



## Preparing for “The Talk”: Ways to get ready to talk about sexuality, relationships, and identity

**A presentation by Dr. Eileen Crehan on April 13, 2023**

0:04

Hello everyone, and thank you for joining today's webinar. Preparing for “The Talk”: Ways to get ready to Talk about Sexuality, Relationships, and Identity.

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Before we get started, I would like to go over a few housekeeping items, so you know how to participate in today's event.

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To the right of your screen is the Control Panel.

0:26

As an attendee, you have the option of listening in using your computer, or by phone. To switch from computer audio to phone, just select *Phone Call* in the audio panel, and follow the dial in instructions.

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If you're having trouble hearing me, please send a message through the Questions pane, and we will assist you.

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Later in today's session, Eileen will mention some resources that will be linked in the Chat.

0:55

Please feel free to engage with and ask about these links as they are mentioned.

1:00

Additionally, at the end of today's event, you will receive a certificate of attendance via email.

1:07

Since your mic is muted by default, you can submit questions to our presenter by typing them into the questions pane at any time.

1:15

We will hold off on answering any questions until the end of the presentation.

1:24

Since most of you are now here, let's get started.

1:30

To those of you who have just joined us, good afternoon and welcome to today's webinar. Preparing for "The Talk": Ways to get ready to talk about sexuality, relationships, and identity.

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My name is Clara and I am the host for today's event. It's great to have you all here today.

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I have the distinct pleasure of introducing today's speaker, Eileen Crehan.

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Dr. Eileen Crehan is a licensed, clinical psychologist specializing in autism and neurodivergents in adolescence and adulthood.

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Her research lab at Tufts University focuses on improving access to care using methods developed in collaboration with autistic individuals, inner clinical practice, Pegasus Consulting. Doctor Crehan conducts assessments with adults and works with organizations to improve accessibility and understanding of autism across the lifespan.

2:31

So without further ado, I'll now turn it over to Eileen Crehan.

2:36

Go ahead and take it away.

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Thank you so much Clara. I appreciate it.

2:43

Hello everyone.

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It's nice to see everybody as it were. And I'm really excited to be here to talk to you about "The Talk". And this is one of my favorite topics to share with families, in part, because I think we don't talk about it enough, and I think people have a lot of questions and it can feel sort of isolating, so I'm thrilled that you're here today to make a plan a little bit.

3:05

Alright, so, let's get started.

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So, I'm gonna start off with just a brief overview of, sort of a worst-case and best case scenario. So let's say an event happens that is really broad, but let's say something related to sexuality, so maybe someone pulled down their pants on the bus, or they're masturbating at school, or something like that. Right. There's a big, strong reaction, right.

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Parents get called, especially, you know, if it happens in a school setting or a work setting. I might get called, right, that, the team brings in, in somebody else. And so what we get is this association of sexual behavior and a negative reaction. Right? And that brings about feelings of shame. Right? If you're like, oh, something like the sexuality happened, and now everyone is upset.

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There's a decreased chance of sharing or asking questions next time. And this is something both that I see a lot clinically, but also that's been shown in the literature a number of times that when we researched this associating shame and sexuality, is not a big jump for many people. OK. So, we don't like this, right? This is a thumbs down. This is not an ideal outcome. Right? Because we want people to be asking questions or sharing information about sexuality so we can give them the best information possible. Right? So here's a new scenario for you to imagine. Alright.

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We had positive, proactive, frequent conversations about sexuality. OK. Then, the event is still going to happen, right? I like to make the point that just because we talk a lot about sexuality and make good plans for sexual behaviors, even if they're unexpected, you know, positive ones that could still be going to happen. But now, that door for communication is already open, right? We are ready sir, run through that door, and talk about what's going on. There are resources that, maybe, if they're not already in hand, people know where to find them. So people feel supported both at the individual, you know, who's engaging in sexual behavior and the people supporting that person, right?

And so then we all get to go home with increased knowledge and more prosocial behaviors.

5:05

So obviously, this is a bit of... a bit of a sunny version of how things can go. But generally speaking, I would give that a thumbs up, right? We want to be having these conversations ahead of time, so that we are best prepared. First, to encourage best, positive outcomes and also to avoid negative and or dangerous. Alright.

5:23

So here we are! You made it here to this webinar. I'm not sure where you're situated. I am up here in Boston, Massachusetts although today is 85 degrees. So, it doesn't really feel like a very Boston Day. But, you made time in your schedule to come learn about this and think about this. So, I would imagine, you know, you're all at different points in your journey, right? Maybe you're just starting to think about sexuality and relationships. You've been meaning to get to it. Maybe you've already started having conversations, you know, with your kids, or with your students, and then you're like, what are some new tools I could infuse in here? So first I would say well done! Right? You're here on some level. The importance of this topic is not lost on you.

6:02

And you hopefully have a little bit of sense of some of the great reasons to talk about sexuality, right? We know talking about sexuality and relationships does good things for satisfaction in relationships. It serves a protective role against abuse. It's actually one of the only evidence-based tools we have, and helps to reduce the risk of abuse, especially for individuals with developmental disabilities. Later age of first pregnancy is associated with early access to sex education. But, so what keeps us from happening, right? We know that

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autistic individuals, in particular, received less sex ed, or that it's less accessible when it is offered. And we're hearing from autistic adults that, "Hey, like, I would like to have more resources on this more, more support to help me have access to this information, sort of operate my body in the way that I need to on a day-to-day basis."

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So other people have asked this question before. You know, why isn't this going as smoothly as we would like to? And there's two big barriers and we're going to focus a little bit on the barrier state. Then, we're going to spend more time talking about making a plan, right? I run optimistic by nature and so, I try to frame it that way and hope that you can walk away with some sort of concrete tools to try.

7:13

So the two big barriers: Knowledge and comfort.

