

A decorative blue dashed line consisting of several short, thick segments arranged in a curved path along the upper-left edge of the white circle.

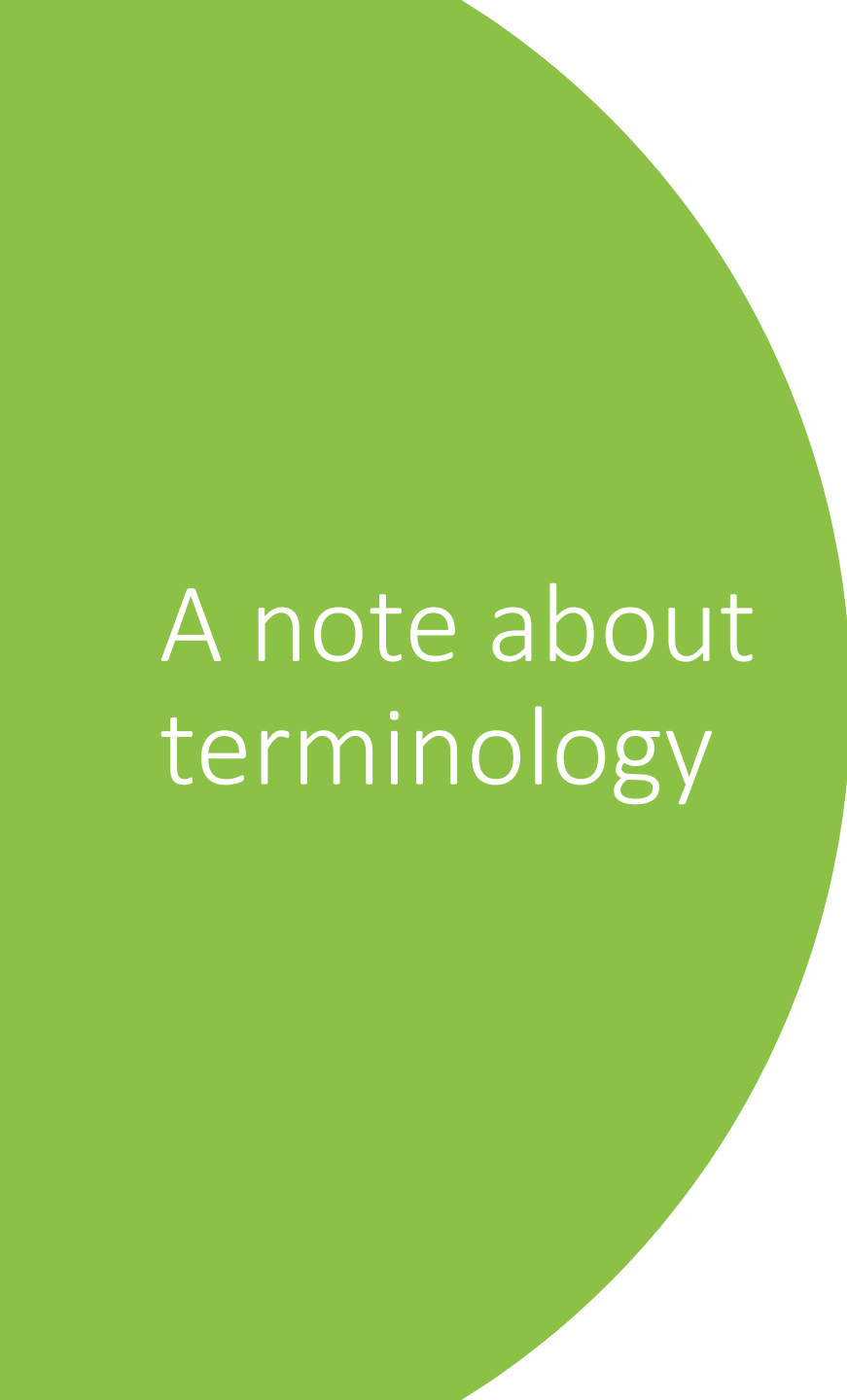
Sexuality Education in Autism Care: Assessment, Goals, and Teaching Strategies

