone walks in on the person masturbating, calmly apologize and leave
 - Positive attitudes about appropriate masturbation should be maintained
 - Use specific terminology that everyone in the individual's inner circle uses (e.g., private touching, sexy feelings)
 - Consider what need is being met by masturbation?

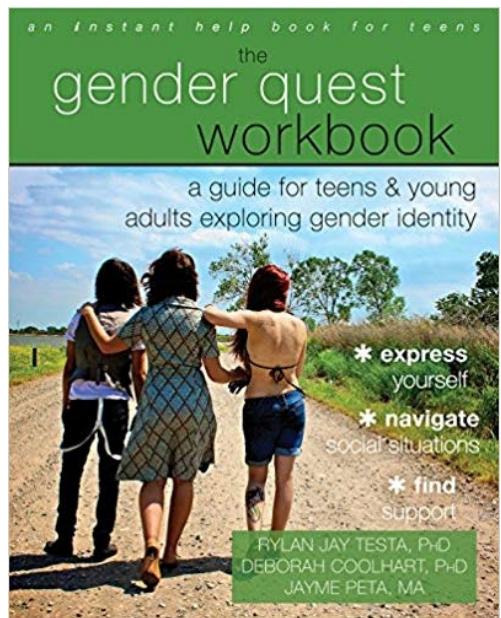
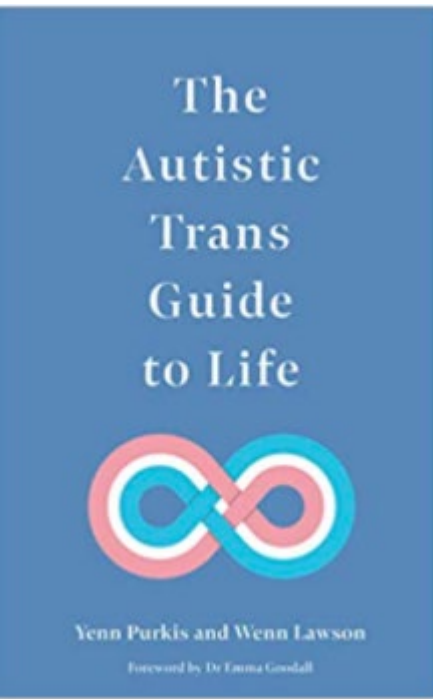
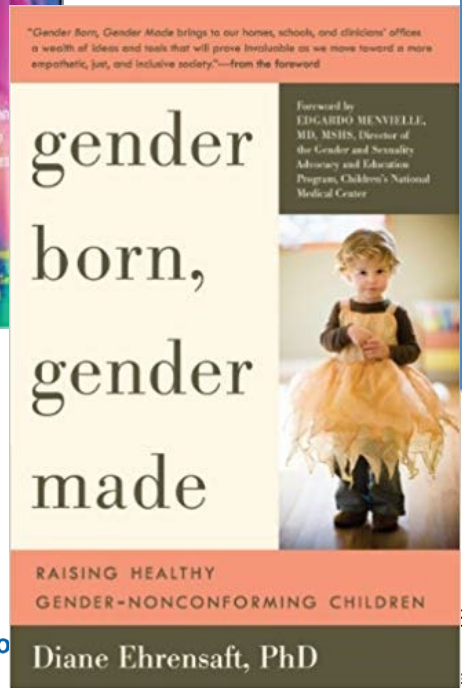


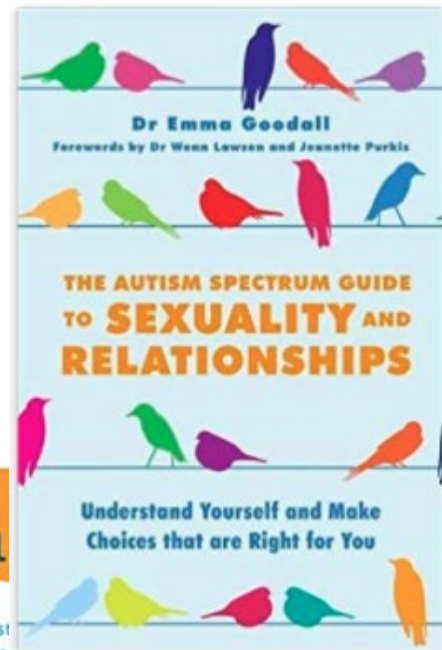
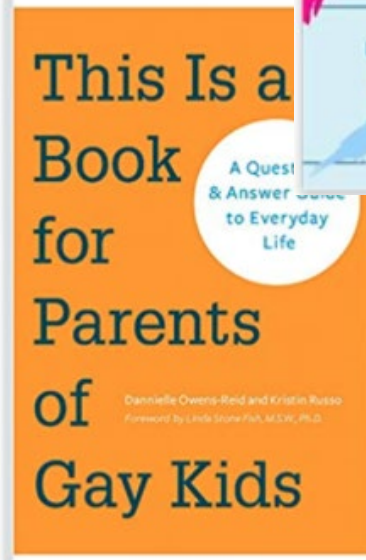
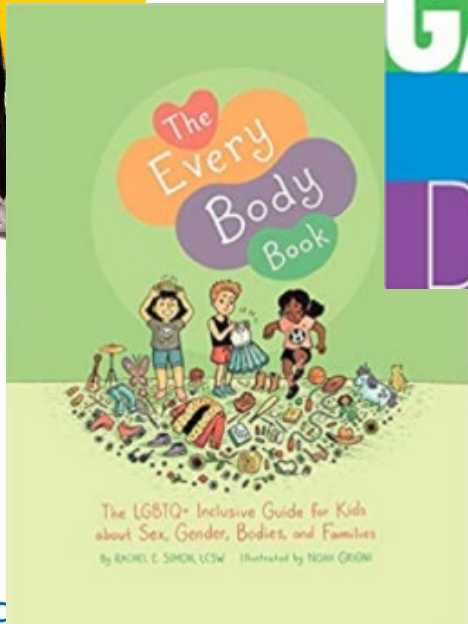
VectorStock

Resources









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/>
- ✓ MA 2014 Resource Guide: <http://www.mass.gov/eohhs/docs/dph/com-health/prevention/hrhs-sexuality-and-disability-resource-guide.pdf>

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?

