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
Type in the chat
## 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

(Debbautd and Rothman, 2001; Quinn, 2005; Hare, 1999)
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:

YES
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

- Race
- Disability
- Sexual Orientation
- Nationality
- Gender Identity

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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
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)
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
Type in the Chat
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

Laugeson, 2020
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

- Teaching Skills
- Restricting Access
- Monitoring
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”? 

[Image of a scale with the text "sexual consent: how much do you want this?"

No! Never! -10

Yes! Definitely! +10]
Other Common Social Safety Challenges

• Stalking and harassment

• Challenging sexual behaviors

• Misreading potentially dangerous social situations
What it often boils down to…

Challenges reading social situations

Lack of reinforcement for other strategies

Strong focus on preferred things
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?
Resources
S.E.X., the all-you-need-to-know sexuality guide to get you through your teens and twenties

HEATHER CORINNA

This Book is Gay

Introduction by David Leckham

JUNO DAWSON

Dr Emma Goodall
Forewords by Dr Wenna Lawson and Jeanette Perkins

The Autism Spectrum Guide to Sexuality and Relationships

Understand Yourself and Make Choices that are Right for You

The Every Body Book

The LGBTQ+ Inclusive Guide for Kids about Sex, Gender, Bodies, and Families

By BRIAN E. SIMON, LCSW
Illustrated by NICK AHRENS

Children's Hospital Colorado

Here, it's different.

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This Is a Book for Parents of Gay Kids

A Question & Answer Guide to Everyday Life

Candace Owens-Bird and Cristiana Russo
Forewords by Andy Dean PhD, MSc, MA, D.

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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?