OAR

June 2, 2026

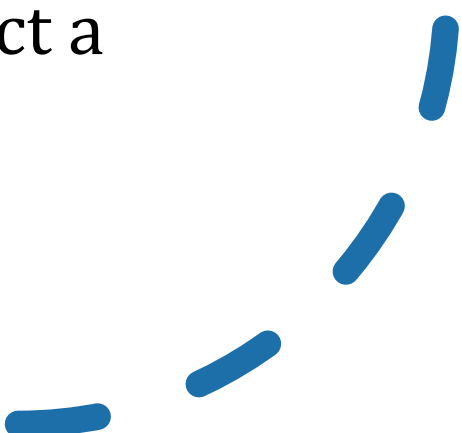
Jessica Cauchi, Ph.D., RBA (Ont), BCBA-D

A solid orange circle located at the bottom-right edge of the white circle, partially overlapping the green background.



A note about terminology

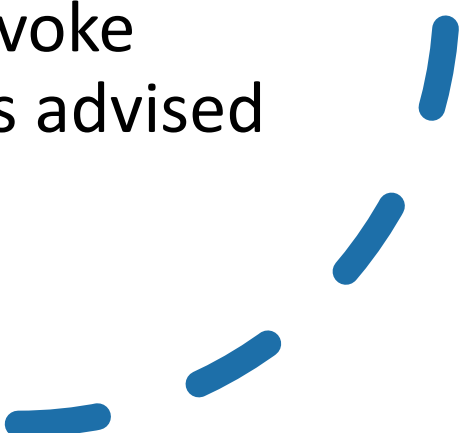
Throughout this discussion the terms “autism”, “on the autism spectrum”, “ASD”, “person with autism”, and “autistic person” are used interchangeably. While we recognize that amongst the clinical, medical, and neurodiverse community there are preferences and conventions in terminology use, the selection of terminology in this presentation is based on grammar and stylistic needs and does not reflect a particular terminological intent





A note about sex education

Sexuality is complex in nature and reflects a high degree of individualization; of preference, of experience, and of level of comfort. It is the intention of this talk to provide accurate, technical, and direct content in order to provide the best education in this area and teaching will be provided in a sex-positive, science-forward manner. However, it is recognized that, for some, this material may seem direct and abrupt and may evoke feelings of discomfort. Discretion is advised



What are
sexuality
skills?





What are sexuality skills?

- Body parts
- Health and hygiene
- Gender identity
- Sexual orientation
- Sexual acts
- Masturbation
- Internet safety
- Social skills
- Safety skills
- Puberty
- Skills related to menstruation
- And more!

Are sexuality skills only about sex?

- No! Sexuality skills are related to many parts of individual's behaviour.
- Important for
 - Safety
 - Understanding of own body
 - Overall quality of life



Why does this
matter for
individuals with
disabilities?



shutterstock.com · 2307251315

Sexuality and ASD – Diagnosis related

- Non-verbal communication
- Insistence of sameness/routine
- Sensory needs
- Hyperfixation/focused interests
- Restricted interests

Sexuality and ASD – other people related

- Infantilization
- Attitudes of ableism
- Peer groups
- Classroom teaching
- Parent teaching
- Recidivism-based work
- Discomfort with subject matter
- Compliance-based teaching

Challenges with sexuality teaching

- Discomfort with subject matter
- Personal values
- Lack of research/great teaching material
- Individual preferences
- Moving target
- In-situ demonstration
- Natural reinforcers





Risks for People with Autism

Infantilization (e.g. Newman, 2022)

Reported sexual assault and/or victimization (Byrne, 2017)

Sexual misconduct (Mandell et al., 2005)