7:17

OK. What we know about sexuality is a really big predictor and how we talk about sexuality. And what we feel comfortable talking about also intersects with that which I think is not our job to make.

Sorry, I just need to break in for half a second. I think we're hearing your earring through your microphone and is tapping a little bit.

Oh, I'm so sorry!

A few people have mentioned it. Sorry.

That's distracting. No, that's fine. Let me mitigate that.

7:44

Is that any better?

7:46

Perfect. Thank you.

7:47

OK, yes. My enthusiastic, movement style. It comes back to bite me. OK. Thank you for letting me know.

7:55

So let's talk about knowledge.

8:00

So first, when we think about sexuality and relationship education, we are talking about a whole bunch of different pieces of information, right? And there's not really a good working definition that all the sex educators have sat down and been like, "This is what sex ed is." So usually, things that come to mind, things like bodies in development and puberty, right? Oftentimes things like sexually transmitted infections, contraception, sometimes topics like boundaries...

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We are best, and by we, I mean, people, either, sharing sex ed information with autistic individuals. Or, you know, even sort of more general settings. We are better and have more resources for talking about some of these more literal topics, like the different parts of the body...things like that. The topics that we have a little bit more trouble with are some of the more socially latent constructs. And inconveniently, those are the ones that we're hearing from self advocates that they would like more information about, right? So there's a big responsibility on us as providers, as family members, to just sort of up our game...in that, in those spaces. And they've done a bunch of studies, particularly asking parents of autistic children, you know, "What is your, you know, comfort and knowledge about these different areas?" And it follows those same patterns that I just mentioned...so things very literally about body parts and taking care of body and hygiene and things like that are more comfortable. Whereas things like, you know, consent and identity, there's less comfort sharing information about those topics.

9:26

There's a lot of interpersonal and social aspects of sexuality and relationships, right? So most of my work is really focused on this social component and understanding, you know, what people already know, what they want to know, sort of you know, interacting with other people, sort of getting their goals met. And then we have this second sort of more complicated layer that's coming up is that the landscape of sexuality, relationships, and identities has changed a lot in recent years, right?

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The Internet has made a really big difference in this. So things like pornography and sexting are topics that our children are exposed to really, really early in their life. And that impacts their development and how they think about sexuality and relationships. And that we need to be prepared for how kids can learn about these topics.

10:13

And because we don't, you know, probably didn't learn about those ourselves, right? Because, you know, many of us were around before things like online corridors or sexting were either as common or as easy as they are now.

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So this...this knowledge piece though, it's not just all of us individually being like, "Gosh. I wish I had more resources." We have sort of a systemic issue here. Just to maybe give a little bit of comfort to the fact that, you know, it's, it's not just you and not being able to find things. And so they've done a couple of research, have been a few studies looking specifically at developmental disabilities and access to sexual health education.

10:50

And this one model shows that there's five big drivers of the gaps in sexual health education for students...and students and young adults with developmental disabilities. And we're not going to go through all of them, but a couple to keep in mind, right? This



lack of policies and standards over here on the right. There aren't particular rules, or they vary a lot from state to state, or district to district about what should be covered in sexuality relationship education. So it's hard to come up with this overarching plan to address the problems if it's not being addressed, right?

11:22

Embarrassment, right? Saying oh, you know saying, "I can't wait to have this discussion about sexual behaviors with my child". Not a common thing. I usually hear from parents sometimes, which is also totally great. But you know, knowing when to bring it up and how to bring it up is a complicated thing that we don't get a lot of direct instruction on.

Parental concerns about what talking about sexuality will do, right?

11:44

Well, that makes someone too interested in sexuality. Will it be the right amount of information? What's the timing? And then especially if they are providers who are also listening in is limited professional education, right? Sort of mastery of understanding and talking about sexuality and relationship education, especially in autism, is extremely limited and hard to come by, right? So we haven't really set ourselves up for success. There's a quote here about the bystander effect that we see a lot of times in this space. So that, "It's a right to know about sexual health education, and it's the right of a child to know how their body works. It's a right...but I don't know whose responsibility..." And that was a quote for some of the participants in the study that chart is from. So, we need to be doing it, but we don't totally know how and we aren't given a lot of support.

12:32

So, excuse me, this is the study that we did in my lab a couple of years ago where we surveyed autistic adults in the US and we asked, "Hey, there are all these sex ed topics. Tell us where you got information about this topic from."

12:47

And we asked about you know, STIs and puberty and identity and things like that. But I want to highlight this consent side. OK? The big blue piece of this pie and the big red piece of the pie...those are internet sources.

13:02

With the blue one being vaguely defined here...website of verifiable quality. So, something from, you know, like a medical site or dot org, or something like that. And the internet, just being like you Google something and whatever comes up first. So the quality could be really, really variable.

13:17

This small, dark, blue piece of the pie and the teeny, teeny tiny one, 1.5%. That's care providers. And that covers doctors, therapists, a really wide range of people that these autistic participants are seeing. And something like consent...that concerns me that people are learning about that topic online. Right? And we saw similar numbers for that are non-autistic group, that the internet was, was preferred, which I don't think it's something we're going to put back in the box. But I think it also highlights that, gosh, you know, we're not the default as providers. Right? Parents are doing a little bit better, there, up above 5%. But for the most part, consent, which is a skill that we can start learning about really early in life, as part of our social development, is something where the Internet is the go to. Right? So we've got some opportunity for growth. I hope it is that way.

14:09

We also did a study with a couple of researchers at UNH in Lincoln Memorial, where we asked both parents and school professionals...this could be teachers or aids or something like that. And we asked them about all of the sex ed topics. And we said, "Hey, what you know, are you teaching about this topic, and who should be teaching about this topic? Like, should it be you?"

