

# Inappropriate Sexual Behaviour and the Child with an Autism Spectrum Condition

It is important to realise that people with ASC can have difficulty understanding others' body language, facial expressions and tone of voice. In addition, they may not be aware that their own behaviour is inappropriate and that it can be distressing for others.

Watching TV and films, children often witness scenes of a sexual nature. A child with ASC may easily misinterpret these and develop an unrealistic notion of how relationships develop.

Explaining sexual issues to children can be a daunting task but it is crucial that children with ASC are taught this clearly and calmly and in a way that they understand.

If a particular behaviour is not acceptable at age 18, it may not be acceptable at age 8 and this is the time, or earlier, to start teaching appropriate behaviour or alternative behaviour. Children with ASC may need to be taught what to do in certain situations as they may not learn these things intuitively like other children. It's very important to begin the teaching process as soon as possible.

If you are a parent or carer or are involved in the education of a child with ASC, it is important to:

- Comment on inappropriate behaviour each time it occurs
- Explain what is inappropriate about it. e.g. "You kissed my friend on the lips and she has never met you before."
- Explain how the behaviour made, or may have made, the other person feel. e.g. "It made her feel embarrassed because she doesn't know you very well and she wasn't expecting you to do that."
- Explain how the matter could have been handled more appropriately e.g. "You could have smiled at her and shaken her hand, instead."

Sometimes adults will allow a younger child with ASC to do something of a sexual nature because it may seem 'funny' or 'cute' or 'they do not mean anything by it' or because the adult feels uncomfortable addressing the issue. This will not help the child for the future – indeed it could be highly damaging. A child will be much more vulnerable to abuse if allowed to think that stroking an adult's breast, cuddling someone they don't know, kissing someone on the lips, talking in public about sexual matters or masturbating in the presence of others, is acceptable behaviour. A child with ASC, even more than other children, may need to be taught that there are certain rules about how we behave, which can help keep them and others safe, such as with whom sexual concerns can be discussed. It might be easier for some to write their sexual/relationship concerns down in a specified book and have an appropriate adult write the answer in the same book. This may work if the child does not want to voice their query.

They may also benefit from having a social story to help them develop a greater social understanding, or a visual aid to categorize

relationships such as 'Intimacy Circles.'

Refusing to discuss these issues (or labelling them as 'naughty', 'rude' or 'wrong') can have an affect on a child's sexual identity as they grow, and cause anxiety in the future.

### Other issues

Children with ASC may need clearly expressed information:

- that masturbating in public is likely to get them arrested and offends others so they should do that in the privacy of their own bedroom and with the door closed and no one else present
- that when we dress and undress we should do so in privacy, such as in a bathroom or bedroom in your house (NOT a public bathroom)
- that (unless a child is still very young) it's not a good idea to sit on people's laps but to sit next to, or near to, someone instead
- (above a certain age) it is important that they sleep in their own bed.

Sometimes, physical actions that we take for granted actually need to be demonstrated to, and practised with, children with ASC, such as;

- how to do a shoulder-to-shoulder hug – more acceptable than a full body hug
- how to kiss someone hello or goodbye – on the cheek, with mouth closed and it is a brief kiss. We might touch the other person on the shoulders briefly as we do this
- how to shake a person's hand if meeting someone new.

### Teach children 'stranger-danger'

If anyone does, or tries to do, something to them which they do not like or they feel uncomfortable with, tell them:

- to raise the palm of their hand towards the person
- to say 'NO' loudly and firmly, or shout if necessary

- not to smile at the person
- to move away if the person persists
- to tell someone they trust – their mother, father, teacher, if something they did not like has happened or they had to stop it happening.

If they find it difficult to verbalise, they could write it down or draw pictures and show it to an adult with whom they feel safe. This can apply to familiar people too. Children with ASC can be particularly vulnerable and can be prone to being taken advantage of, particularly by peers, and should be taught that it is okay for them to say a firm 'NO' if someone asks them to do something they do not want to do, to do something they do not fully understand, or something which may get them into trouble. This strategy is something that the child could practice with an adult using role-play.

### Exceptions that prove the rule!

Children with AS will also need to be taught that there are some times when others may want to hug them, such as during a sports match if a goal is scored or they win a match; if they do something really well like passing a school test; or if they have done something very kind for someone.

If the child is not aware of this beforehand it could cause some confusion for them as there are no written rules to go by. It is also important to note that medical professionals might need to touch them intimately, but they should always tell the individual with ASC what they need to do and ask permission first. All sexual touch and action should be sited firmly within the context of a relationship, of whatever type, to aid understanding.

### A checklist of things to remember when helping someone with AS:

- learn everything you can about ASC!
- be clear and consistent

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- visual cues, videos or role-play may help
- keep instructions brief
- ensure understanding – ask them to tell you in their own words, rather than repeating verbatim what you have said
- praise appropriate behaviours to reinforce learning
- be aware that some people with ASC believe that you know what they know (deficits in Theory of Mind) and therefore feel they do not have to tell you when or why they may be anxious
- early intervention is key – start teaching social and communication skills at an early age
- people with ASC often prefer to be in small groups

Some Community Health Nurses have expertise in supporting parents and children on sexual matters – they can be contacted via the family GP.