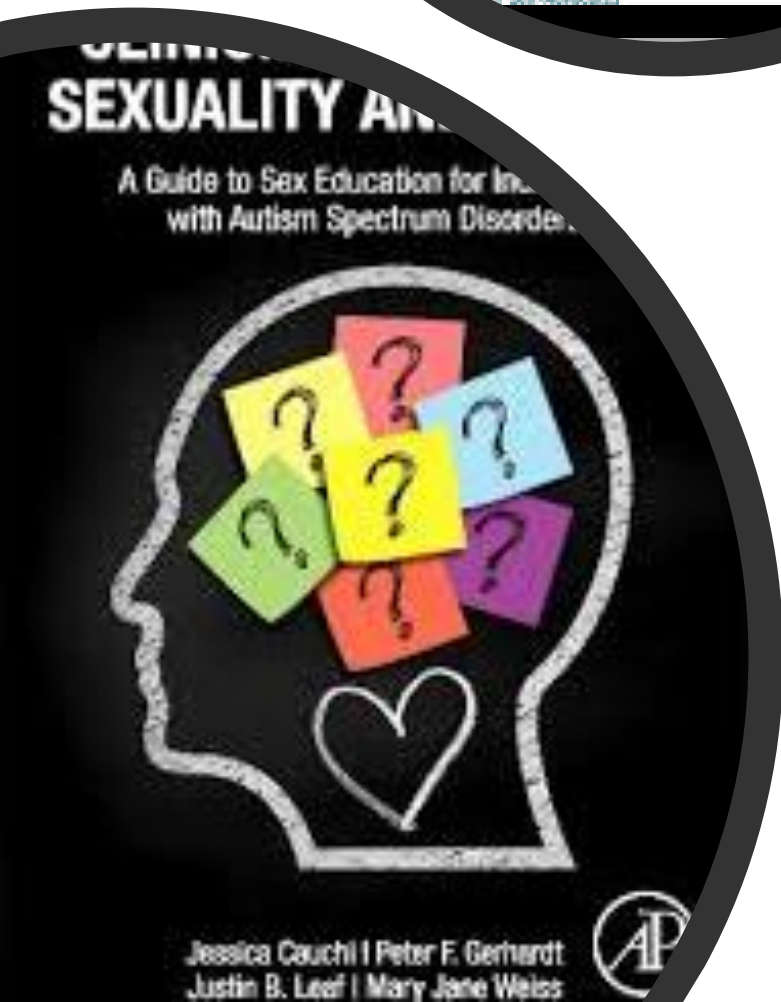
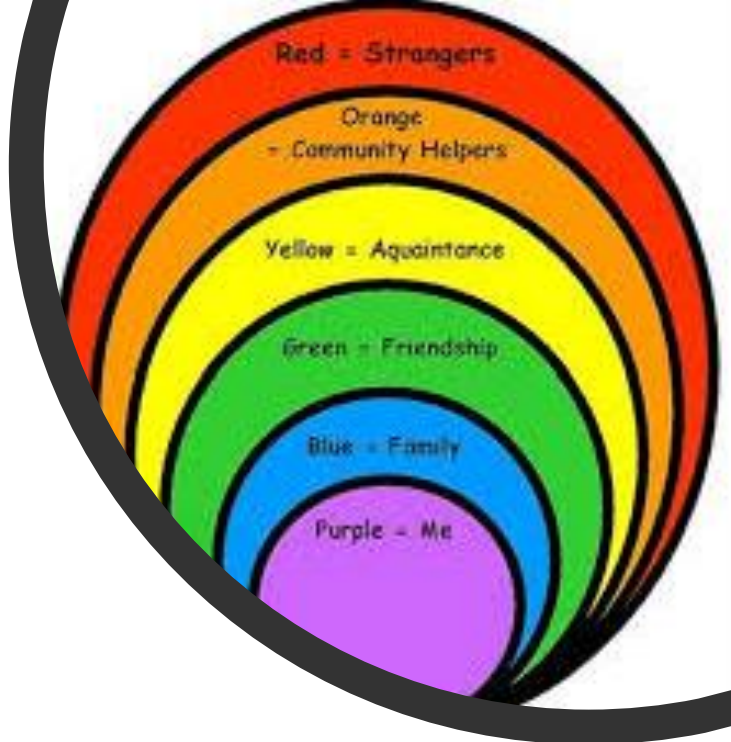
More of us [people with ASD] just give up on having a great sex life, and this is heartbreaking; for like it or not, sexual contact is an unapologetically fantastic part of the human experience” (Carley, 2021, p. 35)

