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## BASIC ISSUES AROUND SEXUALITY AND THE ADOLESCENT WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (Part 2)

In Part 1 of this series we addressed the facts that it is essential to provide some kind of sex education programming for most individuals on the autism spectrum. The type, content, and extent of that program will depend on the needs of the individual. We addressed the need to include three major issues in sort of bridge to sex education. These are:

- ongoing social skills instruction,
- discrimination of public v private
- personal hygiene, and
- body parts and functions

We pointed out that it is best to start early in teaching these concepts and to continue instruction through adolescence and adulthood as needed. Once the four primary issues above are established or ongoing as necessary it is time for sex education.

### Sex Education Program

Many of us may think about a sex education program as being that time in middle school when male and female students watched separate films about puberty and were, perhaps, warned about the dangers of being sexually active. Considerably more than this is necessary for students who are disabled by autism. I know that parents and educators may not believe that our particular focus child will ever be completely ready to be a fully functioning adult with parenthood responsibilities. However, we have an obligation to respond to the interest and desire many of these young people have in relating to the opposite sex. We have the responsibility to provide them with the information they need.

### Key Concepts

- Children need to understand the relationships that people have with one another. Each relationship is different. Often children with ASD don't understand the different types of relationships and may make social mistakes or put themselves at risk.
- Identifying different types of relationships

- Strangers
- Acquaintances/Associates
- Friendships
- Dates/Boyfriend/Girlfriend
- Sweethearts

It is important that individuals with autism know the difference between friends and paid support people in the lives of our children as often these relationships can be confusing. When it is not clear about paid care giving roles, boundaries can become blurry and the rules of touch may become unclear for the child. It makes issues around safety and touch more difficult to teach.

We must ensure that our children understand that these are paid workers and that they are not “friends.” They are associates who help them perform and activity. Our children need to develop age-appropriate friendships. It is important that support workers set boundaries in these types of relationships.

- Personal Boundaries—understanding what your own comfort level is when people are in your physical space.
- Permission—getting and giving permission, which is the ability to say and hear “no.”
- Touching Others – types of touch.

This is an important topic, as boundaries help us to define whom we can touch and who can touch us. It is about respecting the personal boundaries and space of other people. It helps people keep themselves safe---if your child understands boundaries then they will understand when their boundaries are being crossed without permission.

It is important to establish a routine if you are teaching your child about boundaries. This way your child knows that when someone does not ask permission to touch, that person is not respecting the child’s circle.

It is also important when teaching children and young people about touching others. We are not allowed to touch others without their permission. We ask, “May I give you a hug?” (if the child is a relative or close friend). If the person says no, we do not give them a hug or touch them. We have asked permission and respected their boundaries.

It is important to encourage others to be clear about their boundaries with your child so that they can model feedback. Encourage others to discourage inappropriate shows of affection/touching.

The adolescent needs to understand why people are in different types of relationships and why touch is only for a very few people who are well known. You should always feel safe when they hug you or touch you – reinforce the child’s ability to choose touch. For example, do not make

them give someone a hug when they are letting you know that they do not want to—even if it doesn't feel “polite.”

Even if it is difficult it is important that you remind others, as necessary, about how touch may relate to their relationship and ask them to support the concepts that you are trying to teach.

You can use the **Circles** concepts to teach relationships, touch, and boundaries. Use a circle of string or rope to show the personal space for the child. Teach that others may not enter that space without permission nor may they enter another's space without permission. A larger circle can represent a circle of close family and friends who may be in the hug (with permission) circle. A yet larger circle is the handshake circle. Yet one more circle is for people you see often—store clerk, other teachers in the school—acquaintances/associates--people to whom you wave or say hello. You know these people, but you do not have a “touch” relationship with them. You may talk with them sometimes. Finally there are strangers. You do not trust, talk to or touch these people.

- Other topics that might be addressed in Sex Education according to the level and needs of the individual with ASD may include:
  - Contraception
  - Sexually transmitted diseases
  - Masturbation
  - Alternative life styles

### **Safety**

It is essential that our children learn how to remain safe in terms of their body and their sexuality.

### **Key Concepts**

- Safety is about...
  - Being able to recognize possible danger
  - Creating a safety plan and knowing what to do
  - Feeling confident and assertive (being able to strongly state what you need and don't want.)

One thing adults can do is to give the child multiple opportunities to make choices. This may be as simple as allowing him/her to choose what to have for dinner or where to go outside when walking or on an outing. Remember that it is often easier/faster for us to make those decisions, but in order to build your child's confidence it is important for them to develop decision-making skills where they can.

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