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And what I want to highlight here, and I think, is a positive takeaway is that, you know, some topics are being taught about more consistently than others, but everyone thinks that they should be doing more. Right? And this gets at that knowledge component. Like, what is getting in the way, right? Is it knowing what to say? Is it having the resources in what to say? And it's really knowing how to have these conversations. Right? And this was particularly for young adults with developmental disabilities. And so for many of the topics, you'll see the rates, you know, the dark line on the left is what parents...so *they are teaching*, and the dotted line being *what they should teach*. These *should teach lines* are fairly high. For most topics, it's above, or for all topics, it's above 80%. So parents are like, "Yes. I want and need to have a big role in this." But the rate at which they are teaching is a little bit lower.

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And then whose responsibility is from the school's perspective, you know, varied a little bit obviously. But, things like you know anatomy, the teachers were pretty clear on like, "Yes, that should be us and we're doing a fairly decent job at it." But you see some topics here, like sexual orientation. STIs is a big one where parents didn't feel like they were doing as much as they wanted to be doing. The gaps between what's happening and what they want to have happen is really, really big. So, you know, I know we do some programming directed toward autistic adults and teens in my lab, where we talk about sexuality and relationships. But more and more, I think, programming that's designed to support parents and providers and educators is really gonna make more progress is what I'm hoping, right? If we could do both, I think that would be the best case scenario.

16:06

Alright, so let's talk a little bit about comfort, right? So, we've established there's a bit of a knowledge gap, right? We're gonna work on that. So let's switch gears. Comfort, like, how we feel talking about these different topics related to sexuality and relationships, right? I'm in sort of a lucky spot where I do this all day, every day, right? And so, you know, being able to sit here and say, "OK. Letting everyone say the word penis and not

giggle at the beginning of the group is something I'm pretty used to. That may or may not be something that you do in your day-to-day life. I recognize people have other types of work that they do because of the span of their week.

16:40

But how can we build our comfort and to build comfort, we first need to identify where we're uncomfortable right? So let me give a couple of examples, and then we'll actually do some self examination. OK?

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So, in a similar study sample of autistic adults, we asked, "OK. Of the sex ed topics, which ones do you want more information on or which ones do you wish you had more information on?"

17:02

And what we see is that these are the big four in order: sexual orientation, gender identity, consent, and assertiveness. Those are the skills and topics that people want more information.

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This reflects some of those policy and knowledge pieces that we hear about. We know that sexual orientation and gender identity is more diverse in autistic populations, right? We also know that, in the US especially, over 85% in the sort of most recent data that I've seen of our sex ed programs don't talk about sexual orientation and gender identity. Or, they only focus on normal heterosexual relationships or something like that. So by the time people are adults and maybe not getting school based sex ed, they don't have a good place or sort of resource to get the information that they need.

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Consent and assertiveness, as I'm sure might feel similar to some listeners, is concerning right? Consent and assertiveness are such huge topics. We know that rates of sexual abuse, particularly in autism, are higher than for non autistic groups.

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That's not great. OK. And not that teaching about consent and assertiveness is going to just solve that...

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But to give people a sense of like, if there's a level of risk that they feel sort of empowered to be asserted and to navigate consent situations, to me, is a really high priority, right. And again, one of those topics we don't get a lot of training on...in preparation on. So, building comfort and talking about these things And when consent happens, and when consent doesn't happen, especially, because it can be such a nuanced topic, is something where, where we need a lot more resources, and we're hearing that from self advocates.

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So I think it's a good space for us to be listening.

18:42

Um, So how can we build comfort in talking about relationships? So this is an example from a group I've run recently Where we essentially do like a sorting task, right? And so sometimes, you can do pictures on these. This is one, you know, I print this and cut it out. And we talk about what are your goals in a romantic relationship, right? And for older kids versus younger kids, you would change the topics and things like that. But there's some really important work that Tony Atwood has done about, you know, talking to autistic teens in particular about their goals, right? And so to start practicing those skills of assertiveness and autonomy and sort of decision making around romantic relationships, right? This can also be a good way at home. If you're not sure how to start

this conversation, it can be sort of a lower barrier to entry type of activity, right. You can also do it for other people you know, or characters that you see on TV. Right?

19:35

So, let's say, OK. Who's someone you know if you want to get married someday or you want to be dating somebody? It's important to you that the person is funny. Or maybe, it's important to you that the person likes to stay in, right? Or it's important to you that they go out and do a bunch of things. So, what are some of the characteristics and attributes of people? And then you can you share a little bit about your own experience or the experience of people that you know and build some of those sort of peer and family based conversations?

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And this can be, I think, a fun one. And you can be a little bit silly with it if you want to. Like, "Oh, I really, you know, I will only date a Star Wars fan." Right? Something like that where, you know, you can go in any direction, right? You know your family member best. So, this can be one good way to start, sort of build that comfort without directly being like, "When we're in a relationship...this is what we need to be doing." Right? Which might feel a little bit, a little bit more formal than you might want.

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All right, so, let's talk a little bit about making a plan.

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I sort of laugh as I present this slide. You know, it's just four easy steps everyone. And then you do that. You have a plan and sex ed is taken care of. But these are four good places to start.

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Alright. So, we'll just go from the top. Reflecting. So I want you to reflect a little bit on your own, and I'm gonna give you a couple of prompts for this. And I'm gonna actually be

quiet for a couple of minutes and let you think. So, thinking about sexuality and relationship education and all the subtopics that are related, right? We talked about bodies, purity, pornography, masturbation, consent, assertiveness, identity. There's a whole list of them, right? So either you jot it down, or maybe, you know, type in your phone or something like that. Which topics like, pick one or two, feel fairly comfortable?

21:19

Like, OK. I'm ready to talk about this, and why do you think that might be? And then, I also want you to think of a topic or two when you're like maybe when I said it out loud or like, "Oh gosh. That, you know, that one really makes me nervous." Or, "I have no idea where to even start." What are those two and why do you think those?