So how do we know where to start?

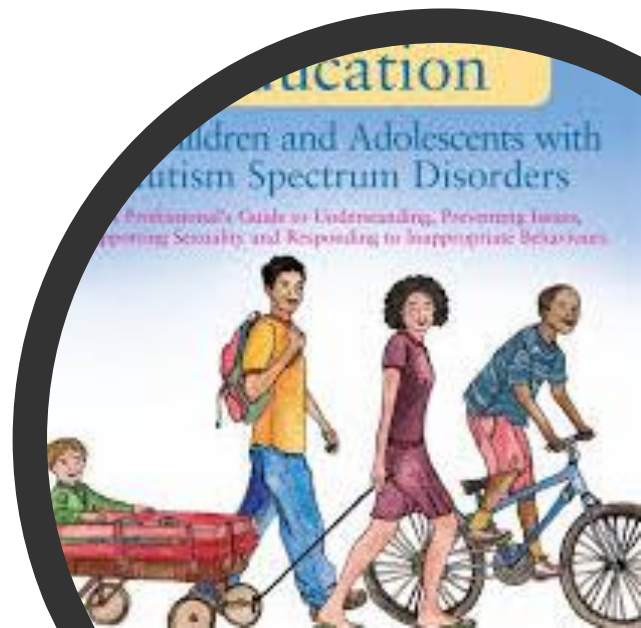
- Assessment
- Goal Setting
- Teaching
- Maintenance?



Assessment



How to assess?



SAFER paper

The SAFER Tool: Promoting Independence and Safety in Sexual Education for Individuals with
Autism and other Developmental Disabilities

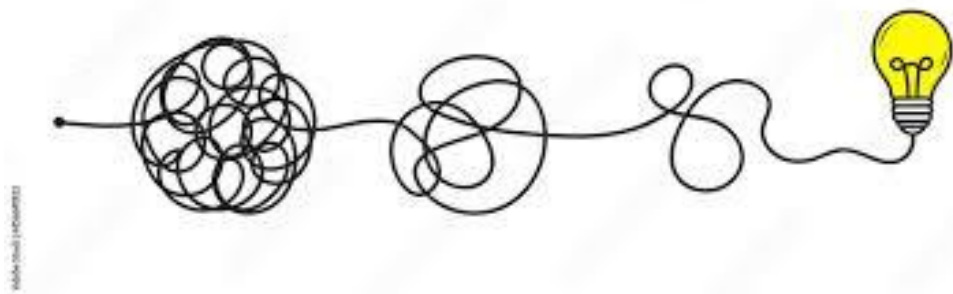
Madhura Deshpande^{1,2}, Jessica Cauchi^{1,3} & Peter Gerhardt^{1,4}

Author Affiliations: ¹Endicott College, Beverly, MA, USA; ²Proactive Behaviour Analysts, Sydney, NSW, Australia, ³Brock University, St. Catherines, ONT, Canada ⁴EPIC Programs, Paramus, NJ, USA

Problems with assessment

- Say vs. Do
- Context
- Private skills





Additional ways to assess

- Proficient performers
- Think ahead!
- Component skills – what can you do to start now?



Some additional
considerations

- Under what conditions...
- Where will the skill be used?
- With who?
- What are you assessing?
Say vs. do
- Whose goal is it?