## TV, Films & the Internet

It is vital that adults monitor what it is that children and even teenagers with ASC are watching on TV/DVDs or the internet. If anything sexual is in the content, it will be important to check their understanding and correct them if they have misunderstood. Giving them an explanation of certain behaviours can also help. Imagine a film which lasts 2 hours. Most people can understand that many months or years may elapse during those 2 hours. However, someone with AS may believe that the characters met, went on a date, had sexual relationships and got married all within a couple of hours, giving them a very different idea of how relationships develop! It is also worth explaining that most people look different from movie actors, and might behave in a way that is destined to entertain, rather than be realistic.

## BOOKS AND DVDS

The Family Planning Association has three books specifically for children with learning disabilities:

- Talking Together... About Growing Up. A workbook for parents of children with learning disabilities. £12.99
  - Talking together about sex and relationships: A practical resource for schools and parents working with young people with learning disabilities. £14.99
  - Talking Together about Contraception: A practical resource for staff and parents working with young people with learning difficulties. £13.99
- Website: [www.fpa.org.uk/Aboutus](http://www.fpa.org.uk/Aboutus)  
Tel: 0845 1228 600  
Email: [fpadirect@fpa.org.uk](mailto:fpadirect@fpa.org.uk)

Life Support Productions have DVDs specifically for young people with ASC/special needs: *Kylie's Private World* (for females) £45.83; *Jason's Private World* (for males) £45.83; *You, Your Body and Sex* £70.01 (a subtitled DVD featuring content from Kylie and Jason DVDs with additional material). They are used at appropriate Cambian schools. You may get a discount for bulk orders.

Website: [www.lifesupportproductions.co.uk](http://www.lifesupportproductions.co.uk)  
Tel: 020 7723 7520

### Contact a Family

has comprehensive booklets *Growing up, Sex and Relationships* written in a clear, concise manner and are relevant for young people with learning difficulties.

There are three different booklets for parents, teachers and young people themselves (also available in audio).

Website: [www.cafamily.org.uk/publications.html?scat=2](http://www.cafamily.org.uk/publications.html?scat=2)  
Tel: 0808 808 3555

*Sense – Sex and Relationships* CD-ROM is an interactive CD Rom produced by Sense Educational CDs and the National Children's Bureau with advice and support from young people, parents/carers, teachers and health professionals. Has a Teachers' Support Manual and is suitable for ages 12-16 but can be used by parents too. Priced £21.99 for home use and £75.00 for school use. Used successfully in one of our Asperger schools.

Website: [www.sensecds.com](http://www.sensecds.com)  
Tel: 01375 484546

*Growing and Learning* is a set of three books and picture cards written by Jane Keeling a nurse, mum of a child with autism and a sexual health educator, to support parents and carers. The three packs cover subjects from puberty to periods and masturbation/wet dreams and are designed to support parents/carers of young people with learning difficulties including youngsters with profound communication difficulties. Prices range from £20-25 and they can be ordered from:

Website: [www.growingandlearning.co.uk](http://www.growingandlearning.co.uk)  
Tel: 01246 207633  
Email: [info@growing&learning.co.uk](mailto:info@growing&learning.co.uk)

*Me-and-Us Ltd* produces materials to help teachers/ educators in sex and relationships education for people with learning disabilities. Some may be suitable for parents to use too.

Website: [www.me-and-us.co.uk](http://www.me-and-us.co.uk)  
Tel: 01539 621777

*Making Sense of Sex: A Forthright Guide to Puberty, Sex and Relationships for People with Asperger syndrome*, a book by Sarah Attwood, addresses just about all the issues relating to sexuality for people with AS, including helpful diagrams, explanations and practical advice. It is available from: [www.jkp.com](http://www.jkp.com) priced £12.99

## INTERNET SITES

Noah's Ark an Australian clinic that has various fact sheets this one is on masturbation: 'Behaviour – Sexual issues for children with autism': [www.noahsark.net.au/resources/online-fact-sheets](http://www.noahsark.net.au/resources/online-fact-sheets)

### The National Autistic Society

website has a downloadable section entitled 'Sex education and children and young people with an ASD' which explains in matter of fact terms what topics to consider and how you should discuss them. You can find it at: [www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/communicating-and-interacting/sexeducation-and-children-and-young-people-with-anasd.aspx](http://www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/communicating-and-interacting/sexeducation-and-children-and-young-people-with-anasd.aspx).

### NHS

Information for young people regarding sex but it is not ASC specific: [www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Sexandyoungpeople/Pages/Sex-and-young-peoplehub.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Sexandyoungpeople/Pages/Sex-and-young-peoplehub.aspx)

### BBC

A 'Teen Species' interactive website which lets you find out how our bodies change during puberty. (There are 'boy' and 'girl' options).  
Website: [www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/body/interactives/lifecycle/teenagers/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/body/interactives/lifecycle/teenagers/)

The National Children's Bureau has a Sex Education Forum. We believe that all children and young people have the right to good quality sex and relationships education (SRE). This website aims to provide all professionals involved in SRE with the information they need to ensure this is right: [www.ncb.org.uk/sef](http://www.ncb.org.uk/sef)

*Social Stories* could be used to help a child gain a better understanding of a social situation: [www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories](http://www.thegraycenter.org/social-stories)

[www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/approaches-therapies-and-interventions/skillsbased-interventions/social-stories-and-comic-stripconversations.aspx](http://www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/approaches-therapies-and-interventions/skillsbased-interventions/social-stories-and-comic-stripconversations.aspx)