21:36

OK, alright. So I'm gonna give you about...I'll give you about 60 seconds which is pretty short, but just so we can get to some of the resources. Topics that make you feel most comfortable. Topics that make you feel least comfortable.

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You're halfway through your minute, so try to generate a couple of things that might feel least comfortable if you're not there yet.

22:42

Alright. So, hopefully, you have a couple of topics. And if we were live and in person,

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I'd make you turn to a buddy, one of those professors that makes you turn and actually talk to a friend, for better or for worse. Because usually, there are some good trends, right, that people have topics that make them uncomfortable, that are, that are similar, or feel comfortable. And you might also find someone who's, you know, topic that makes them really uncomfortable. That's your strength, and then you can sort of help each other brainstorm. Hang on to that list for yourself, right? Because, you know, if you're

here, you're probably thinking about this and trying to make a plan. So how did you learn about those topics, right? Whether you're comfortable or uncomfortable about them? And usually that can give you a fair amount of insight into why it might be comfortable or uncomfortable. Maybe you really liked how you learned about it. Maybe it was never talked about.

23:27

Right? You know, I have a very Irish Catholic Nana who, you know, has passed away. But I think if she knew this was my day-to-day job, talking about sexuality on the internet, I cannot imagine she would be thrilled. OK. And so how can I increase my own knowledge on this topic? And this is a tougher question, right? Because you know, if you knew how to do that, you probably would be doing it, but I'll mention some resources as we move through today that you can try. But, identifying a particular topic instead of just thinking about sexuality and relationship education broadly, which is a huge topic, is the starting point, is a good stepping off point. So that's why I want us to start there.

24:04

The second thing that I want you to think about is you as a facilitator. A little throwback with the Peanuts characters here about the trombone with the plunger going “Whaa-whaa-whaa” when sex ed comes up, right? The most common question I get asked in these trainings is, “How do I talk about these things?” Like what type of language should I be using? The names of, let's say anatomical body parts, or should I be using slang that my child might hear at school? Right? And these are a lot of things I think it'd be really good to decide how you want to present this information. Right? There have been some really interesting studies on the role of humor and teaching sexuality and relationship education. Of course, it's a big, serious, lifelong topic, right?

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Where no nothing, no one's denying that. But, if you can make it to a conversation about sexuality with an adolescent or a younger kid, autistic or not, that's not even the point of this. Without something funny happening, you know, please call me. Because this stuff



that comes up is just, it can be really, really funny. And so my approach has always been, let's start off with that understanding like, this might be embarrassing, right? We might say some things that you haven't said out loud before. That sets the stage for comfort...that it's OK to make a mistake, and bring up something that you haven't been able to bring up in other spaces but that you might really need information about, right? I, 150% of the time, would rather a student say something uncomfortable to me than to ask somebody else who might give them bad information, might be putting them in a dangerous situation. Right? I want to be that person. Right? Now that being said, not everybody uses humor, right? You'd also not have to do that. But there's been some interesting research on how that sort of an accessible tool, for some, for some teens in particular.

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You know, I've had some families in the past where they're saying, "You know what, having a conversation out loud about this is just not something I can ever picture myself doing." And in two slides, we'll talk about how we can get other people to help us. But also had one really creative mom who used a notebook. And so, you know, she wrote a little bit in it and sort of would slip it under her son's door, and if he had questions, he would put it in there. And that was how they communicated back and forth, for a long time questions relating to sexuality which was beautiful right? She said, "It saved me that moment of hearing the question and feeling panicked." You know that was a tool that she could use in other realms with her son, so if that's something you think your child might be interested, or, like a Word doc or something like that, that can be another way to do it, to avoid some of the face to face, but still encouraging the conversation.

26:40

Alright, so, you know, taking the time to reflect on your own is a really important first step of this. I know, like, you know, clinical psychologists, we love self reflection. But you, you have to figure out your own strengths and weaknesses when it comes to making a plan for sex ed. Really important. Don't skip that step, OK?

26:56

Let's talk about identifying your resources. So, there's two types of resources here that I have that I'm talking about.

27:01

One is your team, OK? And, I mean that sort of a loose sense, like it can be your educational team, or, you know, a health team, or something like that. But I really mean the key players in your life, right, or your child's life, who can help with this, right? A big issue that we see, right, that bystander effect, this dispersion of responsibility, for sex ed for autistic teens, is everyone thinks everyone else is doing it. And other people are not talking about it.

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So then, kids are left without that information.

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And so, I provide a really brief list up here at the top, like just some sex ed topics, and all, you know, I've shared the hands out handouts in the link you can download these for free on my site. You can also remake it. It's not that fancy of a form. And so, picking out which topics you're thinking about for your child, or for yourself, right? And then essentially assigning them down in the chart down here. Now, this is a really vague template. I've got parents and family. You would want specific names in there, right? Because, you know, if you think it's going to be dad and dad thinks, it's going to be mom. That's not going to leave us in a good spot, right? Teachers, again, specific names, things like that. And so, you fill in who you think is going to talk about all these topics and topics can occur under more than one person, right? Like the pediatrician, for example, might be someone who's talking about STIs but maybe you're also talking about that at school or at home. But then, you have this document that you share with anyone who's on that list up at the top.

28:29

And that is how we help to reduce that dispersion of responsibility, where everyone thinks the information is coming from somewhere else. That also allows you to say, “Hey, here's some topics I really want to talk about at home and that I don't want to be discussed.” Let's say by teachers. And it lets you set that standard before, you know, something happens in school that you didn't want to be discussed, right? It also helps, you know, if there's something where you say, “OK, here's a topic I want to prepare for a little bit and learn more about it.” That's great, But if there's a topic where you say, “Yeah, I really don't feel comfortable talking about this. You can find someone who does, right?” I will say you know I have my friends with kids. I've been nominated on a few of these forms.