Some thoughts on independence

- Maybe its not binary
- Maybe it's a spectrum
- Are we all independent?



What about “age appropriate”??

- Sometimes we want to impose adult ideas on this
- Look to curricula – sex ed, siecus, others
- What about other same-age peers
- Ask around





What to teach



There's never
enough time...





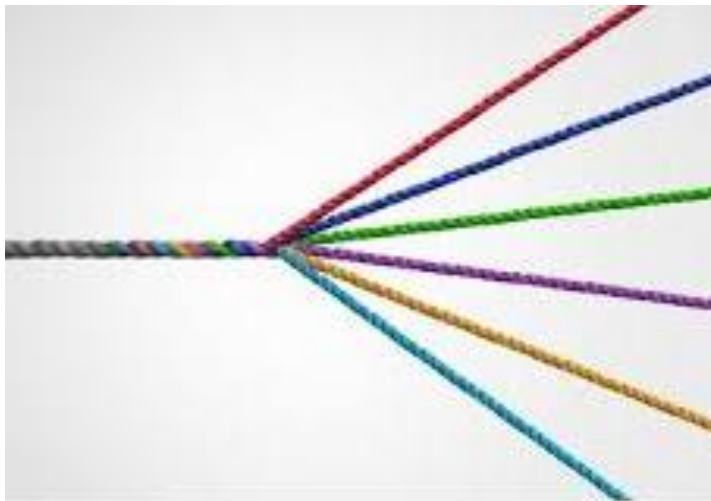
Sex ed skills - its not just
“sex”

- Body parts
- Health and hygiene
- Puberty
- Sexual acts
- Reproduction
- Birth control
- Consent (giving and honouring in others)
- Relationships
- Online activity
- Understanding sexual orientation and gender identity (in self and others)
- Safety including reporting
- Laws
- And more!

Component skills

- Take a big skill
- Break it down
- And some more
- Until you find something you can teach





shutterstock.com · 2359470463

Breaking skills down

- Component analysis of skills
- Most scary, complex sexuality skills are just a lot of small not-scary skills
- This helps us teach age-appropriate skills at the right time AND have sex ed goals in plans

Component skills - consent

Asking
permission

Recognition of
non-verbal
cues

Waiting

Accepting
delay

Accepting
denial

Understanding
transient
nature

Component skills - consent

Identifying likes and dislikes

Communicating preference - vocally

Communicating preference – non
vocally

Functional no!

Component skills – online dating

- Photo posting – self and others
- Online vocabulary
- Logistics – finding app, downloading, account
- Sharing personal information
- Protecting financial information
- Social interactions – initiating, maintaining, getting out of them!
- Flirting/sexting
- Planning to meet



