



Dear Parents,

Welcome to the Organization for Autism Research's *Sex Ed. for Self-Advocates!*

Sexuality education encompasses a wide range of topics that are sometimes uncomfortable to discuss in everyday conversation. This guide is intended to serve people on the autism spectrum by presenting information in a manner that is easily accessible and relevant to them.

As parents, you play an important role as sexuality educators. Your attitudes, values, and approach to sexuality education will frame your child's values, beliefs, and understanding of sexuality and his or her relationship with others.

Some people believe that sexuality education will encourage people to engage in sexual behaviors. But that is not the case. In fact, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found the opposite to be true – numerous sexuality education programs resulted in lower frequency of partners, increased use of contraception, and becoming sexually active at a later age (D. Kirby, 2007).

It's natural for humans to be curious about their physical and sexual development. There is a widespread perception that individuals with disabilities do not have sexual desires and needs, but that is false! People on the autism spectrum are sexual, just like anyone else and, therefore, have thoughts, feelings, and concerns about sexuality. Some parents cannot imagine their children with autism being sexually active, particularly after dedicating so much of their time and energy helping them develop social and functional life skills, and protecting them as much as possible. This feeling often leaves the topic of sexuality unaddressed.

The danger here is that if your son's or daughter's questions about sexuality are not discussed by trusted adults like yourself, he or she may end up drawing conclusions from the news, social media, pornography, or peers. Consulting these outside sources can lead to inaccurate or misleading information that can compromise your child's overall health, safety, and wellness. Therefore, it is also important for your child to learn to recognize unsafe or predatory behaviors, and know what to do if he or she encounters them.

People with autism struggle to understand the figurative language and nuanced social cues that are key to maintaining healthy, safe, and fulfilling relationships. By providing your child with the knowledge and tools he or she needs to navigate relationships, intimacy, and sexual safety issues, you are helping to ensure positive learning experiences that lead to personal growth and independence!

Why Is the Guide Written for Self-Advocates Rather Than Parents or Educators?

While there are many resources for parents and educators about teaching children about sexuality, there are fewer resources for teaching about sexuality to children on the autism spectrum. Even more limited are comprehensive resources for self-advocates to learn about sexuality themselves. This guide is meant to bridge that gap based on community feedback. Developed with teenagers and emerging



adults on the spectrum in mind, it addresses issues that all people face when dealing with sexuality, as well as topics specific to those on the autism spectrum.

About This Guide

This guide is intentionally written to be accessible for self-advocates. For practical reasons, it only begins to cover the vast amount of information available about human sexuality. As such, the guide is intended to serve as an introduction and a stepping stone to further conversations; however, the best approach to teaching sex education to individuals with disabilities is through face-to-face interaction and repeated learning over an extended period of time.

OAR recognizes that not all teens and emerging adults on the autism spectrum will benefit from an online and largely text-based resource such as this one. Additionally, this guide is directed towards teenagers and young adults – the content goes into more detail than younger children are ready for. Based on feedback from adults on the autism spectrum, as well as researchers and professionals, the guide does go into detail on sensitive topics, such as masturbation and various sexual activities. Some of the sections may match your child's needs; others may not. Users can select the sections they are interested in or navigate through the guide from beginning to end. We encourage parents to preview the content before sharing with their children, to ensure that this resource matches their needs.

Finally, we have compiled a list of resources at the end of this page that can be used as supplements or substitutes to this guide, depending on what works best for your child.

This guide ...

- **is not** intended to be a comprehensive sex education resource for the general population, but for individuals on the spectrum who require specific and direct guidance on various issues relevant to their needs.
- **is not** intended to serve as a stand-alone sex education resource or as a substitute for information or advice from a medical professional.
- **does not** use fear or shame to discourage readers from engaging in sexual behavior. There is no evidence to suggest that such negative messaging will delay sexual activity. Rather, negative tactics may have harmful effects on an individual's personal growth and sexuality.
- **does** encourage reflection on topics related to relationships and sexuality. The guide aims to provide information so that self-advocates can understand their values and make their own choices.
- **does** include language that is gender-inclusive and affirming to support LGBTQIA+ people on the spectrum.

Tips on Discussing Sexuality Topics

While our focus is on people 15 and older, questions about sex and sexuality usually begin much earlier. Here are some tips for talking with children about these topics regardless of age.

- Use and teach correct terminology. While colloquial and slang terms are commonly used to describe sexual body parts and sexual acts, it's important that people on the spectrum learn proper terminology so that they can be understood by others. This is especially true if they need to report



abuse. For example, it is helpful to use technical terms such as “vagina” and “vulva,” while at the same time clarifying when such terms should be used in social contexts.

- Answer questions with accuracy and honesty.
- Use positive language when discussing and correcting information; for example, “A lot of people think that because of the movies, but really what happens is...”
- Use clear visual cues to help your child learn concepts. Make sure those cues are specific, so they are not generalized to inappropriate settings.
- Validate your child’s questions so he or she feels comfortable asking them – “That’s a great question.”
- Ask questions to find out what your child knows (or *thinks* he or she knows) to get a baseline for further conversation; for example, “What do you know about how pregnancy happens?”
- Find teachable moments when topics such as pregnancy, pads or tampons, or sex come up in conversation or in the media, such as in songs or movies.
- Do not be judgmental, hostile, or use fear tactics that could make your child feel ashamed.
- If you don’t have an answer right away, be straightforward and say, “I don’t know, let’s find out” or “I need time to think about that,” and then make sure to return to the conversation later.
- If you don’t feel comfortable discussing a specific topic, be direct in saying that, and move on to the next question, or suggest a topic you do feel comfortable talking about. Utilize other resources to return to the topic at an appropriate time.

Finding the “Right Fit”

We encourage you to examine this guide before introducing it to your child to ensure that it meets your specific needs. You may choose to focus on a limited number of topics as challenges arise, or have your child peruse the entire guide before approaching you with questions. Just as autism is a spectrum, so is there a spectrum of resources, some of which may not meet your unique needs. If you need supplemental material, or if your child’s needs do not match what is offered in this resource, we have compiled a list of Sex Ed [Additional Resources](#) that you may find helpful.