29:10

“Oh, Auntie Eileen can talk to you about masturbation.” So, you know, you have to let the person know that they're on your list. I want to reiterate that's an important part of it. But having this plan proactively is great. You know, if you're using an IEP, this can be a good thing to bring to share and say, “Hey school team, are you doing this? I was hoping you would or thought you would, let's talk about it to make a plan.”

29:31

And the second part of identifying your resources is actually places to get information for yourself and to learn a little bit more. And I've got lots of resources. We'll share those at the end. But, so maybe mark off a couple of things that might be helpful for some of your areas where you feel at least comfortable? Keep those in mind as we're moving forward.

29:52

Alright, so let's talk a little bit about feedback. OK. So you've reflected on yourself as a facilitator. You've identified some areas where you want to learn more. You sought out those resources. You know that Uncle Jimmy is going to talk to your kid about this topic and you're going to talk about this topic. You're feeling pretty good.

30:12

Did the plan work? And how do you know if a plan is working right? This is something that comes up a lot in autism research and in clinical spaces. Like, oh, I thought we did talk about this and then maybe something negative happened. Or, you know, a comment came up, and it didn't feel quite right. We do have great assessment tools that we can use sort of ahead of, time, right? And this is a problem in the field of research. And researchers and clinicians are working on, but I don't have a lot of great answer for that quite yet.

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Here is oftentimes where I try to encourage parents and educators to rely on things that are happening in the moment. Right?

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So if you're watching a TV show or a video game, right, there are lots of small passing moments where consent comes up for example. Or assertiveness or touching things like that. Examples that your child might be seeing at, you know, at school seeing other peers engage in. If there's stories in the news, you know, unfortunately, that tends to be a good source of, of examples. And so seeing what the sort of responses to some of those examples, if your kid can sort of engage in those conversations and reflections right.

31:22

If that's a tool that works for you, that's fantastic. Great. But if it's not, I have a little bit of a guide, which I use with families in particular.

31:34

First, I'll begin or top of the page again, like, feel free to edit this and change topics that might be more or less relevant to your particular situation. But, which topics need to be covered? Right? And it might be all of them, right? And so then, we have a timeline down below when to cover each topic.

31:53

It's not sort of within the scope of this presentation, but the when to talk about different topics is a really complicated question. But there's also resources on that and some of the information they'll share will show you that.

32:05

So I would say, think a little bit about what is of highest priority, and then how you might want to approach that topic, right? Something like consent. Ideally, that would be, you know, consent should be a skill and boundaries that we're talking about from when kids are really, really little, right? I've got a toddler at home.

32:22

We are working on body boundaries nearly constantly. And so filling in a timeline of when you want to start each topic, you know, wouldn't be, you know, talking about boundaries with a toddler appropriate talking about pornography with a toddler, Not appropriate, right?

32:38

And so, making a bit of a plan, if you're like, "Oh, I wish I had started this years ago." It's never too late to talk about these topics, right? The best time to start is as early as you can.

32:50

Or now.

32:51

So, just whatever you jump in with, that's totally fine, right? It's always better to have had the information than to not, right? So, starting a little bit, you know, a rough timeline in your head of when you think these will happen and then pick one topic. Similar to what we talked about before from this top piece and say, "OK. I'm going to make a particular plan to talk about, let's say, public versus private behaviors."

33:14

So you're going to come over and jot this on the top of this form. And then you're really going to break down the learning profile and interests of, you know, your child or your student to make a really specific plan, right? The details here will be really helpful. I would love to see something like this included in an IEP. If you are living in Massachusetts and have an IEP for autism, we're actually trying to look for some of this information. We would love to hear from you. But so far, not a ton of templates to build on. So what are some communication strengths for this particular topic? So let's say private versus public. Let's say your kid is really private, right? You know, that at some point you had a conversation about keeping clothes on and so that is true all the time and deviating from that, like, you know, in front of a parent or a sibling can be really upsetting, right?

34:03

How might a sensory profile impact this topic, right? So maybe having somebody too close, right? In someone's personal space would be really upsetting, so how can you talk about, OK, you know, that indicator that someone is too close, that might also be a good time, you know, not to do private behaviors.

34:21

And you know, up in the top right we've got generalization efforts. So, how often do you want to review this information? What sort of teaching tools down below are you going to be using? You know, are you just going to describe what's happening or are there videos you're going to use or they're going to be picture schedules? Are there internet resources? Let's say you've got a kid who really likes that. You know, you could say the same thing, but seeing it come from the internet is more effective. Can we find a proxy for that?

34:47

Then, this bottom right corner, sort of similar to the planning document before, how is it going to be presented? By whom? When should I start? What resources will I need to really get into the specifics of a plan?

34:59

And, again, all of these you can download for free, or the slides will be available, so please feel free to use these and edit them as you see fit.

35:08

So that's you collecting a little bit of feedback. And, you know, maybe, amending the plan as you go. And, you know, continuing to just build on strengths and address areas where melodies and building...maybe the way that you thought it would or wanted to. But also as the driver of this type of education, you know, introduction to these topics, how are we going to keep ourselves accountable? And let's see, it is April, right? New Year's resolutions were a few months ago.

35:35

If we were in person, I'd say raise your hands if you've kept up with all your resolutions. I would guess it's somewhat low, right?

35:42

And by April, oftentimes, people have forgotten about those. We have a lot going on, right? Things are busy. And then, what I hate to hear from families is like, "I started to work on this and there were too many things. And I just feel terrible that I didn't keep up with it." Right? Which happens. We're human.

35:58

But, how are some ways you can build in some accountability to make sure this gets done because there isn't a natural leader. Like, if you're thinking about learning, you know, maybe self care skills or learning. You know, to read. You know, it's not clear who the designated leader of accessing this information is.

