

Decreasing Vulnerability through Sexuality Education for Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

The Importance of Sexual Intimacy

For most people, intimate relationships are a key element in living their most fulfilled lives. Individuals with disabilities are no exception to this rule. They desire intimacy and have the same rights to sexual expression as people without disabilities. People with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) can face some challenges as they navigate this important territory but, with comprehensive education about sexual relationships, contraception, and protection, these barriers can be effectively addressed.

Factors to Consider about Sexual Intimacy

Capacity and competency are two major factors to consider when thinking about sexual intimacy for individuals with ASD. **Capacity** refers to a person's ability to understand, appreciate, and form a rational intention related to an act. **Competency** refers to a legal assessment that varies based on the act or decision being considered. Sexual intimacy may not be right for everyone, but this should be determined on a personal basis considering the wishes and preferences of the individual.

Before engaging in sex, it is important for an individual to:

- Understand the sexual nature of an act
- Understand that both parties must participate voluntarily
- Be aware of the possible physical and emotional outcomes of having sex
- Be able to communicate his or her decision about whether or not to engage in sex
- Have exposure to comprehensive and concrete sexuality education

Sexuality Education

Sexuality education does not have a specific endpoint. It is important for facts to be coupled with social aspects, and sexuality educators must stay current. Some topics to teach can include hygiene and self-care, terms for anatomy and acts, staying safe, and using contraception to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Instructional Strategies for Teachers and Families

There are a variety of methods that educators and families can use when teaching individuals with ASD about healthy sexuality. It is helpful to think ahead and teach the information before it is needed. Address the social side of sexuality and be concrete and consistent with the information you share, especially about what types of things could get someone arrested.

Specific Strategies

- Visual supports
- Task analysis
- Concrete examples
- Specific rules and their exceptions
- Scripts and social stories

Additional Resources

Sexuality Education Manual from Autism Speaks:

autismspeaks.org/docs/family_services_docs/parentworkbook.pdf

National Autistic Society

autism.org.uk/about/communication/sex-education/top-tips.aspx

Autism Sex Education

autismsexeducation.com

Buron, K. D. (2007). *A 5 is against the law! Social boundaries straight up!* Lanexa, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

This document was prepared in collaboration with Laurie Sperry, Ph.D., BCBA-D, MSc, Assistant Clinical Professor at Yale University and Rachel Loftin, Ph.D., Assistant Professor at Rush University Medical Center & Visiting Assistant Professor at Yale School of Medicine