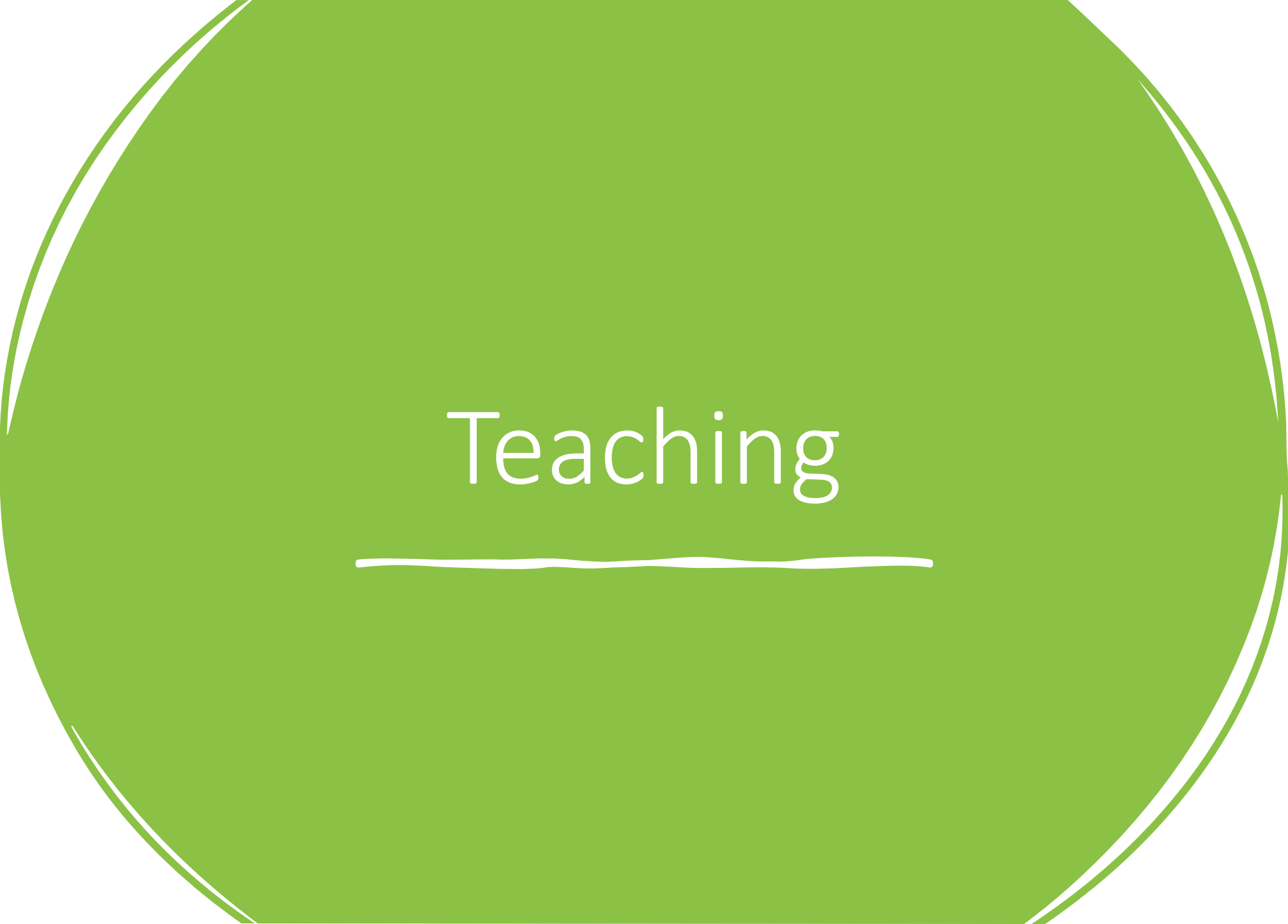
Benefits of component skills

- We know how to do this!
- Can start early
- Often nothing to do with sex



Other considerations

- Think ahead 3 years, 5 years, 10 years
- Consider safety (to self and others)
- Consider independence
- Consider quality of life and fun
- Consider contact with maintaining contingencies



