

Autism and Sexuality

for the Enfield DSL Network

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EASA is affiliated to Russet House School and works in partnership with other local authority services, including EPS, JSDC, the NHS, and voluntary sector organisations. EASA is the Regional Partner of the Autism Education Trust for London.



Agenda

- 1) Autistic differences in relation to sexuality
 - a) Communication and Social understanding differences
 - b) Flexibility of thought and information processing differences
 - c) Sensory perception differences
- 2) Coping with change
- 3) Autism and vulnerability
- 4) Sexting
- 5) Autism and LGBTQ+
- 6) Teaching and learning about sex and sexuality
- 7) Peer awareness
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Autistic differences in relation to sexuality

Autistic pupils have differences in three areas of development.

These are:



Social understanding
and communication.



Flexibility, information
processing, and
understanding.



Sensory processing
and integration.



Social understanding and communication

- Autistic people often take language literally. Conversations about sex often contains lots of euphemisms and slang which autistic people may not interpret correctly or be confused by.
 - “I slept with him” “We kissed all evening”
 - “My heart is broken” “Wet dream”
- Different rules for different people – this may not be understood
 - Who to use different terminology with
 - Who to tell about different feelings
 - Different kinds of touch children may experience – medical, affectionate (parent or close relative), hygiene/care, accidental touch





Social understanding and communication *continued...*

- Communication and interaction is complex – how do you know if someone likes you? How do you tell someone you like them? Signs are often non-verbal which may be even more difficult to interpret correctly for autistic people
- Autistic people may have difficulty predicting how someone will react to a particular phrase or touch. They may want to repeat an interaction with the same person or someone else to test the response. They may not be able to tell if the response is positive or negative unless the person makes it very explicit.
- They may have limited awareness of social boundaries and offending others e.g. following someone to the point of stalking, or masturbating in class



Flexibility, information processing, and understanding

- Coping with change may be difficult
 - accepting body changes at puberty
 - accepting changes in relationship status of family/friends
 - is it still the same person if their name has changed after marriage?
- Autistic people often excel at tasks with a set pattern/procedure to follow. They may find spontaneity in relationships difficult.
- It might be hard for an autistic person to accept that a partner may want different things at different times
- Instructions may need to be given clearly and explicitly – show as well as tell
- Emotional aspects of relationships may be difficult to interpret and navigate



Sensory processing and integration

- Autistic people can be over or under responsive to different sensory stimuli. This may vary over time and in different contexts.
- In sexual situations there are a lot of sensory factors to consider
 - Different kinds of touch and different amounts of pressure
 - Body fluids and lubricants
 - Smells – body parts and fluids, perfumes/deodorants, washing powder on clothing/bedlinen
 - Tastes – kissing, licking etc.
 - Sounds – being closer to someone than usual – heartbeat, breathing etc.
 - Proprioceptive issues – orientation of yourself in space and in relation to another person, furniture etc.
 - Vestibular issues – balance and movement
 - Interoception – being able to interpret internal sensations such as arousal, pain or nervous feelings

Coping with change

- Growing up and learning to navigate changes to your body and relationships with others is tough for all teenagers.
- Autistic teenagers are likely to find puberty more challenging than other teenagers because of the differences in the way they interpret the social world, understand language and interactions, process information and process sensory stimuli.
- Some may try to mask the challenges and pretend they 'get it' by trying to copy others – this is exhausting
- Others show their frustrations and anxiety in other ways such as through distressed behaviour or repetitive questioning or actions

Autism and Vulnerability

Amy Gravino (autistic woman and sexuality advocate)

At 14, she longed for friends and was acutely aware that she did not fit in. No one at school wanted to hang out with her, she said. The emotional pain was so sharp it led her to suicidal thoughts.



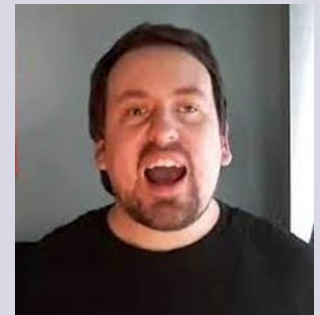
Christine Lion (autistic writer and speaker)

Underwent ABA therapy as a child and was trained to do as people told her; she was led to believe her natural ways of thinking and expressing herself were wrong. This led to her always doing as people asked and being sexually abused as a young adult.

Dean Beadle (autistic speaker)

“What does boyfriend/girlfriend mean? Let’s not just teach bodily functions. Let’s teach about relationships”

“We don’t teach about consent enough. Sex is optional. You aren’t obliged just because you’re of legal age”



Sexting

Sexting is when you send a sexual message, photo or video to someone else.

This includes:

- being partly or completely naked, or in your underwear
- posing in a sexual position
- sending 'nudes' or 'dick pics'
- talking about sexual things you're doing or want to do
- doing sexual things on a live stream

Autistic children and young people may be more vulnerable to sexting and online abuse as they may not understand the risks or be alert to others exploiting them.