36:14

So, accountability. Set small goals. If you leave today and you're like, "I saw the 14 topics listed on the handout that Dr. Crehan mentioned, and we're going to do all those by

June.” I would say not good. OK. It’s too much. Right? It’s not feasible. So, you're sort of setting yourself up to fail a bit there. You can certainly make a plan to do that. That would be great. But that wouldn't be covering the topics and giving them their attention that they're doing, right? What do you already do, right? And I'm always guilty of this. I'm like, “OK. I'm gonna go home and I'm going to, you know, call this person and go meet with them and make a plan.”

36:47

My thing is...I'm a reader. OK. If I have it in a book and the book sits next to my bed, I will probably open it up.

36:55

I will probably fall asleep with it on my face because I mentioned toddler, right? But that is the way I learn information, right? Podcasts are everywhere these days, right? And podcasts about sexuality are particularly around autism also. More and more of those, especially ones by self advocates, are some really great ones. So build on what you already do and set those really small goals.

37:16

Tie tracking your planning that you make, from a couple of slides ago, to some sort of regular event, right? Something like IEP meetings or birthdays at a minimum. So you've got once a year. You're looking at the plan. Where am I off?

37:29

Where do I want to recalibrate? Or like, the first week of the month, right? I've got this really great virtual group of parents up here, and we meet once a month at the beginning of the month. And we talk a little bit at the beginning about a particular sex ed topic. This is for parents of autistic adults.

37:47



And then, they check in with each other on their own goals, right? And just having that minute to protect for this has been hugely helpful, right? Or get a friend involved or reminders on your phone, right? Let's rely on technology. It's everywhere anyway. Let's rely on it.

38:01

Let's make it work for us a little bit in an important and helpful way, OK? Part of why I mentioned this to get a friend involved is another thing that I really hear from parents is that, you know, "I've had these questions, and I feel like I'm the only one going through this". Right? Or, "I don't want to bring this up with let's say my pediatrician because you know, there might be some sort of stigma around it."

38:23

Questions about sexuality, especially sexual behaviors, right things like masturbating in public, or accessing online pornography when kids are younger than you thought.

38:33

It's much more common than people think. And certainly, you know, I have a little bit of selection bias since this is my line of work. But even then, the more I talk to parents, the more they're like, oh, this, you know, once I brought up with my friend, they also went through something similar. So, you know, see how it feels to get a friend involved. That might actually be a source of support for a couple of different reasons.

38:55

Let's talk about some resources. So let's get to some things that you can explore once we end.

39:01

So, I'm going to bring up...there are a few. Alright, so there's a whole list here.

39:07

And I'm going to show you what they look like. Sort of in live and in person. So, this is the Sex Ed for Self-Advocates site. This is made by the Organization for Autism Research. You may have heard of them with self advocates, right, which I think is a particular strength of this. I actually always recommend this even when I'm not giving a webinar for OER. So, it's just fantastic. Part of what I really like about it is that you can pick which topic you want to learn about. So let's stick with public and private since we've been talking about that a bit. When you click on it,

39:43

there's a video that introduces the topic and then what is said down below it. And it breaks a topic down into smaller pieces and you have the option of taking a little quiz at the end. Right? The format is accessible. It touches on topics that autistic adults have shared that like, hey, this would be really good to talk about, which I think is really important for creating new sex ed materials. So explore that, right?

40:05

If you're, if you know, you hear a question, like, "Wow, I'm not totally sure where I'm gonna go with that". You know, look this up late at night. See what information you can glean. The second one is the Sex and the States site. And this is not particular to autism, but it's really important to be aware of because there's a lot of updated sort of legal information on here. So you can click on your state. So I'm in Massachusetts, as I mentioned. So I'll click on this, and then if you scroll down, it summarizes all the important sort of sexuality and relationship and identity information in that particular state. And they update it pretty regularly. So things like age of minority or age of consent, right, which would be really important for safety and relationships? Things like sexting, right? So sexting in Massachusetts, there's no Massachusetts law specifically, but there are federal laws. And so that means that if you are sexting, that's a federal offense, right? And so it makes it really clear, I think, what can be sort of complicated legal rules about things. And so oftentimes I will refer parents and self advocates and educators to

this Just to see what are the rules and your states. You could talk about those ahead of time.

41:17

Amaze.org, briefly again, this is not autism specific, but the format is really accessible for visual learners. They're short. They're usually 2 to 3 minute videos about all sorts of health topics. The consent ones in particular are really good. Healthy relationship ones are really good. There's some really helpful videos on gender identity and sexual orientation. So either these are things that I use in groups or directly with patients that I'm working with or attend parents to watch. These are sort of like having some discussions at home, because they're sort of fun. Right. They're very colorful. There's usually like a character that you get introduced to. It's nice. It's a nice resource.

41:55

Just a couple more to share with you and then we'll pause for some questions. The Porn Conversation. Right. This is a free resource.

42:03

The point of it is that children are exposed to pornography at an extremely young age. And the average age is around eight. OK. And just because things are on phones and they see things and hear things. And so this was not a problem years and years ago. But too often, exposure to pornography is what shapes some people's first impressions of sexuality.

42:27

That's usually not great, right? You know, certainly there is some pornography out there that is, you know, they discuss consent and things like that. But for most of it, that's not what's happening. And so this is a curriculum that is focused on starting the conversation from what the kids already know, right? They might have some ideas about sexuality and relationships in their head so that we can address some, you know, potentially problematic themes. And so, let's say, you know, as a family member, there's downloads

for different age ranges, and those are free. You can pop in your email address and get sent to you. It's really fantastic. So, now available in English, Spanish, French, and German.