Teaching



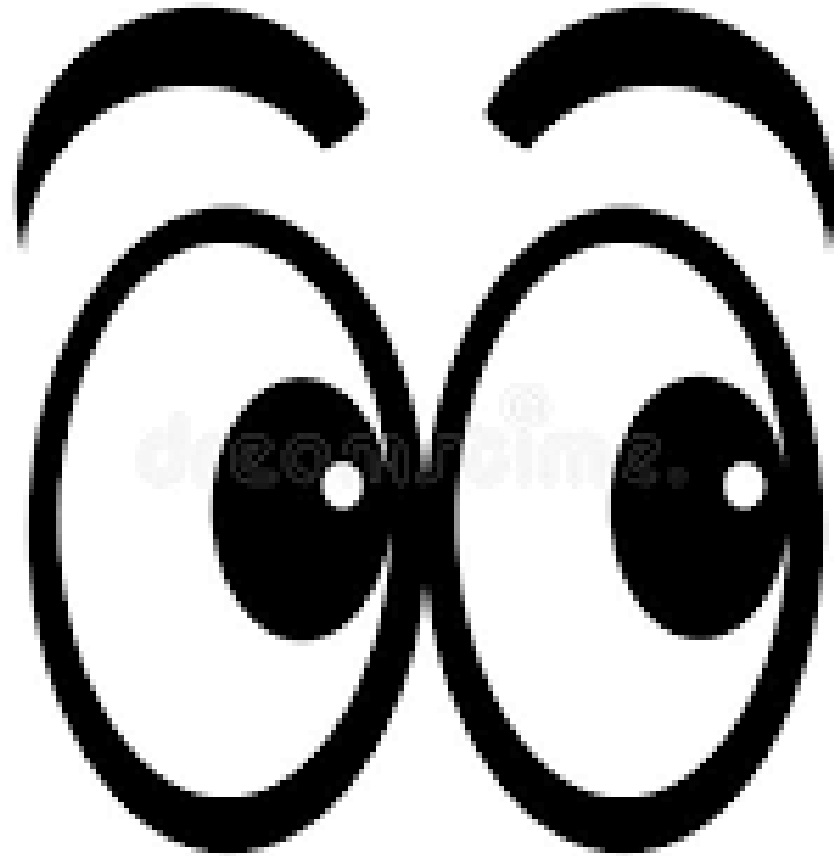
KEY CONSIDERATION

Before you teach

- Are we going to let you DO this skill?
- What are environmental supports to help prompt
- What is a contingency plan? Did I teach those skills (more on this!)
- Are we teaching the WHOLE skill? To the level needed?
- Are we teaching something we don't need?

How to teach

- Know your learner!
- Look for prompts that can stay
- Think about what you are teaching (real bx or vocal bx)
- Consider competing contingencies
- Independence scale



Know your learner

- How do they learn other skills best?
- Sorting task? Video model? In-situ prompting?
- Many sex ed skills can be taught the same way we teach other skills





Independence/prompts that can stay

- Are there naturally occurring prompts?
- Are there prompts you can add that can stay
- Does it have to be perfect all the time?
- Are there ways to prioritize independence?



What are we teaching?

- Say/do correspondence
- The problem is...
- Is there a related skill I can teach?
- Did I think about supporting skills?



Competing
contingencies...





Competing contingencies



What do we know about reinforcement?

