

Autism, Sexual Health, and Today's Sexual Culture

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What is Sexuality

- “...a central aspect of being human throughout life encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.” (*WHO, 2006a*)

What is Sexual Health?

- “...a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.” (*WHO, 2006a*)

Typical Sexual Behavior by Age

	Common Behavior	Uncommon Behavior
Preschool Age 0-5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will have questions and express knowledge relating to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Differences in gender and genitalia - Hygiene and toileting - Pregnancy and birth • Will explore genitals • Showing and looking at genitals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having knowledge of specific sexual acts or explicit sexual language • Engaging in adult-like sexual contact with another child
School Age 6-8 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will have questions and express knowledge relating to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Physical development, relationships, and sexual behavior - Menstruation and pregnancy - Personal values • Experiment with same-age and gender children including games and role-playing • Self-stimulation in private 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult-like sexual interactions • Having knowledge of specific sexual acts • Behaving sexually in public place or through the use of a phone or technology
School Age 9-12 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will have questions and express knowledge relating to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sexual materials and information - Relationships and sexual behavior - Using sexual words and discussing sexual acts and personal values • Increased experimentation with sexual behaviors and romantic relationships • Self-stimulation in private 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly occurring adult-like sexual behavior • Behaving sexually in a public place
Adolescence 13-16 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will have questions and express knowledge relating to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decision making - Social relationships and sexual customs - Personal values and consequences of sexual behavior • Self-stimulation in private • Sexual experimentation between adolescents of the same age • Voyeuristic behaviors are common • First sexual intercourse will occur for approximately one third of teens 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masturbation in public • Sexual interest directed toward much younger children

source: www.StopItNow.org



How about ASD?

- The many misconceptions of sexuality and ASD
- Physiologically and biologically the same
- Biological may not match up with intellectual and adaptive abilities
- Rarely provided with comprehensive and individualized sexuality education in school

Counterfeit Deviance [Kellaher, 2015]

- Lack of knowledge/education
- Age vs. Interest
- Behavior that can be viewed as ‘predatory’
- Time/place confusion
- Boundaries and the “helper” role



Relationships

- Social cues
- Recognizing facial expressions
- Negotiating sexual experiences
- Consent



Isolation and Loneliness

- Difficulty with socializing
- Focused on limited interests
- Lack of opportunities
- Homogeneity of social groups



Modern Love: Technology & The Internet

- Can serve as a temporary fix to loneliness
- Easier for some to “connect” online
- Instant gratification
 - Good for those with low frustration tolerance
- Risks of exploitation



...And Pornography

- Pornography is one of the biggest barriers to forming healthy sexual relationships
- Worst place to learn about sex and relationships
- Always just a click away and another click into more aggressive, violent, degrading images
- Need constant input of new stimuli to achieve same level of arousal



Sexual Response Cycle

- Several models
- Differences between men and women
- Generally researchers use: desire, excitement/plateau, orgasm, resolution



Sexual Response

- Sensory stimuli initiates desire/arousal
- During excitement/plateau muscles tense, heart rate increases, breathing increases
- Orgasm involves involuntary muscle contractions and often a release of sexual tension
- Resolution is the phase when the body returns to baseline

Sexual Response & Sensory Processing

- Individuals with ASD may perceive unusual objects, textures, smells, sounds as arousing
- Restricted interest develop into sexual interests and arousal
- Genital touching vs. Masturbation
- Masturbation is normal and healthy
 - Time and place
 - Technique
 - Stress-reliever
- Hypo-sensitivity issues during masturbation
 - More pressure, stimuli to achieve climax
 - One study suggests that tactile sensitivities may change how pleasure is perceived and result in excessive masturbation [Singh G, Coffey B 2012]
- Orgasm is an intense sensory experience
 - Not necessarily the end goal for all individuals
 - May be uncomfortable, too intense



So with all this how can sexual health be fostered?

- Be cool! Don't overreact
- Start with developmentally appropriate facts; leave the birds and the bees and the stork behind
- Non-judgmental
- Empathy
- Individualized presentation of information
- Explain expectations in all environments
 - Home vs. school vs. work



So with all this how can sexual health be fostered? Cont.

- Parental controls on all technology
 - Pornography is detrimental for developing minds
 - Sexting can't be undone
- Sex-Positive
- Trauma-Informed
- Ask for help



Common Conundrums

- Masturbating in public
- Inappropriate touching of others
- Sexting/giving personal information out to people on the internet

Resources

- Things Tom Likes and Things Ellie Likes by Kate Reynolds
- Autism-Asperger's and Sexuality : Puberty and Beyond by Mary Newport and Jerry Newport
- Intimate Relationships and Sexual Health: A Curriculum for Teaching Adolescents/adults with High-functioning Autism Spectrum Disorders and Other Social Challenges by Catherine Davies and Melissa Dubie
- Planned Parenthood YouTube Videos on Consent:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNN3nAevQKY>
- Reverse Google Image Search Tutorial:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5e9wTdAulA>

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Questions?

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