Autism and LGBTQ+

- Autistic individuals are more likely to be LGBTQ+ (Weir, Allison, Baron-Cohen, 2021)
- Autistic males were 3.5 times more likely to identify as bisexual than non-autistic males, autistic females were 3 times more likely to identify as homo-sexual compared with non-autistic females. (Weir, Allison, Baron-Cohen, 2021)
- Higher rates of autism were found in gender diverse and transgender individuals (Warrier et al, 2020)



Dean Beadle and Robyn Steward – autistic speakers who talk about same sex relationships



Teaching and learning about sex and sexuality

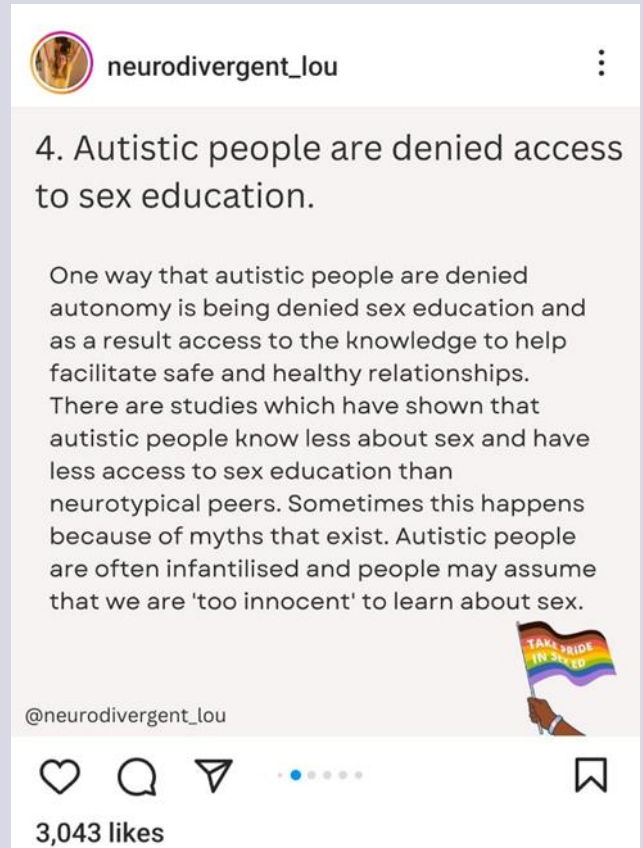
Key things to teach autistic pupils:

- The **difference between private and public** and rules for different places - practice and reinforce this (e.g. closing toilet doors; keeping certain body parts covered when changing etc).
- There are **different rules for different people**. Avoid young children sitting on staff laps or touching staff inappropriately. Calmly treat real situations as teaching times. “This is your chair. Sit here.” “You can shake hands/tap my shoulder”
- **What you do impacts on how others feel**. Use comic strip conversations to show how different actions impact on others. Be firm and clear with instructions and saying how you feel – they may not pick up on tone of voice or body language.



Teaching continued...

- Autistic pupils need a thorough and clear sex education
- Information processing may take longer so start earlier
- Be prepared to explain things in a detailed and factual way and explain slang terminology
- They may not pick up ideas from peers or be able to distinguish between playground stories and factual information
- They need to be taught about consent (theirs and others') and how to end things they are not enjoying.



Don't assume anything!

- Autistic children who touch people inappropriately or say explicit things repeatedly may not be doing this to provoke a 'neurotypical' reaction.
- Repetitive actions and phrases can be to test how people respond, as part of information processing, rather than to 'wind people up'
- Seeking consistent, repetitive responses to actions and sayings can be soothing for autistic people (even if the reaction seems negative to most people).
- Autistic children who self-stimulate or rub against others may not have seen inappropriate things; instead they may be exploring their own sensory response and they may lack social awareness of the context, or impact on others. This is an opportunity to teach "for your bedroom" (and have parents to reinforce the same message).

Peer awareness is important

- Autistic children get social rules wrong all the time. This is stressful and makes them vulnerable to abusive situations.
- Peer awareness about the areas of difference in autism and how to respond to 'mistakes' supportively is important.
- Try to teach other children to respond calmly and assertively - "Stop", "I don't like that" & "For your bedroom" and to tell an adult, rather than making a fuss.
- Teach all children about choice and consent.



Strategies

Social stories: Carol Gray: <https://carolgraysocialstories.com/>

Short descriptions of a situation, event or activity, including specific information about what to expect.

Helps CYP with autism to understand complex social situations, and therefore reduce anxiety levels and unhelpful behaviours that can result.

Comic strip conversations: (Carol Gray)

Simple visual representations of conversation.

They can show:

- the things that are actually said in a conversation
- how people might be feeling
- what people's intentions might be

This can help some of the more abstract aspects of social communication more 'concrete' and therefore easier to understand.

You can use a social script which can incorporate photos and/or symbols.

Having a conversation with autistic CYP about sensitive issues

- No other distractions
- Could look at TV programmes as a starter, or an article for example
- https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/11_18/lets-talk-about/nudes/sending-nudes/
- Can use props to discuss incidents



Different coloured post-its to write and discuss different perspective



Spoon theory



Lolly sticks to represent different people

Further information

National Autistic Society on Sex Education:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/family-life-and-relationships/sex-education>

[Sex Education](#) – forum information sheets

[Sexwise](#) – sexual health website run by Public Health England

[Childline](#) – helpline for people aged 18 or under 0800 1111

[NSPCC - staying safe online](#) – advice for parents on talking to their children about online safety

Sex education for self-advocates (aimed at 15+)

<https://researchautism.org/sex-ed-guide/> Has videos plus testing knowledge and practising new skills

LGBTQ+ support

Enfield LGBTQ+ Network

[Enfield LGBT Network | Lesbian, Gay Bisexual and Transgender \(lgbtenfield.org\)](http://lgbtenfield.org)

Stonewall inclusive books

<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/lgbtq-inclusive-books-children-and-young-people>

Trevor Project

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

Ambitious About Autism:

[LGBTQ+ | Ambitious about Autism](#)