43:01

And then, two last things. So, my lab website, we maintain a sex ed resource list and all of these are live links. First one being that, the OAR materials. And, we're continually updating these materials to consult books to read. I just mentioned, you know, a couple of things like being a reader, some resources, or groups that might be good to check in with. Some television shows, some of the work that we've done is cited down below. And so, you know, feel free to use this, share this, whatever you want to do with that. These are all the, we just compiled these. We haven't created these plans. And then the last one is when I was talking about the resources in the handouts on my clinical page. These are all free. So you just click Download, or create a team chart, or the self reflection activity, and it will pop up and you can print this at home and do whatever self reflection you would like to do with that.

43:57

So, those are all there, and they'll be posted with the slides, so you can keep coming back to these resources as you need them, and sort of find them useful, hopefully.

44:09

So, let me switch back for a second to my slides here.

44:15

Two current resources actually. We are currently running a virtual sex ed program. There's an evidence based sex ed curriculum that's specifically for Autistic teens. It was developed in the Netherlands, and we are seeing how it works as a virtual group, and how it works in the US context. So, you have an autistic team between the ages of 13 and 17. We're going to start a new group, actually, in a few weeks so this would be a good time to reach out. And we're also trying to understand a little bit more about how

young, autistic children think about gender, right? So we're doing little interviews and virtual tasks where we have different toys that, stereotypically, toys that girls play, boys play with, in which toys would you like to play with. And so that's something we're just getting started which has been a lot of fun so far. Both of these are paid to participate, and we can hopefully do a little bit of forward motion when we're thinking about sexuality and relationship education.

45:16

And the last thing and just because purely we haven't gotten this up on the website yet, so I wanted to make sure that you had it.

45:23

I've done a couple of trainings recently specifically on gender identity and sexual orientation, and autism. And there's a great reading list that we have here that is about, you know, those topics. And they range from books written by self advocates for self advocates to some slightly more scientific ones. There's another book that I've been spending some time reading recently that's by a self advocate and it's called *The Autism Relationships Workbook*.

45:45

It's here so that by self advocates Joe Biel and Faith Harper. And so there's lots of good stuff out there. And I listed the Amazon links

45:53

so you can get a description, but support your local bookstores if you can.

45:58

Alright, I'll leave you with this so we have a few minutes for questions. But I want to really thank...we have a community advisory board that we work closely with on all the research studies that we run in our lab and the methods that we use.

46:12

And they're really fantastic about, you know, just helping us move the needle on some of these important topics. And then they worked with a great research team of graduate and undergraduate students here at Tufts. And if you're interested in studies, all of our studies are paid and most of them are still virtual. I don't need to tell you why. And then that's the direct link to the resource page. And then by my practice information on that has more sort of adult focused and sexuality related topics of both of those, you know, feel free to visit that you need. But thank you for listening and for taking that first step. Hopefully, as many come to talk about sexuality and relationships, and hopefully you have got something that you're walking away with that you can try at some point in the not so distant future.

46:56

I'm happy to take questions.

46:59

Yeah. And, you've got my info if you have any follow up.

47:02

Great. Thank you so much for the presentation Eileen.

47:06

So, this concludes the presentation and we're about to begin the Q&A session of today's webinar. So, just as a reminder, you can still submit your questions through the questions pane in your control panel. But, however, because time is limited, we may not be able to get through all of your questions. And if there are any questions that we were not able to get to today, we will try to get back to you via email.

47:29

And before we get started, I just want to point out that in your control panel, there is a section called handouts and that is where you can find a copy of today's presentation should you wish to download it.

47:41

OK, let's move on to the questions.

47:44

Alright, it looks like we have had a few come in here.

47:49

So our first question is, "I'm a BCA that works with children and teens living in the Bible Belt. I've encountered numerous families who are resistant to providing sexual instruction due to their religious beliefs. For example, masturbation is a sin.

48:08

Any suggestions on how to deal with this?"

48:11

Yes. That is a great question. So I actually did my clinical training down in Alabama and this is where I started a lot of this work. Which was, so we could, you know, probably connect offline about some of the, you know, maybe local resources depending on where you are.

48:25

But...a couple of things. There's this one really great article and I think it's linked on my lab site. But if not, I can send it to you and it's by Goldman. And it says, sort of like 13, I'm going to butcher the title but it was like "13...Comebacks to Objections to School Based Sex Ed."

48:43

You know, I tried to take the lens and my work that I think learning about our bodies is like a human right and the World Health Organization takes that.

48:51

But, what I often end up deferring to is this like, this is really a safety concern, right?

48:57

If we, you know, kids, adults, developmental disability or not, usually at some point, they get some sense about masturbation or the, you know, they can make their bodies feel good. And if the first person to show them that is someone who has bad intentions, that's really problematic, right? Because that person...that's gonna be hard to avoid that person, right? So, I do, in those situations, oftentimes, pose it as a protection piece and try and brainstorm, like what are some other ways around that?

49:25

I do think sometimes, some community around that because there are and I don't think I shared any of it today, but there are some, you know, religious based groups that do talk about this. And so then people sort of within the community, right, if you're in the same religious community, can talk about how they maybe also handled it. And then I also would sort of lead in slowly, right?

49:45

I wouldn't open with masturbation, which I think probably makes sense. But, finding a way to come up, you know, ask like, what the big questions are and in seeing if you could sort of slowly chart a path in that direction. I think that can be really useful in addition to that sort of peer network.

50:07

It's a tough spot, though.

50:11

Perfect, thank you so much for your response. Our next question is from Samantha. And the question is, "Is there materials for young adults?"

50:21



I saw the sex eds was specifically for 13 to 17 year olds, but I have a young lady who's definitely in her twenties so a bit outside of that age range.”

50:33

Yes. So we actually just finished an adult...a young adult group a couple of months ago.

50:40

When is the new one launching? I don't know off the top of my head.

50:44

But we always share when that happens on our social media accounts. Or we have on the...website. Like we have a mailing list where we send out announcements. But we should be having an adult round soon I would say. So, yeah.