Long term goals

Stimulus



Punisher



Reinforcer

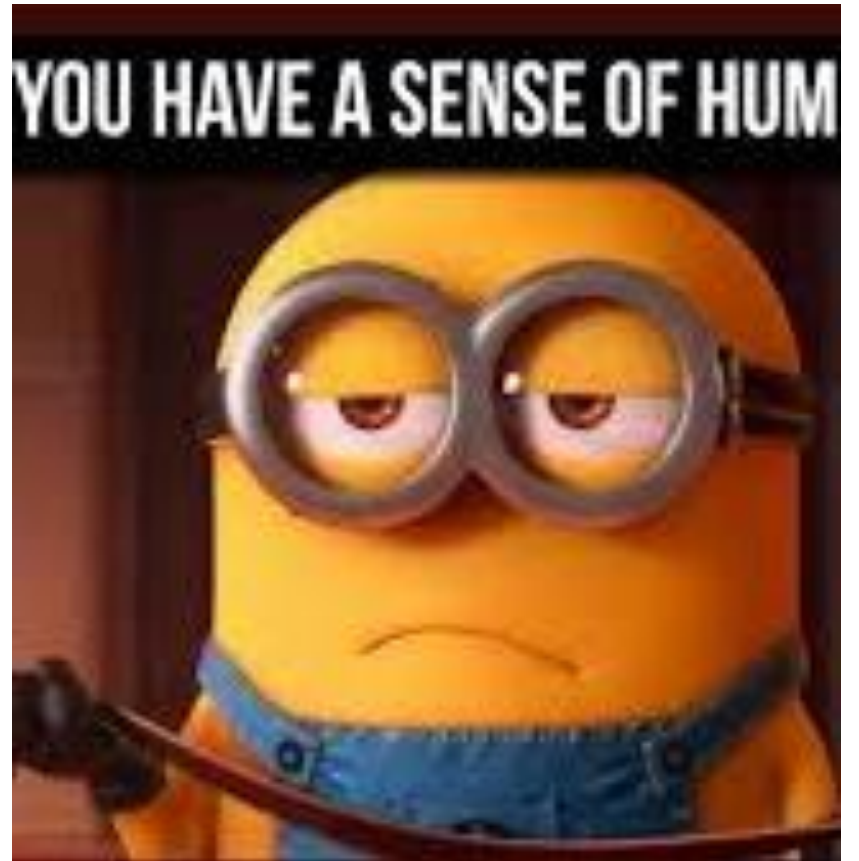
More
things to
consider



- The law
- What we WANT to happen vs. what ACTUALLY happens

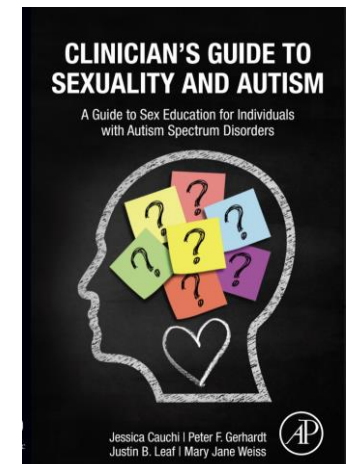
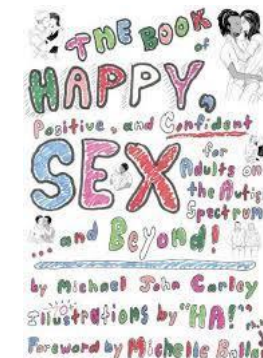
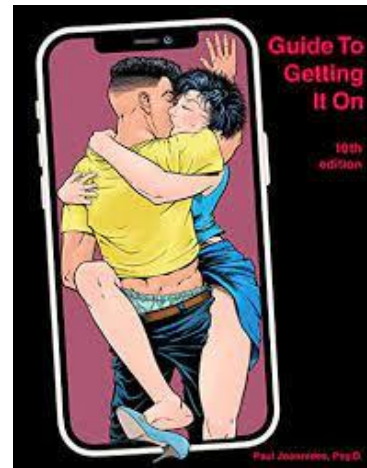
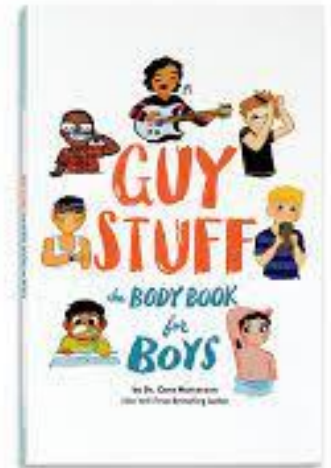
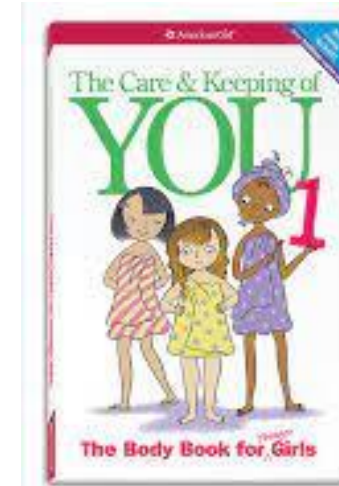
Finally...

- Work together!
- Talk about these skills...
- Be a good behaviour analyst
- Keep a sense of humour!



Resources

- <https://siecus.org/>
- <https://www.sieccan.org>
- <https://www.aasect.org/>
- www.positiveconnections.ca





Thank you!

Jessica Cauchi

jcauchi@Endicott.edu

jcauchi@brocku.ca