50:58

So that would definitely be a possibility.

51:03

And those are real virtual so, hopefully accessible.

51:08

Perfect. Thank you so much. Our next question is from Gale.

51:13

and her question is, “My son who's 15 years old says he would like a girlfriend. But, he has a lot of difficulty just making friends.

51:25

How do I explain to him that he needs to learn to make friends first before he is ready for a more intimate relationship in terms that he would understand?”

51:35

Yeah, great question.

51:37

That timeline of relationships is tough, right?

51:42

Like, especially, because I think we oftentimes see in movies people meet, and then they're in love, and then, you know, they get married, or whatever comes next.

51:49

So there are a couple of ways to do this. There's one book. It's called *Intimate Relationships*. And I think the title...I think it says "High Functioning Autism". It's an older book since that would not be a term that we would use anymore, but by Davies and Dubie. And it's big. It's a long curriculum. But part of what I like about it is that there are a couple of visuals in there that talk about both the timeline, like being friends first and it labeled the different sort of stages of a relationship. So first, it's like acquaintances. Then, I think close friends and then romantic interest, and that like, you know, intimate relationships or something. I forget exactly the terms. So, that might be a good one.

52:28

Yeah, there's a bunch of handouts in there but a couple of those I ended up using really a lot. And another way is sometimes, although not always, some of the autistic teens I work with have either less access or less like interaction with some peer models, right?

52:42

So, oftentimes, students will learn that timetable from other relationships that they're seeing, right? They'll notice that people are being friends.

52:50

So, if there are people in your son's friend group who are doing that, try and make that really explicit. But, if there's not, are there other examples that you can think of? Like

maybe, you know, with you and your partner? Or if there's a sibling or you know, something that you could sort of think of as an example that you might both be familiar with.

53:09

And then sometimes I'll do a sort of more literal visual mapping of like...OK. So you want to, let's say, date, so what are some of the Dating Readiness skills?

53:21

And there's a couple of versions like those that are in the resource guide. And then I build them backwards. Like, OK. So before we get to that, so before we get to taking someone on a date, right? That requires, like, let's say, hygiene and making a plan. And having had, at least, you know, a couple of conversations.

53:38

And getting your phone number, text number, or something...incident.

53:42

Like sort of backward scaffolding the skills that would go into that. Like that was sort of vague, but that's a general overview.

53:53

Perfect, thank you so much. Our next question is from Jason and the question is, "How can I start this conversation with my child?"

54:04

Yes, so if your kid is verbal, I would say a couple of things. You know, you want the scene to be right, right?

54:15

So nowhere where there might be friends around. You don't want to increase the chances of them being like, "Oh, gross. You're embarrassing me in front of everyone." So minimizing the chances were that. I think a really good place to start can be...

54:29

You know, what do you know, right? What have you heard?

54:33

Or like, "Oh, did you hear about you know, this thing...we saw that, you know, cousin Katie brought a boyfriend. What do you think of that?" I think starting from what they know and building from that can be a really good place to start.

54:46

I feel that, you know, not to be a broken record. I rely a lot on the media, right? If there's a relationship that you're seeing and sort of pausing and be like, what is this? You know, what is going on? Sometimes sitting side to side can be good. Sometimes a book or that's also a good place to start. Let's both read this and, you know, listen to it or something like that. So having an external source.

55:08

Yeah, and I think starting there and just to get a sense of interest and motivation can help you plan for next steps.

55:17

You know, if you can, I think a lot of time in not just in the, I think, autism clinical world, although, I guess, yes, they wouldn't necessarily know, but I think generally when we talk about sexuality because there's an important emphasis on safety.

55:32

We also think about it sometimes in like a heavy way. Which it is, but are there ways you could like, make it fun, right? So like, you know, let's say you're like, OK, I, in my mind,

you know, I think it was Jason, who sent the question, like, I want to have this conversation a couple of times. Like, we really need to figure out private versus public. Like, that's a thing that, like, you know, I really want to focus on so you know what my commitment is going to be. We're going to talk about it like once a month but, like, and that's the time, maybe we get pizza, right?

55:58

Or, we get, you know, some special thing that marks that time and sort of celebrate it a little bit and add as much positivity to the moment as possible. And then allowing for breaks and checkouts, right?

56:13

It can be tough to chat about.

56:17

Perfect. Thank you so much. I think we have time for one final question, and that question is from Lee. And he says, "I'm an undergraduate student in my final year hoping to eventually become an inclusive sex educator or sex therapist.

56:33

Do you have any resources or recommendations for going about this networking or connection wise?"

56:40

Yes, that's a great question.

56:42

So it is not autism specific, but the College Autism Network is a space where a lot of like Neurodiversity affirming professionals that are focused on sort of older students, not older students, but like not school age.

56:59

And they've got a lot of resources and professionals that sort of have overlapping interests.

57:05

They're...I think any of the...there's not a ton of papers on sexuality and sort of accessibility. So any one on any of those papers would be good.

57:14

I would say send me an e-mail, right, because if you're getting ready to graduate. It also can be a tough space for funding.

57:21

So sometimes jobs can be difficult to come by and like research base. But there's certainly like nonprofits and things that focus on this work. And congrats on picking a great career direction. You'll have a lot of fun.

57:36

Great, thank you so much for your response. So thank you Eileen and thank you everyone for joining us today.

57:44

If you found today's event helpful, we encourage you to register for OARS next Webinar Event, *Getting and Giving Consent for People with Autism*, which is on April 20th at 1PM Eastern Time.

57:59

Once you close out of today's event, you'll receive an exit survey.

58:03

We would appreciate it if you would complete that and provide your feedback.

58:07

Everyone will receive a follow-up email with a link to today's video recording and materials within the week.

58:14

So, on behalf of the Organization for Autism Research, thank you for joining us and have a great rest of your day.

58:23

Thanks everyone.